

# Taking in the Trash

**T**wenty years ago, Julian Powell started in electronics manufacturing as a chemical engineer running a copper plating line, and he hated it. He told me in a June interview that his ensuing manufacturing career migrated more toward process control with the companies he worked for, but, like a moth to a flame, “recycling was what I really wanted to do.”

Following his calling five years ago, Julian started up Zentech, a small, one-person electronics recycling and used computer equipment business in the heart of Atlanta. And, five years later, his company is finally profitable and poised for explosive growth.

But, just like most things worth waiting for, Julian’s road to success has not been Easy Street. Often, the process was educational; sometimes, it was downright painful.

Take, for example, Julian’s first scheme to make money. He was going to get rich off reclaiming the gold from old printed circuit boards. He dutifully collected 1,000 pounds of used boards, shipped them off to a refinery, and waited for the checks from the gold reclamation to roll in. Instead, he received a letter from the refinery stating that, while they appreciated his business, he now owed *them* money. Seems that 1,000 pounds of boards was not enough to recoup the refinery’s fees charged per pound to process the boards; more like *tens* of thousands of pounds would be needed.

Back to square one. Realize functional computer parts have more value than precious metals.

Plan B, and the venture that has been most profitable for Julian’s business in the last two years, is harvesting functional parts off computers. Out of the electronics equipment he receives, he pulls what’s valuable to him, such as hard drives, video cards and sound cards. He then gives what he calls the “computer carcasses” to his recycler, a large operation that pays employees minimum wage to strip and disassemble old computers for as many recyclable parts and materials as possible.

Now, instead of refineries, Julian’s main customers are mostly local computer and systems builders and computer repair stores. And, even better, Julian is realizing the ultimate goal for his company—capturing components and materials in the electronics waste stream and maximizing their reuse and recovery.

The motto on Zentech’s Website states that the company is “keeping lead out of landfills.” But Julian’s company is preventing more than just lead—which has been hotly debated anyway as to the scientific evidence of its harmfulness to the environment—from entering our nation’s dumps. He’s actually helping to eliminate

the need for those dumps, with every CRT monitor and computer he and his competitors reclaim.

And aren’t overflowing landfills the crux of the problem anyway? Despite what some governments, organizations, and OEMs looking to increase their market share with “lead-free” products will tell you, lead is not what should worry us. Worry, instead, about being suffocated under the mountain of your own trash.

Julian recycles about two tons of that electronics trash monthly, but he could easily see his business growing to about 15 to 20 tons per month; “it’s just a matter of streamlining and being more efficient.” His 3,000 sq. ft. business/living space is jammed with monitors, old computers and telephone equipment, but warehousing shelves recently installed have helped him to maximize the space he does have.

And, although his business is now profitable, he always has other needs and concerns: a dock-height truck with a hydraulic lift gate; more space; not enough manpower. One thing that Julian doesn’t have to worry about, though, is running out of electronics trash from which to make his living.

And, with the attention that toxic materials content in waste has received from the media and government agencies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, could it be that recycling is now “cool”? Certainly, media attention and word-of-mouth marketing have recently increased Julian’s collection of recyclable equipment from corporations and individuals.

I asked Julian if he feels pretty good about his recycling venture. He didn’t give me a pat answer that waxed philosophical about the land, water, trees and air he’s helping to save or the charitable programs he’s looking to set up with donated electronics equipment (although he’s doing those, too). Instead, he gave me a straightforward, all-business answer: “When I’m really making money consistently, I think I’ll feel a lot better. With all the media attention, though, I feel like I’m just about to catch the perfect wave.”

Hang ten, Julian.



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