

# Built Not to Last: How to Overcome Planned Obsolescence

**What you can do as an individual consumer, a business patron, and a voter.**

By Sandra Goldmark, Sep 20 2021

Source: [Sierra](#) (accessed online Dec 15 2021).



In 2020, people worldwide bought some 24 billion pairs of shoes, 64 million cars, and 1.4 billion smartphones—200 million of them from Apple. More than 80 percent of iPhones sold last year went to “upgraders,” not first-time buyers. It’s all part of business as usual.

Since the 1920s, when lightbulb manufacturers teamed up to purposefully limit the life spans of their products, companies have been locked into a business model rooted in the concept of planned obsolescence. To “grow,” at least the way economists define it, corporations have to sell us more stuff every year - which is why there are ever-cheaper products made from low-quality or even toxic materials by people working in unjust conditions.

Planned obsolescence is why we see software mysteriously slow down, furniture designed with hollow legs and cheap staples, and clothing burned because it can’t sell fast enough. As repair shops close, landfills expand. How did we get here? How can we change course?

## The Components of Planned Obsolescence

- Design - Planned obsolescence is determined largely by the materials a manufacturer chooses to use and how they’re put together (think phones with screens glued in place). If a company’s main source of revenue is selling more stuff every year, there’s little incentive to design for durability, longevity, and repair.
- Linear Growth Models - Our reigning economic model’s limited definition of growth means that businesses don’t invest in alternative revenue streams, like repair, service, and resale.
- “Negative externalities” like pollution aren’t factored into the bottom line, and shareholder profit trumps all.



- Low wages - The economic model that demands nonstop growth rests on a foundation of wage inequality and human rights abuses. Without international labor standards, it is easier to make new, cheap items than to service old ones.
- Product Logistics - In addition to basic design, a host of secondary characteristics and logistical quagmires make it hard to keep an object in use - for example, accessories that aren't interchangeable, parts or manuals that aren't readily available, and warranties and service policies that prioritize replacement over repair.
- Marketing - Advertising reinforces the notion that we should run out and get shiny new models. Cultural messages teach us to devalue our attachment to the things we already have.
- Disconnection - As globalization increasingly separates end users from the making of products, our sense of value becomes distorted, creating both physical and psychological distance between the manufacture and the use of our stuff.

## The (Circular) Path Away From Obsolescence

### Individuals

Send signals to the marketplace, demonstrate demand for durability, and live in a way that aligns with your values.

- Have good stuff.
- Buying new stuff should be rare. Seek out new goods that are durable, repairable, sustainably sourced, and ethically produced.
- Don't have too much.
- Stuff is just like food—too much of a good thing causes problems. Reduce empty “stuff calories” by buying less and choosing carefully.
- Look for mostly reclaimed stuff.
- Rebalance your stuff diet by making used goods your first choice whenever possible.
- Care for it.
- Make repair and maintenance part of your routine and your budget by spending time and money on taking care of what you already have.
- Pass it on.
- When an item has reached the end of its useful life, or its use in your life, pass it on to someone who can use it.



## Manufacturers

Companies can meet the growing demand for sustainability by building goods and services that make it possible for people to change their habits. Circular business models are nothing new but are taking off in new ways. In apparel, resale has grown more than 21 times faster than traditional retail in recent years.

- Develop multiple revenue streams—not only from selling new stuff but also from resale, repair, upgrade, rental, and service models.
- Move away from the “race to the bottom” on pricing. Sell fewer items, but make money from the same item multiple times by offering resale and repair.
- Create stronger relationships with customers based on quality, transparency, and service.

## Policymakers

Help create the incentives (positive and negative) that will accelerate and scale positive changes. The following are a few models, from local to global:

- “Pay as you throw” waste services have been shown to reduce waste sent to landfill and help incentivize individuals to “pass it on.”
- Extended-producer-responsibility laws make sure manufacturers and retailers consider the full life cycle of a product.
- Right-to-repair legislation is on the agenda in at least 25 states (in the USA); it would help protect farmers, small-business owners, and individuals who want to be able to fix their own tools and equipment.
- International fair-labor standards are the holy grail of healthier patterns of consumption; our present system is built on low wages in manufacturing countries around the world. A truly circular, ethical model hinges on people being paid fairly for their work.

This is an edited version of the article, read the full article [here](#).