PowerCost Monitor™ Review

From BlueLine Innovations

by Paul Cook

If you want to lose weight, you need a good scale and you need to look at it regularly. Without feedback, it is hard to see how well you are meeting (or not meeting) your objectives. Similarly, if you care about reducing your electrical power consumption of your home, you need a good way to measure that. The PowerCost™ Monitor (abbrev. PCM) from BlueLine Innovations is such a device. <www.bluelineinnovations.com>

The PowerCost Monitor will tell you how much electricity you are currently using either in terms of cents per hour or in terms of Kilowatts hours. So you can see the impact of using various lights, appliances, computers, printers, air-conditioning, etc has on your power consumption and your energy bill.

The unit also reports total consumption, temperature (at the meter) and time. But the main reason for this unit is power monitoring, so that is where this review will focus.

Not Just For Global Warming Zealots

As a very important point, I should point out that you have good reasons to want to save energy even if you aren't a "true believer" in the Global Warming religion. Still, even if GW is false, the trend of energy rising in cost is likely to continue. And what if the Russian and other scientists, who now predict that we may be entering another mini-ice age turn out to be correct? Well then, we're going to need all the energy we can, just to keep from freezing.

Now if you are a GW true believer, you should still be happy about this product. And you should be happy that even those who don't share your convictions want to save energy.

Impressions

Overall, my spouse and I were quite pleased with the PowerCost Monitor. It works well, was relatively easy to install, and provides valuable feedback about how much electrical energy your household is consuming. Besides being useful for helping keep your energy costs down, It is also a cool novelty toy.

As the incandescent bulbs have burnt out, we have largely converted most of our lights to power saving florescent fixtures. Since many compact florescent bulbs are not recommended for use on circuits with a dimmer, motion detector or similar, there are a few locations that may not be converted anytime soon.

It can be fun to see just how low you can get it to go just by shutting off unnecessary things.

One can tell the difference between turning on a number of compact florescent lights and turning on a few standard incandescent. The CFs clearly do save $$$. A glance at the Monitor, will also remind you to make sure all unnecessary power consuming devices are off.

Motors in washers, dryers, refrigerators, sump pumps, well pumps, furnace fans and all our other "conveniences" of modern life also caused the cost per hour to go up.

Of course, when high energy consumers, like the Air Conditioner goes on, the power consumption really jumps.

In the summer, when the AC is actually running, our power costs go up to over $1 per hour. Fortunately, the AC does not run continuously. Still, it is easy to see how better insulation could help.

How It Works

The PCM has two main parts. There is a sensor, which fastens to your utility power meter and senses the power. There is also a display unit, that reports the usage. Both units run on standard AA batteries. There is no need to run wires as the sensor contains a radio transmitter and is linked to the display unit wirelessly.

For most of us, the power meter is somewhere on the outside of the house. If you have a condo, townhouse, apartment or other shared unit, there are a few things you should check before you rush out and buy this unit.

Make sure that you have your own separate meter just for your living unit. You will need physical access to it to install the sensor. Also make sure that it is not too far from the meter to your living unit. I don't know what the wireless range is. But one might reasonably expect a problem if all of the electrical meters were all grouped together, ground-level on the east end of the building and your living unit was on the 10th floor west end of the building.

The sending unit is designed to work on many meter types from the old fashioned mechanical/magnet ones as well as the new electronic models.

On the old fashioned mechanical/magnetic units, the sensor seems to just count rotations of the spinning disk.

Installation

The only tool needed is a standard flat blade screwdriver to tighten what is eventually a giant hose clamp, that is used to affix the sending unit to the meter.

The PCM even came with the necessary batteries. Not some off brand either,

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but Duracell "coppertop" alkaline batteries are included. However, we installed Lithium AA cells in the hope of getting even longer life between battery replacements. One thing that we do wonder is what to expect for the battery life. Should we change them once a year, or more, or less?

Most of us think we know which end of a screwdriver to hold and we "don't need no stinking instructions." Installation isn't hard at all. Still, I strongly recommend watching the enclosed DVD video before installing.

There was at least one minor place where the video was correct and the printed instructions were not. The video also had the only mention that I noticed about the included rubber shims or the alignment template. It mentions them, so you now know what they are, but doesn't really tell you how to use them.

We had one of the old fashioned mechanical/magnetic units. Our glass cover was of the smaller size, so we needed to use one of the foam spacers. Still. the installation was easy. Fortunately, it was also quick as the heavy rains a few days prior had given us a bumper crop of hungry mosquitoes.

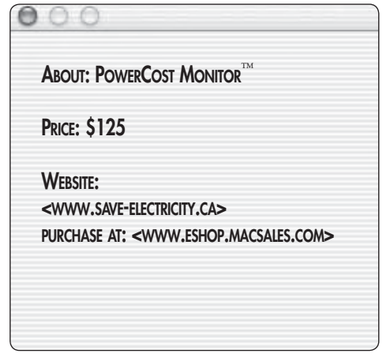
We ended up installing it. And then a few days later, it quit working, so we tweaked the alignment. Not sure if we got it borderline initially or if something bumped the sensor. (We do have lots of cute squirrels/tree rats. Did one of them do it? Or maybe the meter reader trying to figure out what it was?) Whatever the cause, it has now worked fine, for many months, ever since.

After you get the sending unit installed, you need to sync the display unit to the sensor and program it for your local electric rates and meter type. This is a bit like programming most alarm clocks and you may need to follow the instructions to get it right. You will probably also need to find a recent electric bill to figure out what you are paying for electric rates.

Where To Buy

The PowerCost Monitor is available from a number of sources, including Other World Computing, with whom our computer user group has a relationship. OWC's standard price for the unit is $125.

You can purchase it at eshop.macsales.com. I was also able to find it at a number of other Internet suppliers.



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