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Disposable cameras can have nine lives

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The jumble of cameras comes in daily by the tractor trailer load, packed in cardboard boxes.

Employees of OutSource empty the boxes onto a conveyor belt in a loud rattle of hard plastic, the line carrying the cameras past sorters who toss Kodaks into one box, Fujis into another and so on.

Millions of one-time-use cameras — those \$5 plastic cameras you pick up in a checkout line with a single roll of film sealed inside — go through the Rochester vocational rehabilitation facility each month for sorting before they get recycled into new cameras.

Worldwide, the single-use camera reached a milestone around the turn of the year when the number of recycled cameras hit 1.5 billion, according to Eastman Kodak Co. The company's share of that is edging close to 1 billion, said Joseph Weiser, director of worldwide recycling for Kodak's one-time-use camera line.

According to Kodak, about 84 percent of its single-use cameras get recycled. By comparison, the recycling rate for electronics overall in the United States is about 18 percent, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The camera recycling rate is so high because of incentives to photofinishing businesses to send the cameras back to manufacturers and because the declining use of the cameras means fewer new ones have to be made, said Joel Proegler, general manager of Kodak's film capture business.

Kodak's aim is to get to the point where the cameras are made

completely from recycled parts and materials, Proegler said.

Single-use cameras, like car batteries, have high recycling rates because they naturally end up in a business's hands at the end of their life cycle, said Valerie Thomas, an associate professor of natural systems at Georgia Institute of Technology.

Kodak launched its single-use cameras in 1987. The product was designed to be used only once, hence its name — the Fling.

By 1990, Kodak revamped the product line to make the cameras reusable. Since then, a constant flow of cameras has come into OutSource's University Avenue facility for sorting.

"It started with a big table and a lot of hands trying to sort a lot of cameras," said Mike Szpak, vice president of operations for the vocational rehabilitation program. OutSource is a division of the Rochester Rehabilitation Center, its employees a mix of people with disabilities and other employment hurdles such as lack of language skills.

An array of North American photo processors with which Kodak has a business arrangement send the used cameras to OutSource. Kodak also has sorting operations in Europe and Japan.

All the cameras then get sent to a Kodak plant in Mexico, where each gets a new battery, a new roll of film and a new plastic casing.

Any broken components also get replaced there.

To get the cameras, Kodak provides numerous retailers with cardboard containers and shipping labels. It also pays photo developers for each camera they send, roughly 75 cents per pound.

By recycling the cameras, Kodak is able to keep the price about half of what it would be if each was manufactured new, Weiser said.

At the peak of one-time-camera use earlier this decade, OutSource had a pair of conveyor lines running simultaneously and was a two-shift operation.

But use is declining, as is the camera film industry overall. In 2004, some 218 million single-use cameras were sold in the United States,

according to Photo Marketing Association data.

Last year, Americans bought 85 million of the cameras, and the association estimates that this year, sales will be 52 million.

The United States represents 65 percent to 70 percent of the global one-time-use camera market, with Europe accounting for an additional 20 percent to 25 percent, said Proegler.

Just as Kodak's film manufacturing footprint has shrunk worldwide from numerous sites to now just its operation in Rochester, so, too, has the company cut its one-time-use camera manufacturing sites, closing facilities in China, Europe and North America.

Today, OutSource employs about 40 people in its camera recycling operation, runs a single conveyor line and operates in one shift that can go longer during peak times, Szpak said. Along with sorting, OutSource does warehousing and collects the data Kodak uses to figure out what to pay the film developing operations that send in the cameras.

The stream of cameras going by on the conveyor line is a blur of Kodak yellow, Fuji green and a variety of Polaroids and private-label cameras. When Kodak started recycling the cameras, it kept track of how many lives a camera had before it was worn out. But as they started lasting in excess of nine or 10 uses, the company quit keeping track.

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Additional Facts

What's at stake

Environmental and consumer concerns. Recycling the single-use cameras keeps them out of landfills and keeps their cost low.
