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The Mossberg Solution: Where Computers Go When They Die --- As More People Upgrade, Recycling Becomes a Concern; Shredding Your Hard Drive

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Getting rid of an old computer is a predicament that people face when their systems slow down or break down.

That's especially true now as more users decide to buy computers running Microsoft's recently released Windows Vista operating system. Apple Inc.'s campaign encouraging users to switch to its platform from Windows has also contributed to PCs piling up in basement corners.

But where should all this old equipment go? And what happens once it is taken away? How can you be sure that your private data aren't being exposed? And will being a tree hugger turn out to be too costly?

If you're looking to recycle your old system -- monitor, computer tower and printer -- you might think the only option is to search for a local drop-off spot. But surprisingly, most big-name computer manufacturers offer their own recycling programs, some of which come right to your door.

Each company has its own methods, which makes the process more confusing for consumers. Some take old computers away, but charge you around \$30 for the shipping and handling. Others will reward you for buying one of their systems by offering to remove your old system free. Below, you'll find some general guidelines for getting your computer out of your house.

-- Which company does what?

Dell Inc. offers home pickup of any old Dell equipment anytime, free. It will also pick up any brand of computer or printer free with the purchase of a new Dell PC or printer. Details can be found at www.dell.com/recycling.

Hewlett-Packard Co.'s recycling procedures are a bit more complicated. At anytime, the company offers to pick up and recycle your old equipment, regardless of brand, but charges \$13 to \$34 per product for shipping and handling. You will be compensated for each product with a \$30 to \$50 coupon to be used at www.hpshopping.com, where you can buy products from H-P. Recycling details for H-P can be found at www.hp.com/recycle.

Lenovo's ThinkPlus Recycling Service offers prepaid shipping labels for \$30 each to be used for sending any manufacturer's old system, monitor, printer and peripherals to Lenovo for recycling or refurbishment. Lenovo doesn't offer a home pick-up service. Once received, Lenovo uses a designated center to recycle your materials and sends reusable equipment to Gifts In Kind International, a charity specializing in product philanthropy.

Apple is different still. Like Lenovo, it doesn't offer home pick-up but will receive all brands so long as you buy a \$30 shipping label from the company's Web site. With the purchase of any new Mac through Apple's Web site or at one of its retail stores, you'll receive an email with instructions and shipping codes for up to two prepaid boxes. These can be used for shipping any old equipment, regardless of manufacturer, to Apple for recycling. Details can be found at: <http://www.apple.com/environment/recycling/program>.

Apple's retail stores will accept all manufacturers' rechargeable batteries as part of a program run by the Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp., a nonprofit organization. These stores also accept unwanted iPods for recycling and take 10% off the purchase of a new iPod in exchange for your old one.

-- What about my data?

When recycling, almost all companies vow to mechanically shred your hard drive. But they also suggest that you take responsibility for your data and delete them to be safe.

Various software programs let you clear out your hard disk on your own. Symantec's Wipe Info in Norton Utilities and System Works (<http://symantec.com>) will help on Windows PCs and Macs. Webroot Software Inc.'s Window Washer (<http://www.webroot.com>) is another option for Windows, and Jiiva Inc.'s SuperScrubber (<http://www.jiiva.com>) is an alternative for Macs. I haven't tested these programs, and there are many others that do the same thing.

-- What happens to my computer?

Generally speaking, after your computer is sent to a recycling plant, it is disassembled and its materials are separated, melted down and reused. H-P, which has been recycling computers since 1987, says it will have collected and recycled one billion pounds of used products by the end of this year. The company uses some materials over again in its own products, such as plastics that are melted down, combined with plastics from recycled water bottles and used to make one of H-P's scanners.

-- Recycling alternatives

Plenty of other groups, such as the National Cristina Foundation (<http://www.cristina.org>) and Share the Technology (<http://sharetechnology.org>) specialize in distributing reusable computers to people or organizations in need of computers.

For the most part, the best systems for reuse are those that are less than five years old. A good rule of thumb is to donate your computer as soon as possible, so you don't forget about it before it becomes outdated.

Microsoft specializes in PC refurbishment by partnering with TechSoup, a tech nonprofit, and by labeling groups as Microsoft Authorized Refurbishers. These groups, which are located around the world, receive low-cost software licenses so they can install Windows and Office programs on refurbished computers for distribution to low-income families, nonprofit and educational institutions. In the U.S. alone, over 100,000 licenses have been supplied to 400 such groups. A list of them can be found here: <http://www.microsoft.com/mar> .

With Earth Day coming on April 22nd and "going green" becoming a fashionable proclamation, you're sure to find more and more options for recycling your computer or sending it away to someone who can refurbish it. One way or another, your old computer can be used for much more than gathering dust in a basement corner.

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