

Toner Cartridges: Should You Use Remanufactured or Compatibles?

First a little history....

In 1938, the first invention that would lead to the laser printer and toner cartridge was patented. The process, known as "electro photography", used a dry printing method, not that different than today's laser printer. It was 1948, however, before the commercial application of electro photography became available.

In 1959, the first automatic reproduction machine, the Xerox 914, which used a dry printing process. In 1978, the fine-tuned technology was applied to the computer printing needs of business and private citizens. Physically large and with a large price tag as well, the Xerox 9700 laser printer that used a toner cartridge wasn't affordable by individuals except the wealthy.

Everything changed in 1984 when Hewlett Packard began to market the "LaserJet" printer. This printer came with a replaceable toner cartridge that was not difficult to change, although it could sometimes be a little messy. The really problematic part was that people who used the LaserJet had stacks of expensive but empty toners stacked in the storage room or wherever they could find to store the toner cartridges.

This problem was quickly resolved by environmentally aware designers by re-manufacturing the laser toner cartridge. This significantly reduced the cost of using laser printers.

What's happening today?....

Nowadays we have the luxury of having a laser printer on our desk at home if we want that type of printing. The as well as the initial outlay for the printer has become quite affordable and provides a unique, very professional looking print out.

Today, laser printers are manufactured by many companies and the price tag is only slightly more than the common ink printer (though colour laser printers are still quite expensive the gap is getting smaller). The laser toner cartridge costs have been reduced so that it is reasonable to use the laser printer at home as well as at the office. In fact the toners are usually much cheaper when you take into account the larger number of pages you get for the amount you pay (the industry uses the terminology 'cents per page' or CPP)

Basically there are 2 types of cartridges, originals and non-originals and there are 2 types of non-originals being compatibles and remanufactured (this goes for inks also as does the information below). Otherwise known as non-genuine, after market this is how they work:-

- Compatibles are actually a brand new cartridge manufactured to work in the same way (without breaking the trademark, copy protection laws) as the same original cartridge with the same machines. The benefit you gain from these is obviously cost savings with at times massive savings up to around 50%. The downside is they are not as environmentally friendly as remanufactured toners and there are the occasional failures and complaints about lower quality (though failure rates for the top companies making these are within industry norms and not significantly higher than those of the original manufacturers themselves)
- Remanufactured toners however are a little different as they take an empty original (it should have only been used ONCE) and fill it with toner. As long as you buy from a reputable retailer it will have also been checked to determine if parts need to be replaced as well as toner refilled. You also get good cost savings as you do with compatibles but the environment wins out big time as you helping 'close the loop' by reusing an empty original. Once again the same applies as above with quality and failures (both negligible in my experience as a retailer in this industry)

NOTE: Its worth making a special note here that disposing of empty toners is a problem worldwide as the plastic they're made of takes so long to break down and the toxicity of the toner inside. In many countries today there are programs available where you can get rid of your empties without just throwing them in the bin. In fact if you hunt around you'll probably find a company will pay you for them as they need a constant stream of empties coming through so they can remanufacture them.

Something to keep in mind....

When purchasing a re-manufactured laser toner cartridge, be sure to read the box carefully and ensure you are selecting the right toner cartridge. The first time you purchase a re-manufactured toner cartridge, the box may look entirely different or very plain because these inexpensive toners are often not packaged in fancy, colourful boxes like the name brands. But then they don't cost what the name brand toners do, either.

The bottom line....

If you use a reputable retailer for your home/office supplies they should have a clear policy in place not only about faulty toners but what happens if a cartridge has somehow caused damage to your machine (this would be very unusual by the way). Under these circumstances this policy should give you a full warranty to have the equipment repaired ASAP at no cost to you.

With my clients when they ask what I suggest I always recommend they try a non-original to see for themselves the quality etc. In any case the trick is to be able to make an informed choice with someone you trust so at least if something goes wrong the people you bought from haven't skipped the country

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