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Adam Amato Photo Editor
Staples, located on West 11th Avenue, is collecting cell phones and PDAs to be recycled.

Non-profit organizations reuse thousands of phones

Recycle for Breast Cancer and CollectiveGood are collecting cell phones to raise money for charities

Question
Email to



Caron Alarab
News Reporter
November 14, 2003

To help decrease the world's overabundance of cell phone garbage, some non-profit organizations have made recycling cell phones a quick and easy process through Web sites, pre-paid postage labels and drop-off locations.

"There are billions of phones in peoples' kitchen drawers and office desks," said Larry Behrens, program director of Recycle for Breast Cancer. "Now they have no excuses."

More than 128 million Americans use cell phones, and on average they are replaced every 18 months, according to INFORM Inc., an environmental research organization.

Consequently, more than one million cell phones are tossed out each week in the United States, according to the Sierra Club, the largest grassroots environmental organization in the country.

Nathaniel NT, co-director of the University Survival Center, has spent the last two years working with the University to create a recycling infrastructure for mobile electronics.

And although he has never owned a cell phone, he said he would never throw one away to end up in a landfill.

"Cell phone contaminants don't get broken down in landfills," he said. "Those toxins end up in the water we drink and the air we breathe." But organizations like Recycle for Breast Cancer and CollectiveGood are doing more than just reducing cell phone waste in American landfills. They also donate phones and proceeds to good causes, such as developing communities and breast cancer research.

Recycle for Breast Cancer makes a donation to breast cancer research for every phone recycled or reused through the program.

Behrens, 39, started the non-profit program to provide a way for people to donate to a good cause without reaching into their wallets or paychecks.

"We don't just recycle these items for the sake of recycling," he said. "We recycle them to raise money."

Having known many friends and family affected by breast cancer, Behrens chose to donate all proceeds to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. For more information about the foundation, visit www.komen.org.

Although the "meat" of the program lies in cell phone and printer cartridge recycling, Behrens said the company may soon consider different products.

"As the program grows, we are considering other items, like pagers," he said.

Through Recycle for Breast Cancer's Web site, www.recycleforbreastcancer.com, the program sends tiny mailing boxes to donators, along with packing material and a pre-paid postage sticker, making it easy for anyone in the United States to participate.

"It's the best method of collection we've been able to come up with," he said. "And it's something people can do all year round."

Atlanta, Ga., native Seth Heine had a similar idea in 1999 when he established CollectiveGood, an Internet collection program that reuses and recycles old cell phones.

Heine, 35, had been working for a cell phone carrier in Latin America when he realized the majority of the population couldn't afford a cell phone or even a land line. After talking to friends in the United States, he also found that everyone he knew had an old phone somewhere at home.

When he learned that cell phones contain the same toxic components as computers, everything clicked.

"CollectiveGood is a really cool opportunity to take this huge environmental problem and turn it on its ear," he said.

Unless donated cell phones are damaged beyond repair, they are refurbished and distributed to communities in Latin American and developing countries. Although the organization had a rusty start, CollectiveGood has grown to recycle more than 100,000 phones in collaboration with about 250 charities across the United States. Considering new cell phone technologies such as color screens and cameras are becoming more popular and less expensive, Heine said he expects a lot more phone donations in the near future.

On April 27, Earth Day, CollectiveGood began working with the office supply chain Staples to provide another easy way to donate cell phones via store collection tubes. Staples customers can drop off phones, PDAs, pagers and chargers in the clear, plastic tubes

located near the cell phone display in every store, including the 2370 W. 11 Ave. location in Eugene.

People interested in donating their old cell phones to CollectiveGood can participate in the comfort of their own homes by visiting the company Web site, www.collectivegood.com, and downloading free shipping labels.

"People can do it on a Saturday morning in their bunny slippers," he said. "They don't even need to leave the house."

Contact the business/science
/technology reporter
at caronalarab@dailyemerald.com. ■

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