



CARTRIDGE CLASH

What to choose, OEM cartridges or compatibles? Jon Packman investigates.

Life is full of inequalities if you're a cartridge. For the majority, it's a short, mortal existence that begins in a printer factory and ends in a landfill grave. Then there are the clones, made to be interchangeable with, yet often considered second-class citizens to these original models. And for a lucky few, there is the prospect of resurrection as they are recycled to bond ink and paper once again.

Whether it's cost, quality, or saving the planet that floats your electrical boat, each lays claim to being the cartridge you need. Some say you'll pay more in the long run if you don't use the printer manufacturer's recommended product, others that you can save thousands by choosing an alternative. So how do you decide what to go for when the time comes to replace one?

The printer industry splits the cartridge market into two types: about three-quarters of it is held by original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) while the rest make up what is known as the non-OEM, or 'compatibles' share. Within this latter group, there's a distinction between manufacturers who rebuild, refurbish or recondition cartridges – i.e. the remanufactured ones – and those that build from scratch,

making 'compatibles' in the truest sense of the word. Hence there are essentially three options open to you: the OEM's product; another newly-built by a different company; or a remanufactured cartridge. However, to pop a cherry on this cake of confusion, some OEM brands like Xerox and Lexmark also remanufacture some of their cartridges, thus fall into the compatibles sector as well.

Collectively, the remanufactured/compatibles market is second only to Hewlett Packard in sales volume. It's big business, but with such a large range of cartridges on offer there's huge variation in what you get for your money. At best, a remanufactured cartridge is a quality, reliable product that's hardly indistinguishable from the original. At worst, you'd probably be printing better pages if you were sat next to an anchor. What you need, if you are going to save money by avoiding OEM products, is for that saving not to be swallowed up by increased waste and equipment repairs. People don't just want lower

recently. "The range that remanufacturers can offer is improving and quality control is getting more stringent all the time," he says. "The difference between compatibles and OEM products is one of perception more than anything else – consumers like the peace of mind that OEM brands give them."

Another problem with perception encountered by some non-OEM brand companies is that, due to the routes of supply, consumers aren't even aware of the make of cartridge they use. Karl Cerny, senior VP and GM of Katun's Europe/Africa/Middle East business unit, explains the issue.

"In the office supplies market, the end user in a business might not even be aware they are using Katun products," says Cerny. "Why? Because it is their copier dealer who is using these products to service the machines. If the end user has a price per copy contract, and as long as the machine works and the quality if what you would expect, they don't care."

machines to provide the optimum level of performance, quality and reliability.

"Whether customers are seeking photo-quality inkjet output that will resist fading for generations, or crisp laser printing for their business needs, current data shows that, overall, third-party manufactured products cannot consistently deliver the quality and reliability that customers enjoy with HP printing systems."

So, "overall", OEM cartridges are deemed the best choice by the OEM. Hardly surprising though. The fact is, the OEM product comes with pretty much zero risk – it's a safe, if more expensive, bet for your printer. With compatibles, there's always the chance things might not work out as hoped, which is why you need to reduce that risk as much as possible by asking the right questions. For instance, is the compatible guaranteed to match the quality and page-life of the original? Is there a warranty system in place? How have other customers found the product?

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cost solutions, they want lower costs without compromising on quality. For manufacturers of compatible cartridges it's a steep challenge, and one that the OEMs aren't making any easier, either.

Threatened by the burgeoning compatibles market, some OEMs have invested heavily in introducing encrypted microchips on cartridges to give users information on remaining page-life, for example, which has in the past been performed by the printer itself. In order to remanufacture these it's necessary to acquire the chip technology and break its codes – a process which has cost the remanufacturing industry millions and severely slowed down the introduction of new alternatives. For those that are building compatibles from new, it's meant a continual effort to develop their own technologies to keep up with the OEMs.

Like mobiles, we're on third-generation cartridges these days and the fourth isn't far away. The cartridge race is in full-swing and all the players in the compatibles market know they have to go the extra mile to meet the high standards consumers expect from OEM products. Ali Ameen of remanufacturer, Kores, says there has been a lot of movement in the industry

With regards the more educated consumer, Rhiannon Williams, commercial market manager for Hewlett Packard, believes it's ultimately up to them to decide which solution is best and says HP welcomes choice in the market. However, she says: "We advocate the use of original HP supplies in our printers because they are specifically designed in conjunction with our

It's a difficult decision, and only research will supply you with the right product for your needs. If the proliferation of choice is causing you consternation, go join the army. Competition is healthy for everyone, and with regards the printer/copier cartridge market, things are getting very healthy indeed. ■

