

Why you should avoid online returns, according to the experts



The convenience of online shopping is unrivaled. Consumers can order everything from apparel and electronics to furniture and groceries with the reassurance that if they don't like it, they can send it back in exchange for a refund. Risk-averse shoppers are relieved by open-ended return policies, but what happens to all of those returned products? You might assume that unused items are inspected and repackaged, then put back onto store and warehouse shelves, but that's far from the reality of how retailers operate. In a linear supply chain, products are designed to leave the store, not to be brought back.

According to a 2021 survey of 300 retailers, less than half of returned items can be resold at full price and many companies do not have the internal logistics to sort, investigate and repackage returns. At best, returns are sold by the pallet to third-party liquidation companies, a chunk of which ends up in landfills¹. At worst, hundreds of thousands of returned and unused items are purposefully destroyed by giant retailers, including Ulta and Amazon, or they are outsourced by the billions of tons to secondhand markets in the Global South where they choke local markets and clog² landfills. In an era of climate collapse, economic uncertainty and ongoing supply chain issues, there is an urgent need to reduce consumption and divert waste from polluting the planet through progressive policy-making and collective behavior change. (...)

What returns do to the environment

All these returns create an environmental impact that's difficult to comprehend. An estimated 10 billion pounds of returned products in the US become landfill waste each year. When it comes to electronics, items made with bonded substrates cannot be separated for recycling due to mixed plastics.

¹ Landfills : déchèteries

² Clog : engorger

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25 One solution that could help the returns problem — especially in the tech department — is buying more used and refurbished items. Unfortunately consumer behavior is fickle³ when it comes to purchasing these products.

By Leah Kirts, CNN – December 15, 2022

³ Fickle : changeant