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When good appliances go bad: repair or replace?

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Some appliances are harder to repair than others. (Thermador, Handout / February 21, 2010)

By William Hageman, Tribune Newspapers

January 31, 2014

We've all been there. The washing machine starts making funny noises. The vacuum cleaner can't pick up even the smallest speck of lint. The smell of melting plastic wafts from the dishwasher.

And we wonder: Is it worth getting this old appliance fixed, or do I start shopping?

In its February issue, Consumer Reports looks at the repair-versus-replace question.

The article lists repair-or-replace timelines for various home appliances, taking into

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account age, cost and repair problems. In addition, there's information on what breaks (refrigerators with side-by-side ice-makers have a repair rate of 31 percent) and what doesn't (point-and-shoot digital cameras have a repair rate of 5 percent).

Contrary to popular opinion, home appliances are not falling apart at a record pace.

"People think products are breaking down more frequently. What we're finding is that's not the case," says Celia Kuperszmid-Lehrman, deputy content editor of home and appliances for Consumer Reports. "Some products are actually more reliable than they used to be. Things like laptop computers. They're significantly more reliable than just three years ago."

Kuperszmid-Lehrman looked at specific appliances and offered some thoughts.

Washer. A common problem is water appearing in the machine, although it's off. The likely culprit: a broken water inlet valve. A replacement is a modest \$25 to \$50, good news for anyone not in a position to shell out \$400 to \$1,200 for a new machine.

Dryer. If clothes aren't drying as quickly as they used to, the vent or tubing could be partially clogged. Clear that out, then reassess the dryer's performance.

Refrigerator. If your compressor goes, start shopping. It's an expensive part to replace, and labor costs are not incidental either.

Vacuum. Belts and brushes are the main causes for failure. The good news is replacement costs are relatively minor, and it's not a difficult DIY project. If your motor goes, a new machine might be in order. Kuperszmid-Lehrman suggests visiting repairclinic.com to get an idea of the cost of a new motor. "What makes people very nervous about repairing things is this black hole of what it's going to actually cost. You don't know till the person shows up.

"If you arm yourself with some research — you smell the motor burning, you know it's shot — you know a replacement will cost X amount of dollars."

Microwave. Over-the-counter models may be worth repairing, depending on what's wrong (weigh repair costs against the \$250 to \$300 a new one will cost). "Countertop models are just a commodity now," she says. "They're not worth repairing if they're out of warranty."

Stove. Some problems, such as a cooktop coil not heating or a faulty bake element, can be solved cheaply (\$10 for a new burner receptacle for the coil, \$35 for the bake element). Things can get pricey if you're dealing with advanced electronics. Also know that there's a reliability gap among brands. Do your homework.

Dishwasher. Pay attention to filters that need to be cleaned, worn or rusted racks, or a door gasket that's not snug. Keeping those maintained will help hold off major repair bills.

Here are other nuggets from the article in Consumer Reports magazine and online at consumerreports.org:

For the past half-dozen years or so, Consumer Reports has advocated the 50 percent rule. Because of the constant changes and upgrades in products, if the cost of repairs is 50 percent or more of the cost of a new appliance, go new. And that 50 percent is cumulative. If a product has had repairs in the past, even an additional, small fix might be enough to tip the scale from repair to replace.

Should you repair the product yourself? Consumer Reports' 2013 Annual Questionnaire found that 31 percent of those responding made repairs themselves. "It's easier to research problems on your machines these days: YouTube videos, Google searches, repairclinic.com," Kuperszmid-Lehrman says. Consumers can do background research or watch a video of someone making the repair before deciding if they are up to the task. "You'll find that some things that sound like big projects are not."

Kuperszmid-Lehrman adds that parts are easier to get and in most cases aren't that expensive. "You don't lose a lot by trying."

The cheapest fix is simple. Get the owner's manual for maintenance tips. Follow the manufacturer's instructions to make sure your appliance is at peak efficiency, she says. "Cleaning the coils on your refrigerator, making sure the gasket around the refrigerator is



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clean. Cleaning the ports on a gas range. On dishwashers, many do not have self-cleaning filters. The industry has moved away from them because they're noisy. So most dishwashers have a manual filter you have to clean out."

If your clothes dryer isn't doing the job, the problem could be something as simple as a partially blocked vent. Be proactive. Outdoor power equipment have gotten more efficient, with advanced engines that need to be maintained if you want to get the most out of them.

Kuperszmid-Lehrman says that not many people realize they can haggle over the cost of a repair. It can pay off. "Only about 17 percent tried in our surveys," she says, "but about half of those who tried got a reduction. The average was \$64, which is a significant chunk of change. It's not the kind of thing you tend to think about. You figure, 'It's broke; I want it fixed.' You don't think there's a lot of play there, but there is."

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