

PERSONAL TECH

Taking the Stigma Out of Buying Used Electronics

Tech Fix

By BRIAN X. CHEN APRIL 27, 2016

WHEN you sell a used video game console to the retailer GameStop, it goes on a long journey before winding up in the pre-owned section inside a store.

The product travels to one of GameStop's repair facilities, like its enormous refurbishment operations center in Grapevine, Tex., where it undergoes a litany of tests. A used PlayStation, for example, would be checked for every component, from the disc-loading tray to the laser that reads the games. Any malfunctioning component would be replaced, and with the console inspected, cleared of personal data and cleaned, it becomes offered for sale.

"We have to somewhat be like a doctor and ask a lot of questions," said Bruce Kulp, GameStop's senior vice president for supply chain and refurbishment. "The worst thing in our world is to have something go out that's been pre-owned and a consumer has an issue with it."

GameStop's refurbishment of video game consoles underlines how a used electronic sold by a reputable brand can often be as good as buying new. While a used product may lack the original packaging or there might be some scuffs on it, the quality of many of the devices remains high and people who buy the gadgets do the world a favor by putting more use into the energy, metals, plastics and human labor

invested in creating the product, said Carole Mars, the senior research lead for the Sustainability Consortium, which studies the sustainability of consumer goods.

Those who buy used gadgets are also part of a trend of anti-consumerism, which includes maintaining electronics to get more use out of them for a longer period, rather than discarding and constantly upgrading to the latest products.

There are no firm numbers indicating how many Americans buy used electronics. About 25 percent of GameStop's revenue last year consisted of sales of used products, which was flat compared with the previous year. Amazon said that more customers are shopping in its used products store, though it declined to provide numbers. Many organizations dealing with used electronics sell to those that cannot easily afford technology, like public schools or economically disadvantaged countries.

Yet used electronics often face a bad rap — people may lack trust in a pre-owned product because it has been used by someone other than themselves. To see whether such stigma is warranted, I compared the pre-owned products programs of three retailers: Amazon, GameStop and Gazelle. My takeaway is that you can buy pre-owned products from reputable brands with as much confidence as you might buy a used car from a certified dealer.

The Programs

Amazon's in-house program for pre-owned products is called Warehouse Deals. The giant online retailer sells used products in 25 categories, including televisions, cameras, computers, kitchen gadgets and cellphones. Many of the items come from customers who opened the packaging or used the goods and returned them to Amazon.

Glenn Ramsdell, director of Amazon's Warehouse Deals, said every item was checked by hand for its physical and functional condition. A wireless speaker, for example, would be tested for its connectivity features and checked for included accessories; repairs are made if necessary.

Then the items get a grade. “Like new” means it was probably untouched and in perfect condition; “very good” describes an item that was well cared for and lightly used; a “good” item might show signs of wear and tear but works perfectly; and “acceptable” would be something that has cosmetic issues like scratches and dents but otherwise works.

The discounts vary in Warehouse Deals, but with a bit of time, people can scout out some good deals. An Amazon 6-inch Kindle sells for \$60 brand new, but in “good” condition it sells for about \$43.50, a discount of almost 28 percent.

Gazelle offers cash for consumers’ pre-owned smartphones, Apple laptops and iPads. Before the products are listed for sale, they go through a rigorous testing program similar to GameStop’s. The items are shipped to a processing center in Louisville, Ky., and undergo what Gazelle calls a 30-point inspection, testing everything from a phone’s camera lens to its wireless connections. Smartphone batteries need to have at least 80 percent of their capacity remaining, otherwise they are replaced with new ones, the company said.

Dave Maquera, the president of Gazelle, said that similar to the inspection programs used by certified pre-owned car dealers, Gazelle’s process creates a new level of confidence in buying used phones and computers. Though he declined to provide specific numbers, he noted that sales of used devices to consumers had jumped a double-digit percentage compared to last year.

At GameStop, the product testing gets intense. Mr. Kulp, the supply chain executive, said the company takes up to 100 game consoles a month, refurbishes them and puts them through stress tests, running them for thousands of hours to see if its repairs are long-lasting. These test units are never sold to consumers.

“It’s just like the way a car company would do a crash test,” he said.

As for used video games, the company buffs out any light scratches from the discs, but if the game is so deeply scratched that it becomes unplayable, it heads to the shredder.

The trade-offs for buying used games at GameStop are fairly obvious. For one, after a new game releases, you will have to wait awhile to buy it used: In other words, you will be a late adopter. For another, the product will probably lack its original packaging and there might be light cosmetic wear. But for the average consumer, all that matters is that your gaming experience will be exactly the same as if you had bought the product new.

What if something goes wrong? Amazon and GameStop give customers 30 days to return used products, the same amount of time they allow for returns of new products. Gazelle offers a free 30-day warranty for each device and the option to buy an extended warranty.

Bottom Line

Consumers should always consider checking out the used section of retailers for most electronics, including smartphones, laptops and desktop computers, said Dr. Mars of the Sustainability Consortium. In my personal experience buying used video games, computers and even home gadgets like vacuum cleaners from GameStop, Gazelle and Amazon, I have never regretted buying used items.

But Dr. Mars said to beware of buying used televisions and computer monitors, since a lot more can go wrong with larger screens than with computer equipment. The jury is also still out on buying used wearable devices like Fitbit trackers because they make up a fairly new category, she added.

Even if you choose not to buy used, the best thing you can do is sell your gadget as soon as you stop using it so that someone else can give it some love. (I tested several trade-in and recycling services last year, and found all of them to be headache-free.) If you procrastinate, the product can get too old, meaning the retailers won't be able to resell it, so it may end up in a shredder, Dr. Mars said.

“Turn over that old device so that somebody can get a second life out of it,” she said. “There’s no reason for it to go into a drawer.”

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