

Planned Obsolescence and How to Avoid It

Are you the kind of person who likes to buy things that will last? If so, you're definitely not alone, and there are many reasons why people prefer to buy things that won't break after one to five years

One big reason is that it's better for the environment. When we buy products that are designed to last, we're using fewer resources and creating less waste. Another reason is that buying quality goods can save us money in the long run.

So if you're looking for ways to be more sustainable, one thing you can do is avoid buying products with planned obsolescence. Let's take a closer look at what this is and how to avoid it.

What is planned obsolescence?

Ever wonder why your phone seems to break just a few months after you buy it, or why that appliance you just bought stopped working soon after the warranty expired?

You're not going crazy, and it's not a coincidence. It's called planned obsolescence, and it's a common practice among manufacturers.

[Planned obsolescence](#) is the deliberate designing of products to become outdated or unusable within a specific timeframe. This practice encourages consumers to continually buy new products, boosting sales and profits for companies.

Is planned obsolescence terrible for the planet?

Almost undoubtedly, yes.

While some argue that planned obsolescence is simply good business, others believe that it's unethical. Factually, it's [highly destructive to the environment](#). We

live on a planet with finite resources and finite space. At some point, we will exhaust our resources and space available to dump all those broken products.

Planned obsolescence could work in a world with infinite resources and places to dump the garbage. But that isn't the world we live in.

When products are designed to break, they end up in landfills rather than being repaired or reused. Much of the global north ships their electronic waste, textile waste, and other broken products to countries in the global south that are willing to pollute their land in exchange for payouts from countries with more cash.

There is blame to be had on both sides here, but the real problem lies with the amount of waste being generated in the first place.

As our society becomes more aware of the issue of planned obsolescence, it remains to be seen whether this practice will continue or if manufacturers will be forced to change their ways. In France, [planned obsolescence is illegal](#).

Different types of planned obsolescence

The items we buy and use daily take many different forms. Because of this, planned obsolescence can also present several different ways. Here are some of the types to be aware of.

Programmed planned obsolescence

Even if you update your drivers, an incompatible printer will still not work with your new operating system. You searched and found that, unfortunately, the only solution is to buy a replacement. This shows that software updates can often force users into buying newer products.

Consider your smartphone. It works well; you can make calls, send texts, and utilize various applications, but after several upgrades, you discover that your phone isn't capable of handling it all. You may also discover that the most recent

software upgrades are no longer compatible with your device. There's nothing else for it except to purchase a new phone.

Companies often deliberately release updates that render products unusable in order to force people to buy new versions. Yinong Chen, a computer science professor at Arizona State University, says, *"Planned obsolescence is a violation of an engineer's code of ethics."*

Perceived planned obsolescence

Clever marketing is one of the most frequent forms of intended obsolescence. You don't have to be dissatisfied with your goods or wait for them to break in order to desire to replace them.

This often happens with new smartphones but also on social media. With the rise of UGC or user-generated content, more people are making videos on TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram showing off a shiny new product they bought.

While your phone is more than likely capable of everything you need, does it have all the bells and whistles that everyone else's does? If not, the marketing experts will tell you that you're already behind. FOMO is a powerful motivator, and businesses are well aware of this. Before purchasing a new product, consider if you truly need to make that purchase.

Structural planned obsolescence (or contrived durability)

If all companies valued their customers as much as they value making a profit, then contrived durability (deliberately creating products that break down over time) would be obsolete. Contrived durability is one of the more common forms of planned obsolescence. Items are cheaply designed and made to break within a few years, so you'll be back in the market for a new product version.

Examples of planned obsolescence

If you've heard of planned obsolescence, you've likely read about it in the context of electronic devices, especially phones. But there are actually tons of products that are built to break within a few years, including:

- Clothing and shoes
- Cars
- Appliances
- Toys
- Furniture
- Small kitchen appliances
- TVs, video game consoles, and computers

Let's talk about a few specific examples of planned obsolescence to help give you a sense of how common it is.

Printers and printer ink

Printers are one of the most common pieces of technology in our homes and offices, but did you know that they're designed to break?

Even something as seemingly innocuous as printer ink cartridges are designed this way. The ink cartridges that come with most printers are only meant to last for a few hundred pages before they need to be replaced. And what's even worse is that the price of replacement ink cartridges is often extortionate.

Some cartridges cannot be refilled, while others can only be refilled with specific ink or by certain retailers. These items are detrimental to the environment due to the processing that goes into each ink cartridge and all the waste that results from it.

Unreparable phones, computers, and other consumer electronics

Many electronics are designed with planned obsolescence in mind. It's cheaper for manufacturers to produce new items than it is to repair old ones. And often, spare parts are not available or are very expensive. As a result, consumers are forced to buy new devices instead of repairing their old ones.

Manufacturing new electronics requires precious resources, and the disposal of old ones creates e-waste. Planned obsolescence is a significant contributor to the [growing problem of e-waste](#), and it's something we need to be aware of when we purchase new electronics.

New textbook editions releasing with minimal updates

As anyone who has been to college knows, textbooks can be incredibly expensive. While used books are an option, they're often significantly outdated by the time they make it to the student market. As a result, students are forced to buy new editions at full price, even if only a few minor updates have been made.

This practice is particularly frustrating for students who are already struggling to pay for tuition and other expenses. And it's not just students who are feeling the pinch - teachers and parents are also shelling out big bucks for these updated editions.

Given the high cost of education, anything that can be done to reduce textbook costs would be greatly appreciated. Unfortunately, as long as publishers continue to churn out new editions with minimal updates, those savings may be hard to come by.

Appliances don't last as long as they used to

Anyone who has ever shopped for a new appliance within the last decade has probably noticed that they don't seem to last as long as it used to.

Fridges, washers, and dishwashers are all examples of appliances that used to last for decades but now only last for a few years. And often, once they break down, it's impossible to repair them - you have to buy a new one.

The planned obsolescence of appliances is particularly troublesome because they're such large and expensive items. And given the frequency with which they need to be replaced, they're a significant source of e-waste.

Fast fashion

In recent years, "fast fashion" has become increasingly popular, with many stores releasing new styles weekly. While this trend has made it easier than ever to keep up with the latest fashion trends, it has also led to a throw-away culture in which clothes are seen as disposable.

A key feature of fast fashion is planned obsolescence, in which clothing is designed to fall apart after only a few wears. This ensures that customers will have to keep coming back for more, but it also creates mountains of waste.

To end this cycle of consumption and waste, we need to be more mindful of the clothes we buy and their impact on the environment. When choosing new clothes, look for items that are well-made and will last for years to come. Not only will this help reduce waste, but it will also save you money in the long run.

How to spot planned obsolescence in the wild

Product life cycles are shorter

One of the most common examples of planned obsolescence is when product life cycles are shortened in order to encourage consumers to buy new products more frequently.

Products are designed or programmed to break down or become obsolete

Another typical example of planned obsolescence is when products are designed to break down after a certain period of time.

Products are made with inferior materials

Many products are built with poor materials, making them more likely to break down or become outdated. For example, furniture or a television made with cheaper components more likely to break down is an example of planned obsolescence.

Products are made obsolete by new technologies

Planned obsolescence also applies when products are designed to become obsolete in order for buyers to demand the more recent versions.

VHS players were made obsolete by DVD players, and then DVD players were made obsolete by Blu-ray players. Even if you didn't buy into Blu-ray, you might have purchased digital copies of movies you used to watch on DVD.

Steps to avoid planned obsolescence

Educate yourself on planned obsolescence

The first step to avoiding planned obsolescence is to educate yourself on the topic. By understanding how and why planned obsolescence exists, you'll be better at avoiding it.

Become a more mindful and conscious shopper

The second step is to become a more mindful shopper. This means taking the time to research products before you buy them and considering their long-term durability. Ask yourself if you need an item before making any purchase. Do you need it? Are you buying it from social media FOMO or purely for aesthetic reasons? What is your plan to store this item long-term?

Avoid fast fashion

As we mentioned earlier, planned obsolescence is rampant in the world of fast fashion. To avoid planned obsolescence, steer clear of these stores and instead opt for timeless pieces that will last for years.

Buy products from companies that don't use planned obsolescence.

If you're aware of planned obsolescence, you can take steps to avoid it by only buying products from companies that don't use this strategy. Many ethical companies out there produce quality goods designed to last.

Invest in quality items.

When making a purchase, always opt for quality over quantity. It's better to have fewer, higher-quality items that will last for years than a closet full of fast fashion that will fall apart after a few wears.

Repair or upgrade your items instead of replacing them.

If an item does break down, see if it can be [repaired or upgraded](#) instead of replaced. Planned obsolescence is often built into products so that they can't be easily repaired, but this isn't always the case.

Recycle, sell, or donate your items when you're done with them

When you're finally ready to get rid of an item, make sure to recycle or donate it instead of throwing it away. This will help reduce waste and keep usable products out of landfills. Selling the things you're not using anymore is one of the most environmentally-friendly ways to declutter. When someone pays for an item, they're far more likely to use it.

Conclusion

Planned obsolescence is a problem, but there are ways to avoid it. By being mindful of the products you buy and where you buy them from, you can help reduce planned obsolescence and its negative environmental impact.