Clearing the Confusion on Ink and Toner

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OEM, Compatible, Remanufactured, Original, Generic, Refilled and many more........your head must be spinning from all the terminologies being used by sellers of ink and toner to peddle their wares. As someone who has heard all the complaints and seen the headaches of this confusion, I decided to write a short primer on what these terms mean. Hopefully it will make you a more educated consumer of ink and toner and guide you to choose the right product.

OEM Cartridges

Obviously, the most pristine product in the ink and toner industry is the “OEM” or “Original” ink or toner cartridge. This refers to the ink or toner cartridge made by the manufacturer of the printer itself, also sometimes alluded to as the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM). Such an original cartridge usually comes with an inkjet or laser printer, or is the replacement cartridge that is manufactured by the original manufacturer of your printer. It is no secret that most printer companies sell the printer at a low price and make money on the ink and toner supplies over the life of the printer. Therefore, these OEM or original cartridges are premium priced and usually deliver the best results.

Compatible Cartridges

Giving the OEMs a tough competition and the basis of a burgeoning industry worldwide, is the “Compatible” or “Generic” ink or toner cartridge. A “compatible” cartridge refers to an ink cartridge that is NOT manufactured by the original manufacturer of your printer, but will function and work in the same way that an OEM cartridge would. Many printer manufacturers will state that using any compatible cartridge in your printer will void the warranty. However, compatible cartridges are popular with consumers because of the lower cost to purchase, compared to an OEM cartridge. This industry in after-market ink and toner cartridges has grown exponentially over the years and quality standards now almost match that of the OEM.

However, these compatible or generic cartridges are also the fountainhead of a lot of angst among consumers because wrong terminology is often used by retailers to misinform buyers. They are also the source of many lawsuits between the OEMs and the compatible manufacturers since copyrights are almost always at play here. It is therefore all the more important that consumers understand the nuances and differences, sometimes slight, between the various terminologies surrounding these after-market products.

Remanufactured Cartridges

A “compatible” ink or toner cartridge can be a “new compatible” or a “remanufactured” compatible. The difference in terms is simple but the usage is tortured. A “new compatible” is one that is manufactured almost entirely from new parts. But a “remanufactured” compatible is one that uses a
recycled core, filled with new ink, and possibly has some new parts. To a user this can make some difference, to a lawyer this can make all the difference! While a “remanufactured” compatible is usually legal, a “new compatible” is at most times considered a blatant violation of the OEM’s copyright. And in terms of quality, they may be all the same. Most purveyors of ink and toner offer a “new compatible” where legal, and a “remanufactured” when not. With today’s high manufacturing standards, you can buy either one with confidence.

Refilled Cartridges

At the bottom of the totem pole is of course the “refilled” ink or toner cartridge. It is nothing but a used OEM cartridge refilled with powder or liquid ink. There are also a variety of do-it-yourself refill kits that are sold in the market. Messy, prone to damaging your printer, and definitely not endorsed by your printer manufacturer, these refilled cartridges are sometimes the ones that give the after-market cartridge industry a bad name. Especially, when a basic refill is sold as a “new compatible” or a “remanufactured” one.

So now you know the differences and the risks. But how are you to know that the type of cartridge is accurately represented by the correct terminology? Well, for that you stick to that one golden rule --- buy only from the one that stands behind his product.

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