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Manager@Work: Panasonic's green plan

Recycling electronic waste and millions of obsolescent personal computers worldwide has become a pressing issue for the consumer electronics industry in recent years.

According to Earth 911, an online environmental resource in partnership with the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other organisations, only 14% of the over 20 million computers in the US that became obsolete in 1998 were recycled or reused; the rest were disposed, winding up in landfills or gathering dust in garages.

In 2003, just five years later, Earth 911 noted that the figures had tripled, with some 63 million computers obsolescent.

Electronic waste, or e-waste - toxic chemicals such as lead, nickel cadmium, alkaline, mercury nickel and metal hydride which are typically found in batteries - can leak into the soil over a period of time, affecting communities surrounding landfills and the environment, says Greenpeace International.

At the world's largest consumer electronics show, held in Las Vegas from Jan 7 to 10 this year, the industry showed that it's making efforts to deal with the issue.

From big boys such as Sony, Fujitsu and Panasonic to small players such as Z-Power - they showcased products that are not just innovative but eco-friendly. Take for example, Sony's "Spin N' Snap" digital camera - a simple-looking, rectangular gadget with two viewfinder holes in the centre. The novelty of the product is in the way it's powered up - simply stick your fingers through the viewfinder holes and spin the camera around a couple of times before snapping away.

Fujitsu has also released a laptop with a biodegradable plastic case made from corn, while Z-Power has developed silver-zinc batteries which contain recoverable material.

For Panasonic, the aim of going green was clearly conveyed by Toshihiro Sakamoto, its president of AVC networks and also Matsushita senior managing director, during his keynote presentation at the Vegas show on Jan 8.

"Environmental responsibility is a big and serious initiative for Panasonic, and you will see the results in our factories, products and activities around the world. We're the first TV maker

to remove lead from our plasma TVs, and we are now making every effort to go beyond just being environmentally friendly," said Sakamoto.

Sakamoto added that Panasonic's focus in the near future would be on eliminating the use of harmful materials from their products as well as utilising easily recyclable materials. "We also aim to increase energy-efficient products from 16% to 30% [of all products manufactured by Panasonic] within the next 24 months. On top of this, we will reduce carbon emissions by 300,000 pounds in the same time period, a reduction that brings us back to where we were at during the year 2000," he said.

Removing lead is just one of Panasonic Malaysia's corporate social responsibility (**CSR initiatives**), going forward. "We use almost no lead in our plasma TVs, so when [the parts] are recycled, we can reduce the lead significantly for the environment," said Panasonic Malaysia's managing director, Hiroshi Nakamura.

Panasonic Malaysia recently promoted what Nakamura terms "inverter technology", which adjusts the power output of various electronic devices such as those used in refrigerators, air conditioners and microwave ovens. According to Nakamura, energy consumption levels in refrigerators can be reduced by 20% and as much as 50% for air conditioner units.

The Japanese electronics maker also hopes to step up its social contributions. Panasonic Malaysia spent RM500,000 on such activities last year, and aims to increase this by 15% to 20% this year.

"We are now conducting ocean preservation activities, and we especially try to protect coral," said Nakamura. Once a year, Panasonic Malaysia sends a team to the coast of Terengganu to carry out ocean-cleaning efforts and build artificial reefs to encourage coral growth.

The company also works closely with Universiti Malaysia Terengganu and the Marine Parks of Malaysia to conduct learning sessions with local primary schools on the importance of the environment, and what should be done to protect it.

"We started our activities three years ago, but in the past two years, our activities have been more structured and organised," said Nakamura, adding that Panasonic's **CSR initiatives** vary in accordance with the different countries the company is in. "The bottom line though, is knowing what you can and what you should do for the environment."