

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

The 411 on Disposing of Your Old Cell Phone

If you own a cell phone, at some point you're likely to upgrade to a newer model. But what should you do with your old phone? Options include recycling, reselling, and donating. Before you hang up your old phone for the last time, the Federal Trade Commission, the nation's consumer protection agency, wants you know how to dispose of it properly.

Cell phones and more complex mobile devices, like Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), are like laptop computers: they're often repositories of personal and sometimes sensitive information, including addresses and phone numbers, passwords, account numbers, email, voicemail, phone logs, even medical and prescription information. You wouldn't dispose of your old laptop computer without wiping the hard drive clean; mobile devices deserve the same level of attention before you discard them.

Permanently Removing Personal and Sensitive Information

Encrypting passwords and other sensitive data stored on your cell phone, and "locking" the keypad while your phone is not in use, can help prevent unauthorized access even after your cell phone is no longer in service. Still, certain data on your phone, including personal contacts, photos and Web search terms, may be recoverable with relatively simple and inexpensive software programs.

It's a good idea to remove personal information before you dispose of your phone. Permanent data deletion usually requires several steps. Remove the memory or subscriber identity module (SIM) card from the phone. That's an important first step in deleting information, but you likely will need to do more to erase all the sensitive data on your device. You can command a cell phone to delete certain data, but that will only delete the references to where the data is located; the actual information stays on the phone's operating system.

Permanent data deletion also may require you to clear data from the phone's contacts and other stored information. Your owner's manual, your wireless provider's website, or the manufacturer will likely provide information on how to permanently delete information from your mobile device (and even how to save or transfer information to a new device before deletion). Make sure that you have removed the following data: phone book, any lists of calls (received and made), voicemails, sent and received email and text messages, organizer folders, Web search history and photos.

Disposal Options

Once you have a “clean” phone, here are some options for disposing of it.

- *Recycling* – Cell phone manufacturers, service providers, and non-profit groups often have programs to refurbish mobile devices or recycle their components, including peripheral devices like chargers.
 - The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has information on electronic product recycling programs at www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/recycle/ecycling/donate.htm.
 - The U.S. Postal Service’s free “Mail Back” pilot program allows customers to recycle small electronics and inkjet cartridges. Some 1,500 Post Offices have free envelopes so you can mail back PDAs, cell phones, digital cameras, and music players without having to pay for postage. For more information, visit www.usps.gov.
- *Donating* – Many organizations collect old mobile devices for charitable purposes.
- *Reselling* – Some individuals and organizations will buy your old mobile devices. You can find names and addresses online.
- *Disposing* – Keep the environment in mind when disposing of mobile devices. Cell phones contain batteries, which should not be put in your trash because they will end up in landfills where they could be harmful. Many cell phones also contain heavy metals which can contaminate the earth. The EPA recommends that you check with your local health and sanitation agencies for the proper way to dispose of electronics safely.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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