

## EVC INTERVIEWS OF LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS

Kyle Wiens  
Founder  
iFixit + Dozuki

See company video at: <http://vimeo.com/16569242>

*“In our global throw-away culture, it is the greatest feeling in the world when you know that you fixed something, increasing your self-reliance and reducing your environmental footprint”.*

Kyle Wiens

*This interview series focuses on business leaders who are directly impacting our local economy and in some cases the world. Michael Manchak interviewed **Kyle Wiens**, founder of **iFixit**, a San Luis Obispo-based company that teaches people how to fix electronics and other devices to save money, prevent waste, help the planet, and empower self-reliance. As I wrote this article, Kyle is mid-way over the Atlantic flying to Egypt to share his vision with leaders in that country.*

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**MM: Having read your company mentioned in the Wall Street Journal many times, you have successfully bridged two worlds – a successful small company in a small community in California, and one that has built a brand recognized by millions around the world. What are your greatest challenges and opportunities as an entrepreneur on a daily basis and in the long-term?**

**KW:** It's fun working in a target rich environment. Our goal is to teach everyone to fix all of their things. That gives us lots of choices for the kinds of things we get to work on. My background is electronics, so we focused on cell phones and game consoles first. We've done pretty well there, and now we're working on motorcycle repair guides and oil change manuals for cars. We have a great team of engineers who are constantly coming up with new ways to teach people to fix things.

When you're fostering an online community, you have to let your community set the direction. iFixit isn't me or my staff, it's a group of people all over the world dedicated to making things last longer.

Seeing rampant consumerism everywhere is discouraging—we're in for a difficult fight. Our only hope of succeeding is to empower everyone to take part, because this isn't something that any one person or group can fight. Fortunately, fixing things is win-win-win: you save money, help the environment, and reward manufacturers who make repairable products.

**MM: Until I dug deeper on your company, I didn't fully understand that through your leadership your company is trying to help improve the lives of so many in our modern world and in developing nations through electronics recycling. Your video says so much. How did you go from fixing stuff to helping the world?**

**KW:** I always knew that I wanted to work on something important when I graduated from Cal Poly. We started selling computer parts and teaching people to fix things to pay for school. I had no idea that it would turn into a cause. But when we realized how much we were helping people by selling parts, and realized how many people were depending on our free repair manuals, we knew that we had to take it to the next level.

So we 'open sourced' all of our repair guides, meaning we opened them all up for free so anyone could improve them. And then we made it free for anyone to add repair guides alongside ours. We transformed iFixit into a Wikipedia of repair manuals, and we're working to empower everyone to fix things and then teach their friends what they learned.

**MM: What does the electronic industry think about your goal of reducing discarded electronics in half by fixing them instead? How do your conversations go with leaders from those companies?**

We've had trouble getting traction with manufacturers. They don't focus on end-of-life or extending device lifespan because they don't have any incentive to: they make things. Then they design newer things and make those. Their entire organizational structure is based around making things and convincing people to buy them. Until consumers start demanding higher quality products that will stand the test of time, they're going to continue making difficult to repair products.

I'm surprised more manufacturers haven't reversed course and stopped making throwaway products, because higher quality products maintain resale value better. Products with quality repair manuals are easier to maintain and have higher resale value. I'm confident over time we'll see a shift back toward higher quality and reparability.

**MM: You are pioneering a vital and exciting philosophy of teaching a practice of fixing instead of disposing by providing free manuals. What is your long-term vision for teaching people in developing countries that are becoming landfills and recipients for electronic waste from around the world?**

**KW:** I just got back from a month in Egypt and Kenya, and I can tell you that they don't need us to teach them anything. They are vastly more efficient with resources than anyone else I've ever seen. I've watched people fix thirty-year-old television sets, repair radiators that seemed damaged beyond repair, and scavenge old electronic parts for the tiniest useable scraps.

The biggest problem we face is that repair knowledge isn't easily distributed. I've visited scrap yards where they're mining electronics for gold—destroying computers that could be fixed by people across town. We need better systems for getting repair knowledge from the people that know how—manufacturers and expert repair technicians—to the rest of us.

**MM: Other than being a Cal Poly alum, what were some deciding factors that caused you to keep your company in San Luis Obispo than let's say Silicon Valley where millions know iFixit?**

**KW:** A big perk of running my own business is the ability to locate it where I want. I love this area—I spend as much time outside as I can.

It's nice being near the big hubs of commerce—Silicon Valley, the Long Beach port, the Vegas convention center—while being far enough away that life is peaceful. I'm from Oregon, but it's easier to do business here.

**MM: Your recently became involved in SLO SEED VENTURES, the first angel investor group in the county that the EVC is proud to support. What are your views on the prospects and challenges for the region's business community -- particularly the early stage startups that the SLO SEED focuses on?**

**KW:** I'm encouraged by the recent growth of the Entrepreneurship Club at Cal Poly and other local startup initiatives. There's a lot more people working together to build the startup ecosystem than there were a few years ago. We're seeing the start of something—but we have a long way to go. I hope that SLO Seed Ventures can provide some of the motivation and capital to help bright engineers start businesses here rather than leave the area.

Challenges: Startup internet businesses are shackled by the poor bandwidth here. Lack of fiber internet puts us at a severe disadvantage as data mining, 3D graphics, and other bandwidth-intensive industries grow quickly. Larger businesses can afford to pay for fiber access, but startups can't, and it's stifling innovation. If we don't do something about this quickly, we'll be left behind. Improving access to fiber-class bandwidth should be top priority for every elected official in San Luis Obispo.

**MM: At the rate at which your company is developing free repair manuals for nearly everything at an unprecedented pace, is it challenging to keep up with the pace of new generations of electronics?**

**KW:** Absolutely. We're writing manuals faster than ever—we've got over 5,000 online right now—and we're not keeping even with the number of unique devices manufacturers are creating. I'm confident we'll get there eventually, but it's most important for us to focus on the popular devices. Our iPhone 4 glass repair guide has been viewed over 1.1 million times. That has an impact.

**MM: I watched your video three times because I was so intrigued. What is your advice to entrepreneurs about being successful in your business? What are the pillars critical to your success that you live by?**

**KW:** We're a triple bottom line business. Profit is important, but no more important than treating our people right and having a positive environmental impact. We're not in business to make money; I'm in business to make change. I'm sure I could make more money on Wall Street, but I wouldn't enjoy it. Find something that matters, follow your passion, and find a way to subsidize it with profits.

Customers pay attention to authenticity. Find a way to make them awesome and they'll love you for it.

**MM: When you visit scrap yards with movie camera in hand around the world to teach your vision, how does that change you when you return home?**

**KW:** I am so thankful for a world where people don't burn tires for fuel. Business owners understandably chafe under regulations, but I can tell you that environmental regulations are A Good Thing.

That said, we need to learn to be a lot more efficient with the things we have. I can't bring myself to recycle glass jars—why destroy them, just to make another one? I prefer to find other things to do with them.

**MM: When you are not working, how do you blow off steam and add balance to your life?**

**KW:** I kayak surf in Shell Beach and Cayucos, mountain bike all over the county, take lots of photos, build robots, and tinker in my shop. I picked up photography while writing repair guides and never really stopped. We've put up a number of my photos in our office. And I had a blast racing in the Mud Mash at Laguna Park this week!

I've been writing stories from my trip here: <http://www.theatlantic.com/the-fixers>  
Our film project is here: <http://ifixit.org/>

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