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In My Opinion: Three key takeaways from the Best Buy policy change

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Best Buy's recent announcement that it can no longer offer its customers free television and monitor recycling is sending shock waves through the electronics recycling industry and advocacy community. What can we learn from this turn of events?

1. Producer responsibility only works when it is fair and equitable.

When Best Buy announced its take-back program back in 2009, it followed commitments made by many other electronics manufacturers and retailers. Notable companies like Dell, HP, Staples, Samsung, and LG had all announced take-back and recycling programs for their customers. Several states had passed electronics extended producer responsibility (EPR) laws to hold manufacturers responsible for the safe and proper disposal of their products. Responsible electronics recycling was on the rise.

Since then, the cost of processing scrap electronics – and the management of cathode ray tube (CRT)-containing equipment in particular – has increased, scrap material revenues have waivered, and manufacturer-funded take-back programs have narrowed, or vanished altogether. In certain states – Connecticut, Maine, Oregon, Vermont and Washington – EPR laws ensure equitable distribution of responsibility and support a strong, stable collection infrastructure. However, in most of the country, Best Buy is often the only option for residents seeking reliable, convenient, industry-financed recycling for TVs or monitors. Instead of taking the lead from Best Buy and working with collectors to develop viable strategies, other manufacturers effectively stepped back. Now, these programs simply aren't meeting the demand. If they were, Best Buy's program would not be overwhelmed to the point of imposing fees to slow down the flow.

It's time to revisit the country's EPR laws, and pass new ones, to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of responsibility among manufacturers. Since the first law was passed in 2003, the dialogue has drifted away from manufacturers taking full responsibility and internalizing the costs of end-of-life materials management. Instead, arguments revolve around how high targets should be and how much manufacturers should pay. The commitments the industry made to product stewardship earlier this century, both voluntarily and through support of legislation, have eroded.

2. Government cannot afford to shoulder this burden.

Many states have banned used electronics from disposal and manufacturer programs are not meeting public demand for recycling – so local governments are left holding the proverbial bag. Some argue that governments are not required to provide an electronics recycling service, so they should opt out if they can't afford it. It's rarely that simple, however. With disposal bans in place around the country, and no effective alternative collection system, governments often see it as their duty to provide residents with a proper disposal method – or endure the costly cleanup of illegal dumping.

Providing electronics recycling programs to residents can cost local governments more because they cannot take advantage of operational efficiencies (e.g., reverse distribution) that make manufacturer programs more cost-effective. Local governments are also under extreme budget pressures, especially now. These days, not only do electronics recycling programs have to compete for budget dollars with important community needs like libraries, schools, police, and fire departments, but also with curbside recycling programs.

With weak commodity markets, many communities are paying fees for processing curbside recyclables that provided them with revenue in the past. Most see maintaining these core programs as a priority over e-scrap recycling in austere times.

3. It's not just a CRT problem.

There has been a lot of attention paid to the rising costs of CRT management, and for good reason. But it's important to note that Best Buy is charging for all televisions and monitors – not just CRTs. It is clear that the cost of recycling flat panel TVs and monitors is pervasive, too. Many in the electronics and recycling industries argue that once CRT equipment is cleared out of the system, there will be no need for EPR programs; they say the material value in the rest of the stream can cover collection and processing costs. Best Buy's inclusion of flat panel TVs and monitors proves this is not the case. In the current era, electronics recycling is a long-term, systemic concern that cannot be addressed through short-term, piecemeal solutions.

Best Buy's program was the real deal – national, no cost, hassle-free product take-back. It's a shame that their industry colleagues won't match that commitment, and it's no surprise that Best Buy can no longer go it alone.

Best Buy's move represents a call to action. Let's get the laws right so they support the responsible actors like Best Buy, raise expectations on the other manufacturers, and meet the increasing demands for consumer electronics recycling.

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