

# Meet Back Market, the tech company that doesn't want you to buy any new tech

Maddy Ness UK speaks to Katy Medlock, UK General Manager at Back Market, about why the tech device industry needs to change, the circular economy and how our obsession with new tech has more impact than we think.

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*Back Market* is the leading marketplace dedicated solely to refurbished tech and devices. We're on a mission to resurrect devices and bring high-quality, professionally refurbished tech and appliances to mainstream consumers.

Over the years, society has become obsessed with having the latest tech, even when the gadgets we have are still in perfect working order. Frankly, it's madness. And what most people don't realise, is that over manufacturing new tech and throwing out 'old' tech is seriously impacting our planet.

Refurbished tech gives people the opportunity to upgrade or change devices without having the same impact as buying new. The pre-loved devices get sent on to independent merchants who determine how much work needs to go into each device - sometimes it's just aesthetics, and sometimes parts need to be replaced - before doing the work, going through quality checks and then selling on Back Market.

We work with more than 1500 incredible refurbishers around the world to give

gadgets and devices a second life (or more) helping people buy it at a discounted price and cut down on the e-waste they produce. From iPhones to drones and games consoles, there isn't much we don't offer and each product comes with a 12 month warranty to ensure people have peace of mind when purchasing something that is 'like new'.

## How is Back Market impacting the circular economy?

Firstly, it's important to take a look at the impact the tech industry has on the environment. People are becoming more clued up about the impact of fast fashion, but we think less about the impact of our tech. Perhaps it comes as a surprise for many, but 4% of global carbon emissions come directly from the digital sector, and 2% of that can be attributed to the production of new devices. As we enter one of the busiest shopping periods of the year, the amount of tech being created and wasted is astronomical. This year alone, it is expected that we will create more than 57.4 million tonnes of e-waste – that's heavier than the Great Wall of China.

Small changes to our purchasing habits can have a genuinely positive impact. For example, buying a refurbished smartphone instead of a new one saves an estimated 30kg of CO2e emissions. For a laptop that rises to around 380kg of CO2e emissions.

Creating a robust circular economy like this is a win-win for everyone and an essential next step in today's world. It also means we can sell devices at a lower price, helping narrow the digital divide and help to provide affordable and accessible tech for everyone.

Since Back Market started in November 2014, we're incredibly proud to have helped save an estimated 2,274 tonnes of e-waste, and as we grow we're hoping to transform the way everyone buys tech.

## What is your unique offering compared to standard retailers?

The issue of e-waste is relatively unknown to many people, so as a business we try to constantly educate, inform and empower people to use their purchasing power to make a difference. We try to do it without sounding too "preachy", too. Other than helping people save the environment a bit, as well as their hard-earned cash, our main point of difference is specialising in tech so your shopping experience is easy. Enjoyable, even.

For many people, buying refurbished tech will be a new experience and they will naturally have questions about the standards and quality. To be honest, I did. We want every customer to be reassured with anything they buy from us, so every device is tested and the cherry on top is that each product comes with a 12 month warranty anyway.

Shopping on a marketplace can be an overwhelming experience, with hundreds or thousands of options for similar products. One of our main differentiations from other marketplaces is that we try to recreate the user experience of shopping for 'new' products and avoid our customers getting lost in multiple pages. We have a unique algorithm that will at a certain time push a product that is the best value for money, so instead of being presented with multiple versions of the same product from numerous merchants, you get one product that is the option at that point.

## Has the circular economy been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The pandemic had a huge impact on everyone's needs and shopping habits. Nearly everyone needed to work from home and children were being homeschooled, many for the first time. We saw this reflected at Back Market in a surge in devices such as computers, tablets, game consoles and cooking tech. Usually smartphones are the most common purchase at 80% of total products sold, however that dipped to 70% as the other products grew in popularity.

Many of these devices were bought refurbished due to cost - buying new laptops for work and children, or tablets and gaming consoles to keep occupied in lockdowns can get expensive if buying new. More than a *third of us* were worried about losing our jobs during the pandemic, meaning that cost effective options such as refurbished tech helped to alleviate the pressures of purchasing necessary tech.

The circular economy became popular out of necessity as one of the benefits is value for money. However there's still a long way to go in educating people on the broader impact. It's a mindset that needs to change much longer term.

## What are the common misconceptions when it comes to buying refurbished

# tech?

One of the biggest reservations around buying refurbished tech is that the quality won't match up to that of a new device and most people associate refurbished with 'second hand' because they simply aren't aware of the work and expertise that goes into refurbishing devices.

There are many different backstories for all the tech products that are sent to merchants to refurbish. For example, some belonged to individuals and were resold, rented, had damage to the product or just its box during transport or some were just exhibition products. For all of these circumstances, each device passes through the hands of a professional who carefully checks and repairs them to a high standard, and once it passes the quality checks then it is resold with that guarantee.

So, transparency is key. All the products we sell on Back Market are refurbished to the highest quality, and range from those that are pre-loved to those that are more or less just unboxed. However, if they had a previous life which left aesthetic marks, we make that very clear with our grading system.

It gives customers more choice: if, like me, you don't mind a few light scratches on your phone or laptop, you can pick up an absolute bargain. If you care about it looking completely brand new, then you go for our "excellent" grade, even the most detail-oriented people can barely tell the difference between this and a new device.

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## What steps can individuals and businesses make when it comes to reducing e-waste?

Every day, we're bombarded with adverts and images of the latest tech. So much so, that we're made to feel out of touch when our phone isn't the latest model. What's more, planned obsolescence by manufacturers reinforces the

idea that 'new' is best. It's a bit sickening, when you think about it.

As we approach the festive season where mass consumerism reaches a harrowing scale, small daily changes and choices can make a huge difference.

For individuals it's as easy as choosing to rent an outfit for the office party rather than buying a new one, or buying a refurbished games console rather than a brand new one. Not only will it help reduce their impact on the environment, but it will save some cash.

As life gets back to normal, we all have an opportunity and responsibility to make changes that will benefit future generations.

## What does the future hold for Back Market?

While our growth in the UK so far is hugely encouraging in such a short space of time, our ambitions are bigger. We're still only reaching a small percentage of people and with close to £9.2B spent on *Black Friday* in the UK this year, it's clear we need to educate lots more consumers about the impact their shopping really has.

Ultimately, we want to make buying new tech as unsexy as buying fast fashion has become, and buying refurbished tech as convenient as buying new. If we can encourage each individual to take these small steps in reducing their e-waste, then hopefully we can begin to make a change.

Katy Medlock is UK General Manager at *Back Market*.