



SINCE 2004

Tech companies start phasing out toxics

A competitive company league table, non-violent direct action, and cooperation where it's due – Greenpeace pressures the world's biggest electronics corporations into designing out the toxics.

THE THREAT

The world's growing consumption of electronic products has caused a dangerous explosion in electronic scrap containing toxic chemicals which cannot be disposed of or recycled safely. Every year, hundreds of thousands of old computers and mobile phones are dumped in landfills or burned in smelters. Thousands more are exported, often illegally, from industrialised countries to Asia and Africa, where workers at scrap yards, some of whom are children, are exposed to a cocktail of toxic chemicals and poisons.

THE GREENPEACE WAY

Greenpeace saw it like this: toxics in electronic devices are a threat to human health and to the environment. The corporations that profit from making and selling these devices have to face up to their responsibilities – by recycling their products; but even more so, by making them cleaner in the first place. With those demands in mind, Greenpeace in 2004 launched its campaign to catalyse a fundamental change in the way electronic gadgets are designed, produced and recycled. First results arrived quickly. Dragged into the spotlight, Samsung and Nokia announced that they would phase out hazardous chemicals in their products. A year later, Sony Ericsson, Motorola and LG followed suit. In 2006, both Hewlett Packard and Dell committed to a phase-out plan.

GREENPEACE GUIDE TO GREENER ELECTRONICS

But Greenpeace knew that these promises had to be monitored – and that the pressure had to be kept up. In 2006 the campaign's most effective tool was born: the Greenpeace Guide to Greener Electronics – a competitive league table for a highly competitive industry, which ranks companies against each other, both on eliminating toxics and on recycling efforts. The campaign's other major component was "people power," most obvious in the Green My Apple campaign of 2006, which turned Apple from a company falling behind in the rankings into the industry leader on toxics elimination. A website designed like Apple's (which later won a Webby Award) became the base for Apple fans from around the world to donate their time, creativity, blogs, banners, ads and t-shirt designs telling Apple: "We love our Macs. We just wish they came in green." Not much later CEO Steve Jobs declared a change in policy, calling it "A Greener Apple".

GREEN ELECTRONICS PRODUCT SURVEY

If companies fell behind in their promises, Greenpeace used non-violent direct action to remind them. In 2006 Dell committed to eliminating PVC plastic and brominated flame retardants from all their products by 2009. But halfway through 2010 Dell had yet to meet this original deadline and a new one looked unlikely. Greenpeace activists showed up at Dell headquarters in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Bangalore and Austin, while more than 40,000 activists around the world emailed the company. When the industry made progress, however, Greenpeace has been willing to cooperate. Last year, companies were invited to show off the best they've got for a Green Electronics Product Survey. Underlining all this is the campaign's lobbying work towards strengthening regulation on chemicals, which continues to be weak and inadequate. Together these efforts have set the industry firmly on a pathway towards a toxics-free future.

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