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What a load of rubbish

Our ability to separate ourselves from our waste is starting to lead to dangerous consequences, writes Thea O'Connor.

Put out the trash bin, flush the toilet or shove something down the garbage disposal, and out of sight is out of mind. Thanks to our modern waste removal systems we barely have to see our waste, let alone smell or handle it.

In affluent consumer cultures, our relationship with waste is characterised by distance, denial and disposability, according to Gay Hawkins, author of *The ethics of waste* and professor in social theory at the University of New South Wales.

Tough economic times may curb excessive consumption, but a fundamental change in our relationship to waste is difficult when disposability is encouraged - when it's cheaper to buy a new product than get one fixed, when your computer or mobile phone is superseded every year, and when products are designed with built-in obsolescence.

Distancing ourselves from the waste we create not only means that we shirk responsibility for the harm it can do to human health and the environment. It also means we can fail to recognise the regenerative power of waste.

Not so in Lunen. This German town is the first in the world to be powered by poo. Cow and horse manure as well as other organic material from local farms will provide electricity for its 90,000 residents when it launches a biogas network this year.

This may seem amazing, but it's the way nature has been working for millions of years. In natural systems 'waste' is never removed because it's critical to sustaining life.

Everything that lives dies; what dies decomposes into its constituent parts, which are then used to create something new.

This is true of organic matter, but most industrial objects have been designed by a production system that takes, makes and wastes. Some businesses however, are embracing 'biomimicry', an innovation that seeks sustainable solutions by mimicking nature's strategies.

Interface, the world's largest manufacturer of commercial and modular carpet based in Atlanta, is one such company. Since 1994, founder and chairman of Interface, Ray Anderson has been steering the company towards becoming a sustainable enterprise that produces no waste.

'By producing modular carpet in small squares we've been able to reduce the amount of waste involved in laying carpet,' says Clinton Squires, general manager of InterfaceFLOR, the Australian division of Interface.

'To achieve the next level of waste reduction we really needed to make a paradigm shift. This occurred some years ago when our design team in Georgia, USA, was sent out to the surrounding forests and told: 'Go out and see how nature would design a floor covering!'

The team came back reporting that when you look at a forest floor, there are no two things the same - each leaf, stick and stone is different. There's an enormous amount of chaos but it still looks good. This observation was the inspiration for a carpet design that would go on to become a best-seller.

Instead of creating carpets with regular, repeatable patterns, Interface created a new design that was completely random, with no pattern repetition, just like a forest leaf bed.

'It's much more serviceable because it disguises stains and it further reduces installation waste from 14 per cent, to 5 - 2 per cent,' says Squires. 'It's now the fastest selling product in Australia.'

Alan Greenfield is the director and founder of Taylor Fry Consulting Actuaries, which has offices in Sydney and Melbourne. Since founding the company in 1999 Greenfield has been committed to growing a sustainable business.

'Whatever business you are in, waste reduction is the first and most important step in becoming more sustainable,' says Greenfield. A recent fit-out of Fry's offices saw all but two of the old doors get reused.

All of the glass in the new fit-out comes from the previous one and rather than throw away their 15 workstations, they kept them and matched new stations with existing ones.

Computers, printers, phones, photocopiers and lights are basic electronic equipment for office-based businesses. With regular upgrades they also create a mountain of electronic waste.

When thrown away, e-waste ends up in landfills where it leaches toxic heavy metals, such as lead, mercury, cadmium and beryllium into groundwater, contaminating soils and bringing significant risks to human health and the environment.

'We get as much use out of our computers as we can,' says Greenfield. 'When a computer dies, we don't just chuck it out but take it to a recycling centre. And when we no longer need a computer, we give it away.'

Extended producer responsibility (EPR) for electronic products has become law in the European Union, Japan, China, South Korea, the US, Canada and parts of South America. This means that manufacturers must take responsibility for the collection and recycling of their products after the consumer has used them.

In Australia there are a few EPR schemes for electronic waste, including the voluntary cartridge recycling program for office equipment operated by Fuji Xerox.

In most countries in the world, food and garden waste and paper are the main contributors to municipal waste, which is collected from households, businesses, office buildings and institutions.

Visualising where our garbage ends up is one way to help cultivate greater personal responsibility for the waste we create, according to Hawkins. And adopting the mantra 'all waste is lost profit' can remind businesses that waste reduction efforts lead to financial as well as environmental gains.

Wasted facts

Computers

- Average life span of only two years in developed countries

Mobile phones

- Replaced on average every 18 months
- Less than 4 per cent are recycled

Televisions

- Less than 1 per cent are recycled
- An average CRT television contains about 3.5 kilograms of lead

Fluorescent lamps

- Only about 1 per cent are recycled
- One lamp contains between 1 and 5 milligrams of mercury

Top five generators of municipal waste per person in the OECD

1. Ireland
2. US
3. Iceland
4. Norway
5. Australia

Sources: Tipping point Australia's e-waste crisis, Total Environment Centre, Dec 2008; Waste management, 2006 report of the Australian Productivity Commission.

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