



Fixing for a fight

“If you can’t fix it, you don’t own it.” This is the central tenet of the growing “right to repair” movement, and I think it carries repercussions throughout the electronics scrap industry.

As most in the e-scrap space know, judging the potential reuse value of a device or computer is the first order of business when a pallet of material is unloaded.

The value proposition there is simple math – repairing a laptop or smartphone and then selling it for hundreds of dollars is vastly more lucrative than shredding the device and marketing the resulting material. Refurbishment takes skill and good workers, but the effort can be worth it both

financially and environmentally.

However, the refurb sector is increasingly finding itself under fire from the manufacturers of the devices that tinkerers and e-scrappers want to resurrect. That’s the message from outspoken repair folks, such as iFixit founder Kyle Wiens, and it’s one that needs to be echoed more by leaders in the electronics recycling industry.

OEMs, under the rubric of intellectual property, have long battled the repair industry – whether it’s Apple or Toshiba disallowing the publishing of repair manuals or the Library of Congress ruling (later overturned) that made it illegal for consumers to unlock their own cellphones without the permission of mobile service providers.

I don’t think I’m going too far out on a limb when I say that most electronics manufacturers would like you to buy a shiny new mobile device when you shatter your old one. When you head down to your local repair shop and have someone pop in a new screen, the manufacturers simply see a missed sale.

When the manufacturers have their way on this point, the greater e-scrap industry loses.

Look at the marketing materials for the vast majority of e-scrap companies of all sizes – all at the very least nod at the environmental benefits of recycling electronics responsibly. And if we’re really dealing with material in the most environmentally sound way, then we should be considering the waste hierarchy – reduce first, then repair and reuse, and finally, if necessary, recycle.

In addition, e-scrap companies should not view repair as competition. In a highly effective electronics collection system, all refurbished gear will eventually be dismantled and/or shredded. By smartly incorporating repair operations and taking action to protect repair protocols, firms can up their eco-credibility and profit off materials in multiple manners.

Some players are coming to the fore to stick up for reuse. ISRI has offered material and systemic support for this battle and has worked with Stanford Law School to petition the U.S. Copyright Office to allow refurbishers to unlock mobile devices under an exemption to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, the law that gives the power of copyright protection. Our story on page 9 lays out other legal efforts that have been made to work out the issue.

But we need more.

Recently, I had the pleasure to be involved with the 2014 edition of the International Computer Refurbishers Summit in Denver. There I spoke to many refurbishers, and I was surprised by the number of attendees who were unaware of these issues facing the future of refurbishment. I saw a similar level of non-awareness of this space at our own E-Scrap Conference.

Our industry needs to fight for equipment from OEMs that is designed with repair and recycling in mind, and it needs to defend the right to fix and refurbish that same IT equipment. Doing so will help both our environmental footprint and our bottom lines. Fight for your right to fix.

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Volume XIV, Number 12

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