

Stocking Ink for Your InkJet Printer

By Paul Cook

Most of us don't think much about inkjet ink until it runs out and we need to buy a replacement ink cartridge (or tank). Turns out maybe we should.

The next time you are in a large computer store, take a look at just how much floor space is devoted to ink.

On a recent visit, I remembered that the Chicago CompUSA store (101 E Chicago Ave) had an unusually large selection. I couldn't find my notes, so I asked Chris Cosentino, the Apple ASE there if he could help remind me just how large. Chris asked Lindsey Palacios, the General Manager, who gave permission and indicated that they "would love to be mentioned as a source of ink downtown." So if you're downtown looking for ink in a hurry, they have a large selection and if you want to get a Mac from CompUSA, talk to Chris. The following data is courtesy of them.

The display space the downtown Chicago CompUSA store devotes to inkjet ink is 32 feet wide by 6ft high (192 square feet) Of the 32 feet, it is broken down as follows:

- 12 feet HP ink (72 square feet)
- 12 feet Epson ink (72 square feet)
- 8 feet Canon ink (48 square feet)

That is an awful lot of expensive downtown retail space devoted to ink. And while CompUSA has a very large supply, even they don't have ink for every model made. And there are other brands besides those they stock.

Why so many different cartridges? I'm not an expert on ink, but I imagine that some is legitimately due to basic differences between types of inks used for different printer applications. For example, dye vs. pigment, thermal vs. piezo heads, etc. However, that is still a long way from needing 100's of square feet of shelf space.

It seems that the business model that characterizes the ink jet printer business is "give away the razor, but make a fortune in selling the blade refills." This resulted in printers being sold below cost, in some cases free. Of course, the manufacturers are hoping to make a profit on the replacement ink cartridges.

Cheaper third party ink refillers can eat a lot of the profit. (Particularly the continuous feed systems that replace the stock cartridges with special units that go to ink bottles you buy a bottle at a time.) One way to slow them down might be to change your cartridge design frequently. Another might be to add special chips to your cartridges. While inkjet manufacturers don't claim to be doing this to protect their cartridge market, one can't help but wonder if that isn't the reason.

Now I'm not suggesting that the third party refiller ink that you might purchase by the quart from some Internet refiller for a ridiculously low price is every bit as good as that from Epson, Canon, Brother, HP, Lexmark, etc. I truly don't know. The OEM vendors say it's inferior, but then they have an obvious conflict of interest. Would they say anything different, if it were identical? Obviously, I do wonder about the justification for the cost of ink in some OEM cartridges exceeding that of precious metals.

We might all be better off if printers cost a bit more and ink a bit less. The business model of expensive, disposable head/tank cartridges not only contributes to land fills, but often it really isn't all that profitable for the printer companies either.

Even when it seems to work, it really doesn't. Business economics 101 says that for a store to stock replacement cartridges, they have to make enough of a profit on them to justify stocking them. That means that a lot of the possible profits have to be split with the stores, just to cover the expense of stocking and merchandising all of those different SKUs. And when stores decide not to stock slow moving cartridges, it not only annoys customers, but also threatens the business model.

Too often, consumers throw whole printers away and buy new ones, when all they needed was a new cartridge. If you sold the printer below cost, expecting to make your profit on the replacement cartridge, that hurts!

As consumers, there are a few things that we can do. Try to select your products based on the total life-cycle cost of the product and not just the initial purchase price. That "free" printer might actually be the most expensive choice of all. Try to pick products for which supplies are likely to be readily available for some time to come.

And if you can, recycle your empty cartridges. There are often people willing to pay a few \$\$\$ for those empties and it keeps them out of the landfills. (There used to be mailers and a way the TNWoU could get a commission on recycling, but I don't know if that is still the case or not.) 🐼

Editor's Note: YES, the mailers are there! I still use them.

