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Jennifer Montgomery
The Bulletin

REPAIR OR TOSS?

• Local experts weigh in on when to replace or fix those household appliances

By Heidi Hagemeyer • The Bulletin

The washing machine leaves a residue after the rinse. The timer on the toaster oven has lost its tick. The vacuum is more blow than suck.

When household appliance conundrums arise—and invariably they do—so does a not-so-simple question: toss it or fix it?

The answer depends. The age of the item, how the technology has evolved since purchase and its original price all factor in.

The one thing local experts advised not to do is assume it must be replaced the second it sputters.

There's no harm in taking a look inside as long as it's unplugged. After all, it's already broken.

"A lot of times," said Bend man-of-all-trades Weylin Noldner, "people don't even try to see what's happening with it."

While the best course of action varies based on the product particulars, here are a few tips to help decide whether to repair or replace.

Should I repair it?

• Is it really broken?

Sometimes what the item needs is TLC more than replacement.

Bend resident Doug Butler, a handy guy who does repairs for his residential community, Higher Ground, advised to first try plugging the item into another outlet. Sometimes the issue is as simple as an outlet that went out. A voltage meter—an investment of \$15 to \$30—can help test that theory. The issue could also be a tripped circuit breaker or a loose plug.

Other times what the product needs is maintenance. A dryer, for instance, can easily leave clothes damp if its duct and screens haven't been cleaned out regularly.

"Yes, they don't make it as good as they used to, that's true," Butler said. "But if you take care of it, it still will last longer."

A common mistake people make with gas-powered items like lawn mowers or leaf blowers is not draining the fuel in the winter, said Noldner, who owns U-n-I Installations. Fuel containing ethanol turns acidic within two to three months, harming the motor. Fuel without ethanol can sit longer but should still be drained if not used within six months to a year.

• Check sources

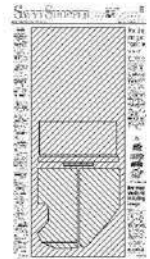
Your refrigerator is probably not the first to make that ker-chunking noise.

Most instruction manuals contain a troubleshooting section, and some manufacturer's websites also offer help, including downloadable user guides.

If you don't find clues there, turn to the Internet. There you can search common problems, learn how products work and find parts.

"The first thing I do is I look online," Noldner said. "I find lots of things online."

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See **Repair /**
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Helpful sites recommended by experts include diy.net, work.com, repairclinic.com and pcappliancerepair.com.

• Warranties

It makes sense to get the item fixed if it's still under warranty. Be warned, however, that this can take time. Also, factory or manufacturer-authorized services will likely be your only choice.

If it's out of warranty, fixing appliances can be similar to fixing a car: There might be an independent contractor out there who is just as skilled and perhaps cheaper than the dealer.

• It's worth a try

Consumer Reports offers this rule of thumb: If a product cost less than \$150 to begin with, it's not worth a trip to the repair shop.

If that makes you wonder if things truly aren't "made the way they used to be," the answer is yes.

Noldner believes many appliances, particularly smaller ones, are made with cheaper parts today.

"They're just trying to compete and be at a competitive price," he said.

Sometimes the higher-end models are also made with the same cheaper parts but have better counter appeal, he added.

Given that advice, what's the harm in taking the item apart?

Butler said sometimes all a product needs is a little tightening and cleaning. He has had items start working again simply after taking them apart and putting them back together.

And sometimes the problem is obvious once you peek inside.

Butler recently poked around inside an expensive gas grill that had been sentenced to the dump. He knew the problem the instant he saw it: a tiny, cracked O-ring. He has ordered a new one — it is a specialty size, so it cost \$20. He expects the grill will work again soon.

"I don't like to see things go in the dump," he said.

Both Butler and Noldner said in their experience fixing appliances, professionals are at times willing to give a bit of advice if you have made it part way there on your own, particularly if you intend to buy parts from them. So it doesn't hurt to call service shops and ask questions.

Should I replace it?

• Compare costs

Forego any repair, Consumer Reports says, that is going

to cost more than half the price of a comparable new product.

A bit of research can help quickly make this determination. First, check out the price of new appliances online.

Then call repair shops to get a feel for how much it might cost. For a larger appliance, it's not unusual for servicers to charge to make a home visit and take a look. Butler said recently he called a servicer about a dryer, and the initial visit was going to be \$85. (Butler instead fixed it himself.)

The computerized technology on some appliances can also sometimes make repairs more expensive. Butler

noted that at times an entire circuit board must be replaced to remedy a single part of it that is blown.

And although it's not a monetary cost, Noldner said it's wise to consider how long it might take to get the item repaired. This includes the initial look, figuring out what is wrong, ordering parts and making the repairs.

"Some of these fixes take time," he said.

• Efficiency and technology

When your chest freezer goes on the fritz, getting a new model might be a better deal.

Noldner is presently in the market for a freezer, and he said he's learned that the amount one would save by repairing an older freezer would evaporate in a year or two with the energy savings of a new model.

Consumer Reports identified refrigerators, dishwashers and washing machines as appliances that are now less power-hungry — and possibly have spiffy new features — than just a few years ago.

Some of those improvements have also meant higher sticker prices, as anyone comparing an Energy Star appliance to its counterparts will note.

• Again, check around

That troubleshooting research might also lead to the decision to buy new.

If the Web buzz is that a product is a lemon, it might not be worth fixing, even if it's a recent model. If a newer appliance has broken more than once, then it's probably time to start shopping.

—Reporter: 541-617-7828,
hhagemeier@bendbulletin.com





Photos by
Andy Tullis
The Bulletin