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When appliances quit, most of us don't call a repairman

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When a dishwasher leaks, a refrigerator conks or a stove goes cold, more and more appliance owners are looking to shop for new and dump the old.

The legendary Maytag repairman isn't the only fixer sitting by the phone.

"We've come into the throwaway age. I used to be a service tech. We used to be able to fix or replace a motor. Things aren't built like they used to be," says Fernie Del Valle, operations manager for Albert Lee Appliances.

"Thirty years ago you could replace an electric motor in a dishwasher for $75, parts and labor. Now people don't want to pay $150 because you can buy a new one for about $250," he says.

Sometimes appliance replacement makes sense. A dishwasher that uses 6 instead of 20 gallons of water per load is one example. A new, energy-efficient refrigerator that can save $35 to $90 annually on electric bills is another.

Fremont Appliance in Ballard offers used appliances and repairs. But a technician there says fewer people are looking for used appliances and repair calls are down from about 10 per day to two or three per week. "You should see the dumps," he says.

Tom Genshock, owner of All Tech Appliance Service, has been doing appliance repairs for 29 years. Recently he's been watching service calls decline. "We think it's a combination of the economy, people fixing things themselves with help from the Internet, and they're dumping them. Appliances are less friendly to repair than they once were. Some we can't even fix."

Genshock cites the use of plastic components -- knobs or shafts that snap so an entire piece must be replaced -- computerization and state regulations that make it more expensive to train and license technicians as factors that drive up the cost of repairs.

Although Genshock says his company's goal is to keep an average repair bill under $100 -- a sum that can replace a switch, make a dryer tumble again, or a stove burner glow, for example -- business is still off. "Look at the Yellow Pages. There used to be about 10 pages of appliance repair places. Those numbers are shrinking every year," he says.

A quick glance at the Yellow Pages proves he's right. Appliance repair listings are down to five-plus pages -- including some ads that cover almost a full page.

Seattle homeowner Jim Replogle is one consumer who's found a way to avoid repair costs he calls "ridiculous."

"Have you ever heard of RepairClinic.com," he asks? He's consulted this online service several times and fixed things himself. "When you buy high-end appliances, you're less likely to throw them out," Replogle says.

During a recent kitchen remodel, he opted for all new appliances, but resold some of his lightly used models through newspaper ads and donated others to a charity for resale.

Chris Hall, president and co-founder of RepairClinic.com, says consumers can save 75 percent of the repair cost by using his service, buying and installing parts yourself. And you don't have to take a vacation day to sit at home, waiting for a service person to arrive.

Hall, who once owned an appliance-repair business, started his Michigan-based online service five years ago. They currently are helping about 25,000 customers per month, with about 90 employees.

He says about one-third of those seeking help don't need a part at all. They just need help trouble-shooting. But if they do need to replace something, RepairClinic stocks parts and they'll send them right out. That's how they make money. But the diagnosis, installation and reassembly and instructions are free. It's sort of like having a technician within reach, but not on site as you do the work yourself.

"Waste prevention is better than recycling," says Tom Watson, project manager in the recycling and environmental services section of the King County Solid Waste Division. He has been watching a growing number of appliances being dumped at transfer stations and on recyclers.

"Those of us who work in this field are dismayed that appliances have such a short life. Recycling is better than disposal, but there are issues with recycling. It's an industrial process. New markets (for recycled materials) have to be found."

Craig Lorch is a partner in Total Reclaim, one of this region's larger recyclers specializing in domestic and industrial appliances, refrigerant gases, computers, etc.

He says the business was founded in 1991 to help businesses, county and city governments comply with Clean Air Act regulations that became effective in 1992. Total Reclaim provides services to transfer stations, appliance shops and non-profits.

In 2003, his company recycled 7.3 million pounds of domestic appliances. "And we're just one company," Lorch says. Add in the industrial products (soda vending machines, for example) electronics and other materials they handle and the total was about 15 million pounds.

Once Total Reclaim extracts gases from refrigerators and air conditioners and remove compressor motors containing a hazardous oil, the refrigerator carcasses are compressed into bales. Then they and other baled appliances go to an auto shredder where metals are separated from plastic, insulation and other components. Non-metals become "shredder fluff," a material that's used as a daily top fill at landfills. It provides a barrier to birds, rodents and other scavengers attracted to the landfill beneath.

Repair technicians may be lonely, dumps overworked and the environment challenged, but appliance dealers are doing business. Good business.

Del Valle says there's a demand for more expensive appliances. "People are realizing they're spending more time in their kitchens and making them desirable places." They're opting for non-traditional items like warming ovens. Whoever gets home first, cooks. Those who arrive later have a well-preserved

dinner from the warming oven.

At Lowe's on Rainier Avenue South, appliance specialist Patrick V. Bennett also has noticed customers buying and upgrading. "If they're remodeling a kitchen, they tend to buy everything new," he says.

While it may be appealing to buy new, it can be costly in other ways. Watson says it costs about $10 to leave an old stove at a dump or transfer station and not all accept them. Refrigerators cost more for disposal because Freon gas must be extracted. Some retailers charge for delivery of the new and removal of the old.

It's just a matter of deciding which costs you're willing to pay.

APPLIANCE SMARTS

Here are more tips on appliances from repair techs, environmentalists, consumers and dealers:

- It pays to troubleshoot. When her 30-year-old, olive-green dryer stopped running, Linda Scott was ready to shop for a new one when her husband decided to open it up and take a look. He discovered about $8 in change in the bottom. He removed it and the dryer is back in business.

- Don't keep an old refrigerator running in the garage or basement to cool a few cans or bottles of beverages. They're a huge waste of energy. In some parts of the country, power companies are offering buy-backs for them.

- Read owner's manuals and follow directions on maintenance. Keep appliances clean.

- Use a small amount of Vaseline on the hinge side of vinyl refrigerator seals. It keeps the vinyl clean and helps the magnets inside get a better grip when the door closes.

- Puget Sound residents tend to use too much detergent, softener and other products for our water conditions. Residue builds up in the washer and in your clothing.

- Expect stoves to last longer than other appliances, especially when they're used for only an hour or two per day.

- Don't dump appliances that look good and work, especially if they're less than 10 years old. Sell them, or donate them to St. Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army or Union Gospel Mission, for example. But call first. Some charities accept all major appliances in good working order. Others won't accept refrigerators and freezers. Some pick up. Some don't. **REPAIR OR REPLACE?**

Trying to decide what to do with an old or broken appliance? Chris Hall, president and co-founder of RepairClinic.com, has some suggestions:

- **How old is the appliance?** If it's more than 6 or 7 years old and a repair will cost more than half the cost of a new one, consider replacing.

- **How long should an appliance last?** Generally 12 to 14 years, but many last for more than 30 years.

- **Consider the energy savings you will get with the new appliance.**

- **How difficult is it to replace?** If you have to remove doors, railings or worse, you might consider repairs.

- **What about hidden costs?** Removal? Installation? Disposal? Tax? Check with your local waste-disposal organization, and do the numbers.

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