When ‘Refurbished’ Takes On an Earth-Friendly Vibe

By BARRY REHEFELD

JARED SELTZER faced more than the usual megabyte headaches recently while shopping for a desktop computer for his office in Tokoma Park, Md. As the information technology director of the Center for a New American Dream, a small environmental group, he wanted to buy a computer that would be relatively easy on the ecosystem.

His search brought him to the Dell Web site, where he chose an OptiPlex model that had been refurbished. "I wasn't losing anything by not buying new," Mr. Seltzer said. "And it was good that I was being true to what we're about."

Refurbished computers, he explained, are not generally made from old clunkers on their last legs. They are typically returned by buyers shortly after delivery and spruced up by the manufacturer. And they often have the same guarantees that new computers do.

Like many other consumers, Mr. Seltzer is concerned about the environmental effects of computers, which can contain hazardous substances including lead, cadmium, and mercury, among others.

Hazards occur when these substances are extracted from the earth, and, on the other end, when they are disposed of. At either end, toxic substances can find their way into the air, soil, water and eventually into people if they have the potential to cause serious health problems.

Refurbished computers lessen the blow to the environment because they have effectively been recycled, albeit at a price. They can also be easier on the bank account. Mr. Seltzer's desktop cost him $379 less than the $500 price of a new one.

Lynn Rubinstein, executive director of the Northeast Recycling Council in Brattleboro, Vt., faced a similar challenge when she was asked to replace her personal laptop in October. She could not find a refurbished model to fit her needs, so she consulted the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool, or EPEAT, an electronics rating system available free at www.epeat.net.

The system, now five months old, is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and is meant for buyers to determine which computer is environmentally friendly. The EPEAT website provides a list of upwards of 600 models, but it is not comprehensive. It only rates computers by their energy efficiency and ease of recycling.

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Seltzer, who works for an environmental group in Takoma Park, Md., bought a refurbished computer instead of a new one. Many computer users who want to save money on their electric bills. The E.P.A. estimates that 800,000 megawatts of energy, as well as 12 million pounds of hazardous waste, will be saved over the next five years by the purchase of EPEAT-rated computers.

"It was enough for me just to get one that made the list at any level," said Ms. Rubinstein, who chose a Dell Latitude computer that had a bronze rating. She paid the same price as she would have for a comparable laptop without an EPEAT rating, but the Latitude was listed as having significantly lower levels of hazardous substances.

Concerns over the environment are increasingly affecting the choices people make when purchasing new electronics. Some manufacturers of environmentally friendly sound computers are now adding "green" features to their products as well. For example, the "eco-friendly" personal computer company EPEAT is now offering computers that use less energy and are easier to recycle. The company also offers a line of desktops and laptops that comply with the environmental standards.

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