

Ink again

It takes 1,000 years for ink cartridges to decompose—or about 5 minutes to refill and recycle them.

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When the black ink turns to gray and then to illegible on your printer, it's time to get a new ink or toner cartridge. But what to do with the old one? You can ship it back to the manufacturer hundreds of miles away for recycling or remanufacturing. Or, you pitch it, adding to the roughly 2 billion plastic, non-biodegradable and often inky cartridges filling up landfills each year. A survey by Pinky Pink's Inks, a nonprofit cartridge recycling charity, found that most Washoe County businesses throw their ink cartridges away.

But there's an alternative. A handful of local businesses, including Pinky Pink's Inks, Rapid Refill and Cartridge World, accept old cartridges and provide either new or remanufactured ones. The companies also pick up and drop off cartridges for businesses.

Most empty cartridges can be refilled three to 10 times with ink—and reusing takes less energy than recycling. The quality of remanufactured cartridges, or “remans,” varies, some being downright inky, others being on par with brand new ones—and they cost up to 50 percent less. Most companies guarantee their product, so take it back if it's not working well.

Julie Spicer Calvery, executive director of Pinky Pink's, was helping her granddaughters' school “topple toners” for Cartridges for Kids, a fundraiser in which schools ship old cartridges to a company that pays them a few cents per cartridge. Calvery saw toner dust everywhere, on tables, on the kids' hands. “I was just grossed out.” Though toner dust isn't designated as hazardous waste, Calvery felt direct contact with the chemical product could not be healthy, especially for kids. With president Lisa Carver, she formed the nonprofit, collecting cartridges and finding regional remanufacturing companies that paid \$1-\$5 for them, not 1-5 cents. The proceeds are distributed among elementary schools participating in the Pinky Pink's program, where a guy in a pink pig costume entertains students as Calvery and Carver teach about the hazards of toner dust and the benefits of recycling.

The average price Pinky Pink's has been able to get for each used cartridge has dropped from about \$1.12 to 35 cents. Carver attributes the decrease to a good thing—more people recycling—but it's driven values down. The nonprofit is now seeking more donations and grants. Still, Pinky Pink's was able to raise around \$2,500 for Washoe County schools in 2007.

Neat racks of ink and toner cartridges line the walls of Rapid Refill on South Virginia Street. Most of them are remanufactured cartridges, though there are some new ones. Terry Elder and his wife, Rosie, opened the franchise in October. They weren't doing it to be "green," necessarily. But the business has opened his eyes. Before throwing anything away, Terry finds himself thinking, "Is there a way I could recycle this?"

Rapid Refill cleans empty cartridges, refills them and then tests them to make sure they work. Clients don't have to wait for a refill when they drop off their "empties", as cartridges are ready to go in the store.

"Since they're all made from plastics and oil, it's just not a good idea to throw them away," says Elder.