

Can they fix it?

Many of us would rather replace goods than get them repaired. We look at the reasons behind the throwaway culture

We tend to throw out products such as kettles and toasters when the simplest thing goes wrong. Hardly surprising, when you can buy a Best Buy kettle for £15 or a Best Buy toaster for £20.

But we've found that a much wider range of products are often quickly discarded when they break down.

Our survey reveals that 55% of the UK population believe it's too much hassle to get a household product repaired when it breaks. The cost and difficulty of repairing modern products and rapid advances in new technology give consumers an ideal reason to replace rather than repair.

This is especially true when you consider that the typical repair cost is likely to be at least £100, according to Comet.

The products that we most readily throw out tend to be audiovisual goods such as cameras and MP3 players.

Repair or replace?

We asked Which? members whether they would repair or replace a product they had had for some time if it developed a fault.

After a year

■ Eight in 10 people would replace rather than repair an MP3/MP4 player.

■ Two out of three people would replace a DVD player.

■ Five out of 10 members wouldn't bother repairing a digital camera or vacuum cleaner if it had a serious fault after a year.

Four years

■ Four in 10 would replace their washing machine if it went wrong.

■ Four in 10 would replace a widescreen TV if a fault had damaged its performance.

Six years

■ Built-in ovens and washing machines were among products that many people would be prepared to have repaired even after this time.

The cost of repairs

Nearly three quarters of the UK public in our survey feel it's often cheaper to buy a new product rather than get an old one repaired.

This is perhaps not surprising, when you consider that even simple repairs are relatively expensive. Parts that commonly break down, particularly on white goods, are quite cheap (typically £5-£40) but labour costs and VAT push prices up. You can expect to pay a £75 call-out and repair charge for each job. We looked at the common repair costs for a range of broken parts in our reliability survey in January 2008.

Most of us think it's too much hassle to get goods repaired when they break down



This time, we phoned repair shops around London for a quote to replace a faulty thermostat on a fridge that cost under £200. We got three quotes: a replacement thermostat was £11.49, and the charge for labour was at least £70 in each case, making replacement a tempting option. It's likely that most repair quotes will be at least this figure, so it's almost certain that a consumer would replace a broken £40 DVD player.

Shops in decline

The electrical repair shop, once a familiar sight on every high street, is fast disappearing. According to our survey, nearly half of respondents said there wasn't one in their local area. We looked at towns of similar size and found a big difference in the number of repair shops; there are 36 in Southampton but just eight in Barnsley, for example. Towns such as Canterbury and Falkirk have five or fewer. Amdea, the Association of Manufacturers of Domestic Appliances, confirmed there are fewer shops in the UK.

PHOTOGRAPHY: UNP, JOHN TRENHOLM, GETTY, ALAMY



PURE MADNESS

Christine Wordsworth 51, biologist

Christine's £150 Pure digital radio was just three years old when it broke down, so she took it to be repaired.

Pure offers a repair service for radios that are out of guarantee, but Christine was told that spare parts were no longer available for the Evoke 2 radio.

She said: 'It seems barking mad to sell a product that they can't mend.'

Pure agreed to let her have a new Evoke 2XT for £70 instead of £119.99. It said that £70 was 'slightly more' than the repair cost would have been for the older radio.

Pure told us that the majority of parts for this model, launched in 2002, were now no longer available. It said that the Evoke 2 was one of five out of the 40 models it makes that is no longer repairable. The newest of these is four years old.

Roy Brooker, who is part of the team that tests audiovisual appliances for Which?, said: 'The repair industry is declining. In some cases it's impossible to repair things and often not worth the money.'

Digital camcorders, MP3 players and PVRs can all be repaired with the right expertise, but it will cost a lot.

Roy explained that the nature of many products gives consumers no choice but to throw things away. He said that the laser on a CD player, for example, used to be replaceable. Nowadays it's moulded into the chassis, so you have to replace the whole mechanism, which is more expensive.

Roy fears that white goods, such as washing machines and fridges, that still have repairable parts will go the same way as more aspects of production are computer controlled.

Mike Floodgate of Retra, the Radio, Electrical and Television Retailers' Association, said these were difficult times for the trade.

He said that those shops that still carry out repairs do them to keep customers rather than to make a profit.

And some find it hard to get hold of the

necessary spares (see 'Pure madness', above) and technical instructions. The pace of technical change means that product components can change from batch to batch and that means reduced spare parts.

The bulk of work is repairing goods such as plasma and LCD TVs and more expensive older models of items like DAB radios or DVD recorders.

Store service

It's not widely known that high-street electrical chain Comet offers a repair service. You can even take items or brands not sold in its stores in to be repaired. Service director Toby Lousada said the repairs side of its business is not well known, but there are plans to increase its customer awareness.

Newer and greener

Some say that it's greener to buy newer products as they use less water and heat and are more efficient than older models.

A calculator on the website www.t2c.org.uk shows estimates of how much money and energy you might save by replacing an appliance that is more than seven years old.

Contacts

Amdea (Association of Manufacturers of Domestic Appliances) www.amdea.co.uk

Comet www.comet.co.uk

Currys www.currys.co.uk

Retra (Radio, Electrical and Television Retailers' Association) www.retra.co.uk

CARING FOR YOUR PRODUCTS

Get the best value from things you've bought

**Q Should I buy an extended warranty?**

A Most manufacturers guarantee products for one or two years after you buy them. Be wary of extended warranties, which are often expensive compared with the price of a product. Appliances are more reliable these days, so you could be wasting your money. If you do want an extended guarantee, manufacturers might offer one free, or at least more cheaply than a retailer.

Q What about faults?

A If there's a manufacturing defect, the retailer must repair or replace the machine up to six years after purchase, even if the fault doesn't show up for some time. You may need a repairer to look at the product and confirm that it is a such a defect.

Q Where can I get goods repaired?

A High-street chain Comet repairs all brands, including items not bought at its stores, charging a fixed rate including call-out, parts and labour. Currys also does repairs and Indesit runs one of the biggest UK service operations. If you want something

repaired, go back to the manufacturer or retailer first. Compare the quote with local repair shops or online. Go to Which? Local www.which-local.co.uk for recommendations by Which? members for UK domestic repair shops.

**Q How much will I pay for parts?**

A Check online to see how much spare parts for appliances cost – you'll then be able to see whether a repair quote you've been given is reasonable. You can also find out how to fix or find spare parts for appliances on sites such as www.howtomendit.com.

Q What if something I bought goes wrong?

A If a faulty electrical product made after January 2007 needs replacing, the retailer you bought it from should take it back on a like-for-like basis when you buy a new one.

Councils also collect these items, but they are allowed to charge you for this.

OUR RESEARCH

3,039 Which? online panel members were surveyed in April and May 2008. And 1,010 adults representative of the British population were interviewed in May 2008 by telephone.