Firmware update for HP printers bans third-party ink

The long-standing tradition of getting cheaper ink by buying "off brand" cartridges just hit a snag for HP printer owners.

Credit: ROBERT CARDIN

- Sep 20, 2016 7:18 AM

Printer companies and third-party cartridge manufacturers (and refillers) have a long, fraught relationship. Recently, HP added another problem to the mix. The printer maker introduced a tweak to its firmware that caused HP printers to reject third-party ink cartridges.

This isn't some freak accident that can be corrected by reloading an unrecognized cartridge. It's very real. "The purpose of this update is to protect HP's innovations and intellectual property," HP said in a statement to the BBC.

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The problem appears to have started last week on Tuesday, September 13. When printers hit that date, it appears their firmware was set to reject cartridges lacking official HP authentication chips.

Netherlands-based 123inkt (Dutch language link) was the first to discover the issue. Customers of the online ink seller reported problems with the site's 123inkt brand cartridges in HP printers last week. The problem may not last long, however, as 123inkt says it expects to have new cartridge chips soon that will get around HP's firmware restrictions.

The story behind the story: For years, printer makers have sold their devices largely under the "razors and blades model." That is, they sell the printers cheaply and then make up the money by charging high prices for the regularly depleted ink cartridges. Printer ink famously costs more than human blood, which is why printers are notorious for bugging you when you use off-brand ink, or popping up refill warnings long before ink cartridges truly empty. Some won't even let you print black and white documents unless you have color ink installed, too..

In some cases cartridge prices are so high that it's actually cheaper just to buy a new low-priced printer with free ink in the box.

Save at your own risk, sadly

It's a fun thought experiment, but buying a new printer every time you need an ink refill isn't a realistic solution. Many people avoid high-priced "official" ink by either refilling old cartridges or buying "off brand" replacement product. It's been this way for years, but now HP is fighting back—at least for a little while.

If 123inkt is correct about an impending workaround to get third-party cartridges working again HP has a tough decision ahead: Play a never ending game of cat-and-mouse with third-party cartridges, or find a way to make up for its losses that isn't so blatantly anti-consumer.