

Recycling old electronics for charity

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Electronic waste is a problem year-round, but never more visible than during the holiday shopping season, when purchases of consumer electronics skyrocket and families trade in their old TVs for even bigger, shinier, flatter new ones.

More than one-third of Black Friday weekend shoppers bought electronics this year, the Consumer Electronics Association reported, and high-tech gadgets were the big sellers for many retailers. Apple products, including the iPad Air and iPad Mini were 22 percent of Target's sales on Black Friday, and all but one of the chain's top 10 selling items that day were electronics. Seventeen of Walmart's top 20 sellers that weekend were electronics, and the mammoth retailer said it sold more than 2 million TVs and 1.4 million tablets in just four hours on Gray Thursday.

What do consumers do with the old electronics they're replacing? Nonprofit organizations like Goodwill often accept working electronics, but the EPA says most broken or outdated tech toys, along with their toxins, go to landfills.

The agency estimates that only about 28 percent of all electronic waste gets recycled, and the percentage is even lower for cell phones. An estimated 13 percent of all cell phones in the United States are recycled, which means that over 135 million phones go into landfills each year.

But San Diego-based SecondWave aims to change that, and do something for nonprofits too. The firm in Pacific Beach allows consumers to donate their cellphones for recycling and send the proceeds from the sale of the renewable materials to the charity of their choice. Meanwhile, the company makes its money from refurbishing and selling the phones that still have some life in them.

SecondWave isn't the only business in town addressing so-called e-waste. For the last seven years, Recycle San Diego has served more than 50,000 businesses and households with free electronics recycling, and the [recently acquired ecoATM \(http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/Jul/02/EcoATM-acquired-Coinstar-Outerwall-recycle/\)](http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/Jul/02/EcoATM-acquired-Coinstar-Outerwall-recycle/), also based here, makes high-tech recycling kiosks that price and buy back old cell phones and mp3 players. But SecondWave distinguishes itself from the competition by placing heavy emphasis on the charitable nature of its work.

The company was founded by two brothers, Ryan and Michael Rubel, who both worked in and were respected leaders of the recycling sector before they launched SecondWave in 2011.

Michael, a veteran, said he got the idea for SecondWave from some of his Naval Academy classmates, many of whom work in nonprofits now.

"I was looking for ways to support them in what they were doing, so we merged the two ideas together," he said. "We wanted to do something great for these nonprofits by doing something great for the environment."

The firm works not only with individuals looking to offload some of their phones, but it collaborates with other organizations to collect and recycle dozens and hundreds of them at a time. And although it focuses on collecting cell phones, the company has begun accepting tablets and music devices, since people were sending them in anyway.

"You'd be amazed at what people donate," Ryan said. He can't accept televisions though, because the logistics required to recycle them drive up the cost, making them an expense instead of income.

About 40 percent of the electronics SecondWave receives can be refurbished and resold on sites like Amazon or eBay. The rest are sold for their reusable parts, and the proceeds given away to charities all over the country. The average recycled phone is worth about \$3, which is the amount that goes to the nonprofit of the phone donor's choice.

Partner charities nationwide include USO San Diego, Combat Wounded Veterans, the Surfrider Foundation, Rady Children's Hospital, Atlanta Children's Hospital and Honor Flight New England, among others.

The company saw a surge in donations after Black Friday and Gray Thursday, receiving 1,000 cell phones the Monday after the shopping holiday—about half the number it typically receives in a month.

"We've really seen a huge uptick," Michael said. "This is a really big time of year for the company, and it's partly because this is when everyone buys those new electronics products, but it's also when they think about doing something to support a cause that's important to them."

"I think we're in a really unique position to help them with that, and there are certainly other ways to get rid of your phones, but we're looking for people who want to support a great cause."

Last year, the company donated \$3,000 to just the USO San Diego. The Rubels were hesitant to estimate their contributions to the dozens of other nonprofits they gave to.

Ryan said anyone wishing to donate a used cellphone or other small electronic can request a postage-paid mailer and send it in.

"It's free for them, so it's a great and easy way to give back," he said. "There are so many other ways to do it, but this is just another tool people can use."

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