

Sustainable Success Reports

from the St. Louis Green Business Challenge

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GREEN BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Certification Yields ROI for Electronics Recycler MRC

By Jean Ponzi

Obsolete electronics – or eWaste – is the world's fastest-growing waste stream. Computers of all types, peripheral equipment, hand-held devices – even copiers – can become outdated in as little as 12-18 months.

Then what happens to these “waste” items? There is some U.S. regulation: eWaste is banned from landfills in 25 states. Most, like Missouri, rely on both businesses and individuals to voluntarily recycle these kinds of items. Electronics are almost 100% recyclable, yet only 20% of these items are currently being recycled, nationwide.

Midwest Recycling Center, or MRC, started up in 1998 as a sales and service dealer in new and reconditioned appliances. MRC soon began recycling appliances as well. Watching changes in technology, and seeing the difficulty their customers had disposing of old televisions, MRC moved in 2003 into the then-new niche of recycling electronics.

Within a few months of accepting eWaste items, MRC began hosting community collection events, in response to requests from school, business and local government customers. They hosted four events that first year. In 2014, MRC held 107 community collections. Their range of accepted items now includes “anything with a cord or battery.”

As MRC's eWaste recycling capabilities grew, so did customer expectations. Security concerns led MRC to invest in data destruction expertise and capacity. They own and operate equipment to “degauss,” or wipe clean, the hard drives of computers recent enough to be reconditioned, resold and reused – and to physically destroy the hard drives of equipment too old for resale service. MRC guarantees this critical service to exacting Department of Defense “seven pass wipe” or shredding standards.

Most important to MRC is certification of their responsible handling of the complex components they accept. MRC maintains R2, one of only two nationally recognized certifications, and the international RIOS standard for safety and environmental processes. These annually renewed certifications are further monitored by random audits, guaranteeing that de-manufactured equipment is handled with both social and environmental responsibility.

“It's pretty easy in our kind of business,” says Ryan Wilkey, head of MRC business development, “to quietly ship motherboards, processors and other material-intensive, complex items to third-world countries where workers are physically dissolving circuits with acid to recover the tiny amounts of gold and other precious metals used in today's micro-circuitry. This kind of so-called eWaste recycling happens all the time, unfortunately.

“MRC invests over \$50,000 annually in our rigorous certifications, to clearly document our commitment to sustainable practices. Our certifications,” adds Wilkey, “also help us educate the public about the importance of eWaste recycling, and how to handle these materials with integrity.”

De-manufacturing collected items accounts for about 85% of MRC's business. Reuse of still-viable items constitutes about 15%. MRC must pay a downstream recycler to recover the lead in CRT computer monitors and TV sets brought to their collections. “Grants from the St. Louis-Jefferson Solid Waste Management District have helped us to accept these items at no charge, along with other non-hazardous items,” reports Wilkey. “As this support is available, we typically take one CRT monitor or TV per car for free, and charge a small fee to accept additional ones.”

Wilkey says MRC's investments are paying off. “From 2007 to 2011, prior to earning National R2 certification, we recycled a total of 8 million lbs of eWaste for those five years combined. After earning R2 we recycled a total of 35 million lbs during 2012-14. Additionally, we had 18 full-time employees prior to certification and we've since added 42 people – and grown by 70,000 ft² of warehouse space.”

MRC maintains a de-manufacturing facility in Park Hills, offices and the reuse facility in Imperial, and a drop-off location in south St. Louis County, plus three warehouses and many partnered drop-off locations throughout Missouri. The company employs 60 FT staff and may hire on as many as 25 temporary workers to support their busiest summer month collection events.

As a St. Louis Green Business Challenge participant, MRC has combined in-house single-stream recycling with new food waste composting, diverted 98% of the company's 2014 waste from landfills. Staff interest in biodiversity is growing plans for a company vegetable garden and possible bee hives.

“MRC is proud of our innovative Green achievements,” says Ryan Wilkey, “but our top priority is maintaining top-level certifications to assure our customers – from individuals to corporations – that we're responsibly handling their electronic waste.”

The St. Louis Green Business Challenge, a joint program of the St. Louis Regional Chamber and the Missouri Botanical Garden, delivers “triple bottom-line” results (financial, social and environmental) to businesses across the St. Louis Region. The Challenge's scorecard of strategies and customized service helps companies “Green up” everyday practices in ways that work for each participant's goals, type of business, and workplace culture. This column is funded in part by the St. Louis-Jefferson Solid Waste Management District and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.



MRC vehicle efficiency includes 38 mpg Chevy Cruze sedans as company cars and a fuel-saving van for short-run eWaste pickups – all proudly advertising their services!

Learn more at www.stlouisgreenchallenge.com