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A Town That Shreds Together ... By STEPHANIE RAPOSO

On a recent Saturday, Bob Maes scraped a melted chocolate bar off his son's wagon, loaded it with eight years' worth of financial records and set off to join his neighbors for Shredder Day in Brielle, N.J.

"It's great to get rid of the clutter and to have all this information you wouldn't want to get into someone else's hands just be gone," says the 55-year-old Mr. Maes, a financial adviser. "As long as this stuff exists, you feel vulnerable."

The line wrapped around the borough hall parking lot as about 200 locals waited to drop off financial statements and other paperwork—measured in pounds—and watch it get diced to confetti. The monitor built into the exterior of the shredding truck provided a live view of the process.

Local governments, corporations and small businesses around the country are increasingly partnering with mobile-shredding companies to host free get-togethers, some of which resemble homespun carnivals. In addition to recycling the paper, there's often another cause attached, such as raising money for cancer research or crime prevention. But the chief appeal is a more visceral one: preventing identity theft.

In Katy, Texas, Janine Godwin, a 47-year-old professional organizer, has donated her time to coordinate six free "festive" mobile shredding events over the past three years in her area. To lure participants, they feature extras like decorations, clowns, face painting, dogs and cats available for

adoption, information booths, cookies and refreshments. "Just shredding can be boring," Ms. Godwin says.

Mobile shredders—essentially retrooled box trucks containing industrial-size paper shredders—may be to adults with sensitive documents what ice-cream trucks are to children on a hot summer day.

At the Brielle event last month, which was sponsored by Monmouth County, N.J., locals compared their loads and—competing with the roaring sound of the truck—laughed when confessing to how long, where and why they've been collecting the items while they waited. Conga-line style, every few minutes the group would shuffle forward carrying, dragging and kicking documents closer to the truck.

Growing Popularity

Although there are no hard data tracking the number of such shred-a-thons, people in the paper-shredding industry say they are becoming more popular. Tom Thompson, general manager of Information Protection Solutions of America, a Chicago-based consortium of 90 certified shredding companies, says that inquiries he's received about shredding events have doubled to three or four a week after the financial crisis hit last year.

Identity-theft experts say that holding on to unsecured confidential information around the house, or disposing of it improperly by not shredding it first, is a first-class ticket to becoming a victim of fraud.



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“People who don’t shred are acting extremely unwise,” says Adam Levin, chairman and co-founder of Identity Theft 911, an identity-theft education firm in Scottsdale, Ariz. “When someone gets their hands on your name, address and Social Security number, they own you.”

With paper fraud accounting for 25% of reported data breaches for the first half of the year, according to the Identity Theft Resource Center, a nonprofit based in San Diego, mobile shredders provide a quick solution to a critical but otherwise tedious at-home ritual.

The green factor is another reason behind the rising popularity of shredding events. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, every ton of paper recycled saves 3.3 cubic yards of landfill space and 7,000 gallons of water—and enough energy to power the average American home for half a year.

“I have six kids, and the little decisions I can do to leave a better world behind for them helps me sleep better,” says Donnetta Campbell, 45, of Westport, Conn., about using a mobile shredder to recycle. Ms. Campbell, a public-relations professional, says she consumes more than 100 sheets of paper a week and recently attended a shredding event in Windsor, Conn.

After material is shredded, it is sorted into different grades and contaminants are removed. The fragments are then baled and eventually sold to paper mills. The recycled fibers can eventually make a comeback as low-grade paper products such as paper towels and toilet paper.

Many personal shredders on the market require users to physically insert one or a few sheets at a time, which can take hours. On average, a mobile shredder can devour 6,000 pounds of paper per hour with a total capacity of 10,000 pounds. That equals one filled standard-sized paper storage box gone in less than a minute.

400 Pounds of Paper

Judith Briles, an author living in Aurora, Colo., says she had more than 400 pounds of paper, some dating as far back as 1980, shredded in less than five minutes at a recent local shred-a-thon. The disposed documents included old bills, bank statements and research for her master’s thesis.

Mobile shredders are contracted by high-volume paper consuming facilities such as hospitals, schools and banks to dispose of client files and sensitive information on site.

While rates vary depending on how far the truck has to travel and the volume of the job, hiring a mobile shredder can range from \$150 to \$250 an hour. And with the average shred-a-thon lasting four hours, it can be costly for companies to provide the service to the public.

But many shredder companies donate their services or provide them for cost. “We don’t do these events to make money,” says Jeffrey Rupp, president of Incred-A-Shred in Baltimore. “We do them to give back to the community and hopefully generate more business over time.”

In an effort to raise money for the American Cancer Society, Donna Brockway, a 48-year-old accountant, persuaded ProShred Security, a mobile-shredding company based in Elmsford, N.Y., to donate its services for a third year in a row. “I was looking for a unique fund-raiser that would draw attention,” says Ms. Brockway. This year’s event garnered \$962 in donations.

Earlier this year in Denver, shred-it, a company based in Oakville, Ontario, provided 14 trucks in five locations at no charge for a daylong initiative to raise money for the Denver Metro Crime Stoppers, a 24-hour tip line. Some 242,000 pounds of material were shredded, and about \$35,000 was raised.

James Holmes, 46, a business coach and trainer, used the event to eliminate 25 boxes of confidential material he had in his basement, he says.

Terry Grist, a paper-recycling specialist at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, says there is no one way to organize community shredding events. Businesses and local governments alike have a hand in spearheading the logistics of a community shred event by working with a shredding company to contract a truck.

In some cases there is no middleman. Westchester County, N.Y., owns two mobile shredders. Louis Vetrone, deputy commissioner for the Department of Environmental Facilities for the county, says the county expects to stage about 200 shredding events this year,

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up from about from 20 in 2007.

“It basically pays for itself,” Mr. Vetrone says, since the paper gathered is eventually marketed and resold.

Write to Stephanie Raposo at Stephanie.Raposo@wsj.com

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