



He's closed  
the loop

A single environmental commitment turned Steve Morris into an entrepreneur with a company that's about to go global.

Electronic waste – mountains of discarded devices such as mobile phones, printers, toasters and computers, as well as consumables such as batteries and printer cartridges – is now a major problem. 'E-waste' is growing in landfills at three times the rate of general refuse. In Australia, more than 20 million printer cartridges alone are consumed each year – but there's an innovative company profiting well from the fact that electronic waste such as cartridges can actually be recycled.

In 2000 Steve Morris was running a small business selling printer cartridges and needed a competitive edge. He offered to recycle his customers' cartridges for free, on the basis that they bought his in return. The customers responded well, but, unable to find a way to recycle the complex mix of plastics, metals, foams and toner, Steve was left with a mounting pile of cartridges.

Refusing to compromise on his commitment, Steve established Close the Loop, raised funds and formed a team to develop the Green Machine – the world's first complete printer-cartridge recycling technology.

In 2004 Steve developed eWood, a lumber alternative made from electronic waste plastics and tinted using waste toner and inkjet inks. The inclusion of the tints gives eWood its distinctive black appearance, provides UV protection and acts as a binding agent. The product is also water, rot, insect and bacteria resistant, can be shaped using regular woodworking tools and, unlike other plastic lumbers, can be used with glue, paint or varnish.

Applications include fencing, landscape edging, outdoor furniture, sound barriers and retaining walls, but it is not recommended for structural use in buildings – yet.

Close the Loop is now a privately listed company with close to 500 shareholders. It employs up to 70 people and has an expected 2005/06 revenue of \$6.5 million. In 2005 it recycled approximately two million printer cartridges, using 100 per cent green power, from more than 30 000 collection points throughout Australia. Its success is now attracting major international corporate partners.

**What's the dream for Close the Loop? What are your current goals?**

**Morris:** It is to become an Australian environmental success story on a global scale. We have just signed our first contract in Europe with Canon, and have several other multinational customers ready to sign in Europe. Our goal is to have several long-term partnerships with multinational printer and copier companies on a global scale within two years. These long-term partnerships will be based on the objective of working together to make recycling of E-waste cost-neutral to manufacturers.



**Left: Steve Morris with his custom-made Green Machine and printer cartridges for recycling.** Close the Loop

**Above: Close the Loop's eWood product exemplifies how even waste from a recycling process can be reused for excellent added value.** Close the Loop

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**What have been some key moments in the development of Close the Loop?**

Morris: An early high point was the signing of our first contract, with Ricoh Australia. Each contract signing is a high point as all of our customers are multinational household names. A pivotal strategic move was partnering with the well-known environmental foundation Planet Ark in the launch of the 'Cartridges 4 Planet Ark' program. A recent high point would have to be winning an episode of the ABC's *New Inventors* program with our eWood technology, and, of course, our first European contract with Canon (UK) is the latest buzz.

**What has been the key to your success?**

Morris: I think the key to our success has been our passionate commitment to the brand promise 'zero waste to landfill'. This brand promise has inspired the innovation that has created a unique selling proposition and set us up as global leaders in the highly specialised industry of E-waste recycling.

**How are things going for eWood?**

Morris: eWood is progressing slowly but surely. We are currently coming to the final stages of an arduous period of testing and compliance to a number of standards for specific applications, including use in mines, as a building material and in landscape gardening. Each potential application has its own set of regulations, tests and qualifications. We've just installed a new eWood machine that will increase our production capacity by five times and we expect to be pumping out over 500 kg of eWood products per hour in the next few weeks.

**What would you like to change in your industry?**

Morris: In general, in electronics recycling on a global scale, I think progress is happening at the right pace. Laws are being introduced as infrastructure is being developed, and technology is evolving to reuse manufactured items.

I would like to see the Australian government lead the world in introducing

product stewardship legislation and banning of E-waste to landfill. This would stimulate the development of world leading recycling and reuse technologies, industries that Australia could turn into jobs and export earnings.

I constantly lobby for consistent legislation across the world. We are operating in a global village now and most manufacturers and recyclers operate across several, or all, regions of the world. Compliance for both producers and recyclers is a costly nightmare if every country has their own slant on a directive or piece of legislation.

**What could be improved in Australia?**

Morris: I would like to see Australia become a world leader in regulatory and other drivers to lead the commercialisation of environmental technologies and sustainable business practices. Progressive governments can actually create a competitive advantage for their countries by showing leadership, creativity and commitment to the long-term sustainability of their nations.

I'd like to see strong leadership that heavily taxes polluters and environmental vandals and that gives tax breaks to solution providers and responsible, sustainable businesses and citizens.

**What is your advice to anyone interested in developing eco-friendly products/services?**

Morris: The commercial reality is that no one buys a product because it's recycled or environmentally friendly unless it also has more features and benefits, or is cheaper than the opposition's products. Make sure, if you are developing a business around eco-friendly products or services, that you are better than the alternative and make the eco-friendly bit an added bonus.

For eco-friendly services, there must be legislative or commercial drivers in place to support your service. No business customer will pay significant money for the feel-good aspect alone. I've just returned from three weeks in Europe and the US, where there's serious money to be made for those interested in providing sustainable solutions. US venture capitalists see Australia as a green and innovative country, whereas we see ourselves as laggards. We're not capitalising on our ingenuity.

● Rachel Taylor

**More information:**  
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