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How to make smart repair choices

on March 4, 2014 - 12:01 AM

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Deciding whether to fix a broken product or spring for a new one often feels like an expensive guess, notes Consumer Reports. But there's no need to throw away good money on a bad product.

In fact, repairing broken items and keeping them going as long as possible isn't always the best way to save money.

Consumer Reports offers these tips that can help extend the life of your current product or new purchase, based on the experiences of 29,281 subscribers it surveyed as part of its 2013 Online Annual Questionnaire.

Products aren't breaking faster. The repair rates of most products in Consumer Reports' latest survey are similar to what it found when it conducted the survey in 2010. Some products are breaking less often. Laptops had a repair rate of 24 percent, down from 36 percent in 2010; the LCD TV repair rate is 7 percent, down from 15 percent.

So why does it seem like things don't last as long as they used to? Because when products do break, it's memorable: They stop working altogether (53 percent) or work poorly (32 percent), according to the survey.

People who used independent repair shops were more satisfied with the repairs than those who used factory service, which is consistent with what Consumer Reports found previously. And repairs cost less, too. That was especially true when it came to large appliances and lawn equipment.

Another way to save on repairs is to do them yourself, as 31 percent of those surveyed did when

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▶ their products weren't covered by warranty. The prevalence of how-to videos on YouTube and other sites – such as RepairClinic.com, which itself hosts more than 1,400 videos – makes repairing even complicated appliances a much less formidable challenge.

But if your product is under manufacturer's warranty, you'll need to use a factory-authorized repair shop or risk voiding the warranty. Just make sure the technician who will be sent to your home has been properly trained on your product.

No matter who does the repair, Consumer Reports' long-standing advice remains: Don't spend more than 50 percent of the cost of a new product on repairing an old one. And if an item has already broken down once before, replacement may make more sense.

Warranties don't improve satisfaction. Only 15 percent of products in Consumer Reports' survey were covered by the manufacturer's regular warranty when they broke, and about 10 percent were under a service contract or extended warranty.

People who had a service contract or an extended warranty weren't any happier with their repairs. They actually were more likely to have had repairs done incorrectly the first time around and waited at least two weeks for the repair than people who didn't have those contracts.

Even the 77 percent of people with those contracts who were offered a free repair or replacement for their product didn't save much money overall. The median cost for the contract or warranty was \$136; the median cost for repairs was \$152.

Not every problem needs a repair technician. Easy fixes you can do yourself include:

- Refrigerator. If it seems to run constantly, dirt and debris might be coating the condenser coil. (See the manual for the location.) Cost: up to \$5 for a condenser brush.
- Range. If your cooktop coil doesn't heat or heats intermittently, replace the burner receptacle. Cost: \$10.
- Clothes washer. If water enters the machine even when it's off, replace the water-inlet valve, which can wear out. Cost: \$25 to \$50.
- Vacuum. If the brush roll turns little, if at all, it could be the brush roll belt or the roll itself. Cost: \$3 to \$40.
- Snowblower or mower. If you know you have fresh fuel and have primed the engine as outlined in the manual, trouble starting could simply be caused by an old spark plug. Cost: \$2 to \$5.

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