

ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

It's an act of charity to reuse ink cartridges

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GREEN PIONEERS

Patrick Stead, founder of Environmental Business Products, helps charities through recycling

THERE is an easy way to explain what Patrick Stead does. "Imagine throwing your car away every time it ran out of petrol," he said. "You wouldn't dump it by the side of the road and spend thousands on a new one."

Rather than cars, Stead refills ink cartridges for computer printers. Environmental Business Products (EBP), the firm he set up 18 years ago, now resurrects more than 6m ink jet cartridges a year — diverting them from landfill.

"These things don't biodegrade," said Stead. "It takes about 1,000 years for the plastic to start to decompose and there are metals and chemicals in the make-up that affect the water table."

The potential market is huge. Britain uses more than 45m cartridges a year, with about 70% still being thrown away and dumped, according to Stead. EBP's engineers turn old cartridges into new ones, and the group sells them across Europe to retailers including Tesco and WH Smith.

For Stead the key is reusing, rather than recycling. He claims cartridges can be reused as many as seven times before reaching the end of their life.

Stead, who was born in Yorkshire, moved to London when he was 19 with his mind set on starting his own company. He was working as a sales representative for Canon, selling photocopiers, when he came up with the idea of recycling toner cartridges.

"People were already selling toner cartridges but not doing a very good job of it. It seemed obvious that ink cartridges, being better technology, were the next thing."

In 1992, Stead, then still only 26, set up EBP with a colleague. The initial problem they faced was how to collect enough ink jet cartridges to create a sustainable business. Stead decided to piggy-back on charity mailing lists. Tommy's, the medical research charity, was one of the first to sign up.

EBP sent freepost envelopes to all the charity's donors, inviting them to return their empty ink jet cartridges. The company then made a donation to Tommy's in exchange for every cartridge received.

The scheme was a huge success. "We started to collect an awful lot of products and we were the only



Stead's cartridges are sold under the brands of top retailers

people doing it. We had gone from collecting a handful every week to a few thousand," said Stead. Now the company has agreements with dozens of charities and it co-ordinates the scheme through a website called Each One Counts.

The business has raised about £5m for charities since 1992, while also expanding its source of raw materials.

Once the supply of old cartridges was secured, the next challenge was how to fill them and make them as good as new cartridges. It is not as straightforward as squirting ink back in.

"If it was that simple, everybody would be doing it," said Stead. Each cartridge and each colour requires different machinery. Using his own savings to fund the business, Stead hired his first engineer to help develop the technology to clean and reuse the cartridges.

EBP started by selling its own brand, called Ink Again, in stores and through catalogues but the business was soon winning contracts to make private-label products for retailers such as Viking Direct, PC World and WH Smith, which sold their cartridges at a lower price than original manufacturers such as Hewlett-Packard and Epson.

"There was a genuine appetite from people who wanted to save money," said Stead. "They embraced the idea of having an alternative to an HP, Epson or

Canon cartridge and they liked the environmental aspect. Once it is in your printer you don't know the difference."

Life is made more difficult for EBP each year by what Stead calls the "electronic banana skins" thrown down by the original equipment manufacturers. Research and development cost the company £250,000 last year. "It's a game of cat and mouse. They constantly reinvent their technology," said Stead.

Where the big manufacturers cannot compete is on price. The recession has helped Stead's business double in size and reach sales of £30m this year. EBP has expanded into countries across Europe, with offices in France, Portugal and the Netherlands.

"During an economic downturn, people are very price sensitive — and there is no reason why that should change, because consumers out there are now thinking, I can buy an HP cartridge for £25 or I can buy a WH Smith cartridge for £17.50. The saving is still worth having."

Stead did not think of himself as a green pioneer at first. "We are a business and we are in the green space," he said. "Our products appealed to people who are price sensitive, to those who wanted to be green and to people who wanted to help charities. That was really a bedrock for the business," he said.

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