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“Ireland More in Tune with iPhone Recycling than the U.S.”

By Carmel Doyle

Some gadget lovers might be getting excited about the release of the new iPhone 4S, but it seems we are forgetting about the e-waste surge that's happening, with many, particularly in the UK and the US, opting to store their old phones in a drawer, rather than capitalising on the re-commerce opportunity, or helping a social charity by donating their phones to them.

E-waste experts such as EWSI are predicting that a simple new product announcement such as Apple's new iPhone 4S will likely create another 200m pounds of e-waste in the next two years.

Somewhat surprisingly, it seems people living in Ireland are more in sync with re-commerce than people in the US. Ireland is even ahead of the UK for phone recycling. Many people still don't realise the monetary value of their own mobiles (or cellphones, as they are called in North America), especially the iPhone, when they upgrade to newer, shinier models, says Barry Walsh, founder of Greenyourgoods.ie, which is based at Cork Institute of Technology in Cork City, Ireland.

E-waste charities such as Greenyourgoods.ie believe people are missing out on a chance to make some extra cash, as well as ignoring the eco benefits of recycling phones and keeping them in the IT lifecycle a bit longer. They are also missing out on a chance to make a social difference, by donating their phones to a charity, such as the Irish-founded Jack & Jill Children's Foundation, which supports babies born with life-threatening and debilitating conditions.

Earlier this week, US company E-Waste Systems (EWSI) released a statement, saying that with the release of the new iPhone 4S, gadget-loving hearts might be beating a bit faster, but that, from a "green standpoint," the news is probably a little less exciting.

"There's no question that the phone is already making a big splash, but just how much of an e-waste swell will it generate?" said EWSI CEO Martin Nielson this week.

Nielson went on to assert that saying the new iPhone will be in high demand in the US is an understatement.

"Here are three reasons why: 1) It's NEW! 2) The new phone will be more widely available (on Sprint as well as Verizon and AT&T). 3) It's been almost a year and a half since the last iPhone was released.

"That adds up to a huge deal with the potential of a massive e-waste impact," added Nielson.

"Apple has already sold 55m iPhones in the first three quarters of 2011, and nearly 130m phones total. And once available on Sprint's network, expect another 52m potential new customers for the iPhone. That's a tonne of phones and an equally sized tonne of phones that are about to go to landfill."

So how are e-waste companies going to deal with the sudden iPhone surge?

Well, according to EWSI, e-waste is the fastest-growing solid waste stream in the world, and about 25 US states have bans prohibiting its disposal in landfills.

"Although e-waste recycling is growing exponentially in the United States, still only 10-15pc of all electronic waste is currently being recycled, and some shady recyclers simply ship it illegally

to third-world countries, often without the knowledge of the employees working in the recycling facility.

"It's now the norm to discard electronics deemed 'obsolete', which in many cases, may be no longer than a year or two old ... if that. It doesn't matter if it's a 40-inch plasma TV, iPhone or a DVD player, people just don't think twice before tossing it for the next big thing."

He alluded to how while people are still digesting the dust around the whole global warming issue, that it's still more hip than commonplace to drive a hybrid, recycle cans and bottles, go shopping with reusable bags and even outfit your home with solar panels.

Nielson said: "These "green" actions are all well and good, and help promote the message of living responsibly to those who are receptive to change. But, as we learn more about protecting the planet and how best to do so; the one area that will never go away or even slowdown is its end-of-life processing. With innovation comes waste.

EWSI itself processes, refurbishes and mines the components of "dead" electronics. This emerging electrical waste and recovery sector is not only highly fragmented but often incorporates unethical business practices, claimed Nielson.

EWSI is working to unify this industry by acquiring best of breed end-of-life sector companies, and their management teams. The mission is designed to build a unique global platform that combines repair, refurbishment and resale of useful electronics, as well as the proper recycling of technologies into reusable raw materials, he said.

I spoke to Martin Nielson about two green IT-recycling charities in Ireland, Greenyourgoods.ie and the Jack & Jill Foundation.

The young green-tech company Greenyourgoods.ie takes your old gadgets and gives you some money for them, so you can donate some of your cash to a charity of your choice. They then recycle the gadgets/reuse the parts, often refurbishing gadgets such as laptops. They also take in CDs and old DVDs, plus video games.

The Jack & Jill Foundation, meanwhile, was co-founded in 1997 by a husband and wife team in Co Kildare: Jonathan Irwin and Senator Mary Ann O'Brien (also founder of Lily O'Brien's, the Irish chocolate company) after they lost their baby, Jack.

The charity offers support to parents of children who are born with or develop brain damage with home nursing care and respite nationwide. Jack & Jill gets most of its funding from mobile phone donations. That's because Ireland's health service, known as the HSE, gives just 19pc annually towards the cause, said Irwin. Jack & Jill urgently requires another €750,000 from the HSE for 2012.

Coincidentally, Irwin won a global award in Amsterdam on Wednesday at the International Fundraising Conference for his fundraising efforts over the years with the charity, sponsored by the Resource Alliance.

Irwin and O'Brien are heading to New York this weekend to launch the Shamrock Fund, which asks Irish-Americans to support Jack & Jill's county fundraising drive.

"I am now the named global fundraising person of the year. It's never happened to Ireland before. It is the top of the pops in terms of worldwide charity, so we're very flattered. I think it's great for Ireland. Who ends up becoming the global fundraiser? One of the smallest charities in one of the smallest countries. I think it's fantastic," he said today.

But back to the HSE. "We get more year-on-year from phones than we do from the HSE. They only give us 19pc. Since I started in 1997, we've collected €32m privately while receiving only €4m from the HSE during that time. These babies should be their responsibility, but they are just not at the races at all. I think there's something very wrong when waste, such as old phones, is contributing more to keeping these babies warm and cosy than our national health organisation.

Irwin says phone recycling hasn't really caught on in both the UK and the US.

"I think distance has a lot to do with it. We did try it in Kentucky for a local hospital there and it went quite well, but it never took off with the same sort of popularity as it does here."

He spoke about the alliances in other countries that Jack & Jill has created.

"This idea that we pioneered here was taken up by a great friend of mine who is on the board of the Starship Foundation in the Children's Hospital in Auckland, New Zealand. It has been so successful for them that they managed to pay for their air ambulance service just out mobile phones, which costs about a \$1m a year.

"We buy the phones from people. All the New Zealand phones are sold by our partners, so there's no geographical distance. From, what I know, America hasn't been to the forefront on this. Of course they were quite late into the market with cellphones, partly because they had such a good telecoms service.

"In Ireland, if you recall, it could have taken you a year to get a new telephone put into your house not so long ago!"

U.S. and e-waste - Q&A

As regards the US Martin Nielson (MN) answered a few more specific questions around e-waste and cell/mobile phone recycling.

CD: In the US/London, is this trend of e-waste recycling happening, with people donating their unwanted IT items to charitable causes, or what do people generally do with their old mobile phones?

MN: Unfortunately, most people simply abandon their old cellphones. They go into a drawer, closet or some other place out of mind. Some companies offer to buy back an old phone, but many customers cannot be bothered to do so, unless they have a smartphone, like an old iPhone. In that case, the shopper can get a credit or a cash payment depending on the condition of the item and the age. The problem is the ones furthest down the 'value chain,' when the customer will get nothing. Conscientious consumers look for a solution, such a donation or proper recycling. Others will just put it in the garbage.

Charities

MN: The use of charities is a growing solution, which deserves more attention. This is because the charity can work with a firm like ours to extract value from the materials content in the item and obtain much-needed funds as a result and keep the materials from ending up in a landfill or exported to a third-world country.

For the broader family of electronics, there is a huge disparity in the percentage of the waste that is properly recycled. In Germany, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, the idea of recycling is ingrained in people as they grow up. However, most of the western countries still routinely toss end-of-life products away. As little as 20% is properly recycled and the rest is

ignored, landfilled or exported. The problem is huge, however, as e-waste is the fastest-growing waste stream in the world.

A simple new product announcement such as Apple's new iPhone 4S will likely create another 200m pounds of e-waste in the next two years. That does not mean we are against such a new product: quite the opposite. As an iPhone fan, I will certainly buy a new one. But, the old product must be respected and turned into new raw materials eventually and never be landfilled or processed improperly.

Current behaviour trends are improving, but not fast enough.

CD: How is EWSI working to unify the e-waste industry to unify management on e-waste strategies, and what are the challenges?

MN: First, we are assembling a multinational, multidimensional company that operates at the highest standards of compliance: the WEEE Directive of the European Union. We are integrating the reverse logistics pipeline by acquiring companies with superior management, trusted supplier relationships with customers, and complimentary geographies and services. Then, we are applying best practices in professional management and imbuing these companies with the skills needed to make growth a core competency. As we obtain sufficient volumes in each trading radius around our acquisitions, we will invest in the newest and most productive plant and equipment to extract maximum value from each tonne of e-waste we touch, without landfilling or exporting to unwanted regions.

The challenges are finding enough high-quality companies who want to join us. There are some great operators in this industry and many who are passionate about what they are doing, but too many of the companies are quite willing to cut a corner or look the other way rather than find the best solution. We embrace this challenge and support those who share our values.