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Best Buy testing free e-waste recycling program

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE, AP Business Writer
Monday, June 2, 2008

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(06-02) 15:07 PDT San Francisco (AP) --

Under pressure to help dispose some of the electronic waste it helped create, Best Buy Co. is testing a free program that will offer consumers a convenient way to ensure millions of obsolescent TVs, old computers and other unwanted gadgets don't poison the nation's dumps.

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The trial announced Monday covers 117 Best Buy stores scattered across eight states that will collect a wide variety of electronic detritus at no charge, even if the Richfield, Minn.-based retailer didn't originally sell the merchandise.

The pilot stores are in Best Buy's Northern California, Minneapolis and Baltimore markets, as well as parts of North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Depending on how the test goes, the nation's largest electronics retailer may expand the recycling program to all of its 922 stores in the United States.

"We want to take the time to learn if we can handle this before we go any further," said Best Buy spokeswoman Kelly Groehler. "We know the need is there and the waste stream is there. We think everyone needs to bear some responsibility for this — consumers, retailers and manufacturers."

As it is, Best Buy's test is believed to be the most extensive free electronics recycling program to be offered by a major retailer so far.

Consumers will be able to bring in up to two gadgets per day at the participating Best Buy stores. The list of acceptable items includes computer processors, computer monitors and televisions with screens up to 32 inches. Console televisions, air conditioners, microwave ovens and other large appliances won't be accepted.

Best Buy agreed to set up the recycling trial after a social responsibility group, As You Sow, submitted a proposal that would have asked the company's shareholders to endorse an electronics recycling program. As You Sow withdrew the proposal after Best Buy indicated it was already exploring ways to expand its existing recycling programs.

"This is a step in the right direction," said Conrad MacKerron, director of As You Sow's corporate social responsibility program. He is hoping Best Buy's recycling trial will prompt other major electronics retailers like Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Circuit City Stores Inc. to set up similar programs.

The disposal of electronics waste has become a more prevalent problem in recent years as technology's relentless advances turn cutting-edge devices into relics every few years.

That has threatened to create environmental headaches because the old stuff contains lead and other hazardous materials that aren't supposed to be put in the trash.

All Best Buy stores already have been accepting some electronics waste — such as cell



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phones, empty ink-jet cartridges and worn-out batteries — for several years. The retailer also will haul away old appliances and television sets when customers pay to have a replacement delivered to their homes.

Many community groups, local governments and recycling specialists also offer to accept electronics waste, often for a fee.

But environmentalists are worried about what will happen as more consumers replace their existing TVs to prepare for the scheduled February 2009 shift from analog to digital broadcasting.

Although old TVs will still be able to receive the digital signals with the help of a converter, millions of consumers have simply been buying state-of-the-art TVs — a trend that has helped boost Best Buy's profits.

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