

Home Energy Devices: Can We Bewilder Edison?

By Elisa Wood | August 15, 2011

Why do so many energy insiders insist that [home energy automation](#) will fail? Many whom I respect say the typical householder will never take the time to fiddle with smart gadgets that reduce energy costs.

Their skepticism, however, just elicits a verbal shrug from Peter Porteous, CEO of [Blue Line Innovations](#), maker of the PowerCost Monitor, one of the many devices hitting the market to help homeowners manage their energy.

Porteous sees things differently because he spent several years selling products in other industries. Smart energy devices, he says, are really no different than food, automotives or any other consumer item.

“We are no different than any other market. The text book tells it all. First there are the early adopters, and you gradually move through the product lifecycle to where there is mass adoption. Business models evolve, and products evolve, and gradually you make yourself more appealing to a wider segment of the population. There are no surprises here,” he told me by phone this week.

We'll know soon if he's right. The company has worked with about 125 utilities on various pilots and projects since it was formed about seven years ago. But it's not relying solely on that channel to get its product out. Blue Line is testing its ability to thrive in the mass market by offering its energy display monitor directly to consumers in stores like Lowes and Frys.

The PowerCost Monitor's bragging rights are that it's relatively cheap (about \$100 for a basic model), easy to install (no electrician required), and does not rely on a smart meter. In fact, Porteous says the system works with 90 percent of existing meters, even the old-fashion analog kind. A sensor placed on the home's meter reads your electricity usage and transmits it wirelessly to a handheld display inside the house. The display shows how much electricity you're using both in kilowatt-hours and in dollars and cents. A more advanced cloud-based system (about \$229) lets consumers slice and dice their home energy use and pinpoint the appliances that are energy hogs. The technology is increasingly moving away from the displays and toward use of cell phones, making it easy to monitor energy usage while away from home.

Porteous also is nonplussed by [Google and Microsoft's](#) recent decision to quit the home energy display market. Skeptics cited the back-to-back departure of the two giants as evidence that smart grid devices have no place in the home. But again Porteous sees the event as a function of a normal market. Smart energy is non-core to Google and Microsoft, and “it is just the natural course of companies in harder times to focus their resources,” he says.

Their departure was something of a blow to Blue Line, since it used the Google and Microsoft applications with its hardware. However, Blue Line was already well on its way to launching a third option offered by [People Power](#) when the giants announced they were transitioning out. “The impact was quite minimal,” he says.

So will Blue Line prove that the home energy skeptics are off base? We'll see. In the meantime, we should probably cut the skeptics some slack. Innovation is new to the electric industry. Those who frequent energy conferences have heard the line many times that while Alexander Graham Bell would be shocked at the changes made to telephones, and barely recognize the technology, Thomas Edison could pretty much pick up where he left off if he were to return today. But if Porteous and his competitors have their way, we'll have a pair of bewildered ghosts.

