



Drewry Pearson, chairman of the Catering Equipment Association (CEA), which will host the 21st annual CATEX exhibition at the RDS in February 2007.

A WEEE Spot of Bother

The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (or WEEE) Directive was brought in last year to ensure the proper disposal and recycling of electronic goods. For catering equipment manufacturers and the businesses they supply, the situation is more complicated. Drewry Pearson, Chairman of the Catering Equipment Association, explains how businesses can efficiently meet their WEEE requirements.

If you're Power City, it's easy to meet with WEEE requirements. You simply sign up and pay a fee, determined by your sales by category of all products sold. The money that is collected then goes towards the recycling process for getting rid of those products, which means the business is paying local authorities on municipal sites to handle them. It's known as a business to consumer, or 'B to C' chain. This means that any domestic product I buy from Power City, I can bring down to a domestic recycling centre, and they'll take it free of charge and recycle it on behalf of Power City.

That's fine for stuff that ends up in the domestic chain. But stuff that doesn't, be it photocopying equipment, office equipment of all sorts, large-scale computers, medium-sized computers, air conditioning systems... the list goes on and on. You can't turn up in a truck and drop a mainframe computer into a municipal site. To fit the criteria, businesses have to write up a waste plan. You have to report your sales, according to category, and then you have to take all your products down an agreed recycling route. Every item that's included in the plan has to be shown to be properly recycled. You have to keep a record all of that, as well as noting how you've recycled all the products that have been taken back.

Ultimately, for the catering industry, the problem is that acceptable waste routes for equipment are yet to be sorted out. What template should be used for recording all the information? What value or no value or what cost or no cost will it be? How much money will you get back, such as in the case of stainless steel products, from the recycler? All of that has to be determined before catering equipment can meet the requirements.

Businesses were supposed to have complied with this way back in August 2005, and everything should be retrospective to that date. But at the time, it wasn't on anyone's radar screen because, a) everyone was looking at how it affected domestic products, and b) the catering people didn't believe that the legislation applied to them. They understood it as domestic legislation. The only country that has actually put any legislation in place or any systems in place to deal with catering equipment so far is The Netherlands, and that's only half in place anyhow. The Swedes have decided it doesn't apply at all because their recycling systems are quite good enough to deal with it, and the rest of Europe is sitting there, saying, 'Looks like we're gonna have to do something about this.'

The real difficulty with enforcing this legislation is that it's been brought in as a Europe-wide directive, and what that means is there's a minimum level that can vary from country to country. When they interpret the legislation, each country can draw up their own set of rules applicable to their needs, as can the Irish, or Dutch, or French. That creates inequalities right through the catering equipment market throughout Europe, which distorts the market and effectively makes the legislation null and void.

Soon you won't be able to sell any piece of electrical equipment that you've imported without doing a waste plan, signing up to the WEEE register and doing all these reports. So, if you're a hotel and you want to import a piece of equipment from Germany – a cooker, for instance – you can't do it any longer. You've got to buy it through somebody in Ireland who's registered. So, people like the architects and the specifiers who, for instance, with Bewley's Hotel, brought all the products in from Germany, had them installed here, got a local agent to service it and took a nice, fat commission fee, will either have to sign up and do a waste plan in their own right as an importer of product, or Bewley's Hotel will have to do it, one or the other.

For small companies, it becomes even more difficult. Many don't actually record every physical item they sell and categorise it. Now they're going to have to record every item, they're going to categorise it, and have to make that report every month to the WEEE register. The Catering Equipment Association is trying to set up a system that will be common to all catering equipment, so that that system can be followed by all the members or anyone who joins up to it. If they follow that template, hopefully they will be compliant with what's required.

The legislation was brought in with the idea, and quite rightly, in my opinion, that Europe was being flooded by electrical products from China that lasted for a year and then they were going into the dump. The dump couldn't absorb them; there was all sorts of stuff in them, like lead in the wiring, in electronics, which was no good. And they shouldn't be ending up there – they should have been collected and recycled. What that does is give an advantage for someone to charge a little bit more for a really good product which lasts a little bit longer. That's where the market – hopefully – will go eventually; rather than taking rubbish stuff and throwing it in the bin, you'll actually buy something of quality because something of quality will last for longer. ■