

International E-Waste Day

Fast tech: don't bin it, bring it!



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‘Fast Tech’ Fuels Growing E-Waste Concern as Millions of Small, Low-Cost Electronics Flood World Markets

International E-Waste Day survey finds nearly 90% of European consumers

own ‘fast tech’, 29% hoard unused devices at home, 27% trash them; Experts urge consumers to recycle every unused electrical and electronic item

Brussels – With annual Black Friday and holiday shopping sprees approaching, International E-Waste Day 2026 aims a spotlight on the booming trade in “Fast Tech” – USB adapters, mini fans, LED lights, electronic toys and other small, inexpensive gadgets.

New research finds that almost 90% of European consumers from 12 countries own at least one such device and 78% bought one in the past year. But when they become obsolete, broken or simply no longer wanted, many are tossed into household rubbish or hoarded in drawers instead of being recycled.

This rapidly growing and largely overlooked waste stream is dubbed “Fast Tech” to draw a deliberate parallel with ubiquitous, inexpensive fashion products, often used for relatively short periods and easily replaced.

Commissioned by the WEEE Forum and conducted by Bellegarde Scientific Consulting, a new Fast Tech Consumer survey of 10,245 adults in 12 European countries found that Fast Tech has become a routine consumer purchase, driven largely by low prices, convenience and modest expectations of how long products need to last.

The findings suggest consumers often knowingly accept the implicit Fast Tech bargain: the product is inexpensive, does the job for a while and can easily be replaced.

Indeed, 58% of buyers could recall a Fast Tech product they had used for no more than six months, including 39% who recalled one they discarded unused, after a single use or within a month. Yet 61% of Fast Tech consumers say they are satisfied overall, and only 8% are dissatisfied.

Separate research by Material Focus found that in the UK alone more than half a billion small Fast Tech electrical items were purchased, roughly 16 items per second.

And with Black Friday promotions followed almost immediately by the holiday shopping season, the WEEE Forum says the coming weeks will see another surge in Fast Tech purchases, many sold through online platforms.

“Fast Tech is the blind spot of the e-waste world,” says Pascal Leroy, Director General of the WEEE Forum, which leads the International E-Waste Day, a global awareness campaign now in its 9th year conducted with WEEE Forum members worldwide.

“Black Friday and Christmas will bring another enormous wave of electronic toys, decorative lights, mini gadgets, chargers and other inexpensive electronics into our homes. Their low price doesn’t mean they have no environmental cost. We need them to be collected and recycled when they’re no longer in use.”

Consumers expect short lives, but keep buying

The survey reveals an apparent paradox: consumers value durability, but the convenience and low price of Fast Tech frequently win out.

The environmental implications of this cycle appear much less obvious to consumers than the durability trade-off. While 46% expect Fast Tech to have a shorter lifespan than more expensive alternatives, only 21% consider it more environmentally harmful. Just 16% simultaneously associate Fast Tech with both shorter life and greater environmental harm.

“Consumers understand perfectly well that an inexpensive electronic product may not last forever,” says Dimitri Naczaj, co-founder of Bellegarde Scientific Consulting, based in France. “Much less visible is what happens when those millions of individual purchasing decisions become millions of discarded cables, earbuds, lights, toys and gadgets.”

What happens when Fast Tech dies?

The study found no single dominant route for unwanted Fast Tech.

Keeping devices at home was the most common response, reported by 29% of buyers. Just 27% took products to recycling centres or municipal facilities and 19% used in-store collection points.

But incorrect disposal was also widespread: 23% reported putting Fast Tech in household waste, 21% in plastics recycling and 7% in street bins. Some 27% of buyers reported using only waste-disposal routes for unwanted devices, while 32% reported using only recycling or reuse routes. *(Note: some survey questions offered multiple response options)*

Perhaps most strikingly, incorrect disposal is not always deliberate. Among people who reported using only waste-disposal routes, 21% also said they did so to protect the environment, suggesting confusion about where small electronics belong. Habit was the most commonly cited reason for electronics end-of-life choices overall, followed by environmental protection and convenience.

By the numbers: Europe’s Fast Tech habit

The new study of 10,245 adults in 12 European countries found:

- 87% own at least one Fast Tech product; at least 44% own more than five
- 78% bought Fast Tech during the previous 12 months
- 93% of 18-to-29-year-olds bought Fast Tech in the past year, compared with 61% of people aged 65+
- 55% cite low price as a reason for choosing Fast Tech
- 58% recall at least one Fast Tech item they used for six months or less
- 61% are nevertheless satisfied with Fast Tech products overall
- 80% would have paid more for a longer-lasting alternative to at least some products
- 59% would still replace a broken Fast Tech product with another inexpensive one
- 29% keep unused Fast Tech at home

- 27% use only waste bin disposal routes for unwanted devices; 32% use only recycling or reuse routes while 16% keep the devices at home
- 21% believe Fast Tech is more environmentally harmful than more expensive alternatives 15.9% think Fast Tech is less harmful
- 57% are unaware that online platforms selling electronic devices are legally required to contribute financially to e-waste collection and recycling
- 64% do not intend to reduce their Fast Tech purchasing.

The study found particularly strong age differences. 93% of respondents aged 18–29 had purchased Fast Tech during the previous year, declining steadily to 61% among those 65 and older.

And there is little evidence of social pressure against the trend. Only 14% expect people important to them to disapprove of buying Fast Tech, while almost half of respondents believe more people are buying fast tech than before. Nearly three-quarters of buyers encounter Fast Tech at least weekly.

If you sell it, help recycle it

The WEEE Forum underlines a growing structural problem: electronics sold online by companies that may not be registered under national producer-responsibility legislation.

Where sellers fail to comply, required recycling fees may not be paid, take-back responsibilities may go unmet and collection and recycling systems are left to deal with the products at the end of their lives without the corresponding financing.

The new consumer research suggests public awareness of these responsibilities remains low. Only 29% of those surveyed knew that online platforms selling electronics are legally required to contribute financially to e-waste collection and recycling; 14% had heard of the requirement but did not know the details, while 57% were unaware of it.

“The principle should be straightforward: if you make money selling electrical and electronic products into a country, you should contribute to the cost of collecting and recycling those products when consumers are finished with them,” says Leroy.

“Responsible producers already pay into these systems. Online marketplaces should not provide a back door through which electronics can enter a market without anyone taking financial responsibility for what happens to them afterwards.”

The WEEE Forum says this is both an environmental issue and a question of fairness. Companies that comply with extended producer responsibility requirements bear costs

that non-compliant competitors can avoid, potentially putting responsible businesses at a disadvantage.

“Consumers shopping online this Black Friday should not have to investigate the environmental compliance of every seller,” Leroy says. “The platforms facilitating those sales are in a powerful position to ensure that sellers comply with the rules and that the recycling costs associated with the products they sell are covered.”

Small devices, big risks

Although 83% of consumers surveyed know these small products contain electronic components, the study suggests many do not necessarily translate that knowledge into appropriate disposal behaviour.

Fast Tech products contain plastics, metals and other materials that can potentially be recovered and returned to productive use. When they are thrown into general waste, those resources are lost.

A growing number also contain lithium-ion batteries, creating an additional hazard.

When discarded with household waste, battery-powered devices can be crushed or punctured inside collection vehicles, sorting plants and waste-treatment facilities, potentially causing fires that endanger workers, damage equipment and disrupt waste services.

According to findings from the WEEE Forum’s Batteries Roundtable, 36% of e-waste operators surveyed reported experiencing a battery-related fire at their facilities during the previous year.

In France, the number of fires at waste-treatment facilities linked to lithium batteries doubled between 2019 and 2023.

Single-use vapes, wireless earbuds, small electronic toys and other battery-powered products are among the items of particular concern.

Concludes Magdalena Charytanowicz of the WEEE Forum and IEWD coordinator: “A tiny battery-powered gadget tossed into a household bin may seem inconsequential. Multiply that by millions of products and it becomes a serious problem, both in lost resources and in fire risks for the people and facilities handling our waste.”

Think before the Black Friday click

International E-Waste Day falls just weeks before one of the world's biggest periods for consumer electronics sales.

The WEEE Forum is encouraging consumers to consider not only price when buying Fast Tech during Black Friday and the Christmas season, but also whether they really need a new product, can they get it second hand instead, whether it can be repaired, and how it can eventually be returned for responsible recycling.

For electronics already sitting unused in homes, the message is recognise, return and demand responsibility.

Recognise it: Anything with a plug, cable, circuit board or battery should be treated as electronic waste at the end of its useful life, regardless of how small or inexpensive it is. It should not go into general household waste or bins.

Return it: Unwanted Fast Tech products should be taken to official collection points, retailer take-back locations or dedicated e-waste drop-off sites. In the European Union, retailers, including online retailers, have obligations concerning the take-back of discarded electronics. Other circular options include donation, repair and reuse.

Demand responsibility: Regulators, retailers, consumers and online marketplaces can help ensure that companies selling electrical and electronic products meet producer-responsibility requirements and contribute to the systems needed to collect and recycle what they sell.

A worldwide campaign

International E-Waste Day takes place annually on 14 October. Initiated by the WEEE Forum and its members in 2018, it brings together e-waste collection schemes, producers, recyclers, retailers, governments, municipalities, universities, NGOs, schools and consumers to raise awareness and encourage responsible collection and recycling of electrical and electronic products.

Organisations around the world are invited to mark 14 October with collection drives, public events, school activities, social-media campaigns, research releases and other initiatives.

In 2025, more than 140 organisations in 50 countries across six continents participated in International E-Waste Day activities, generating an estimated 1.8 billion potential media impressions across 55 countries.