Review of Microsoft Hohm's Blueline PowerCost Monitor

This week on Mothering Outside the Lines we're talking about the **sexy topics of energy conservation and conscientious living.**

Yesterday I wrote about how conserving energy might actually promote happiness and last week I admitted being in love with No Impact Man.

Today, as promised, we have a technical report on Microsoft Hohm's Blueline PowerCost Monitor, which James installed a few days ago, for your reading pleasure.

This monitor retails for $268.00 but we didn't pay for ours. The manufacturer sent it to us for review.

Here's more than you would like to know about this device, written by my husband, James di Properzio:

Blueline's PowerCost Monitor is a system for monitoring your electricity use in real time.

There's a sensor that attaches to the meter outside your home, and a wireless display that shows your current energy consumption in cents per hour, your total cost since the last reset, the time, and the outdoor temperature. It's relatively easy to install it and to program it with your energy cost data.

There is also an optional wireless broadcaster that picks up a signal from the sensor and forwards it through your home wifi network to the Internet, where you can sign up for Microsoft's Hohm program and graph your energy use over time.

However, this only works on PCs, and we're a Mac-only household; so I can't tell you how well it works, though I like the concept.

You can toggle between cents per hour and amount of power consumed in kilowatt-hours. Instead of showing your total consumption for the month, you can have it show your estimated monthly bill based on how you are using energy so far this month.

There's a neat 'Appliance' button, which you can press before you start using an appliance when you want to measure how much juice it takes: the display zeros out all the other current consumption and shows only the extra power used by whatever you just turned on.

This was a fun function for testing how much our toaster or our electric kettle really suck up the electricity ($0.07/hour).

We were already pretty careful about our consumption, and local electric rates in southern Oregon are low, so our average so far has been about $0.02/hour, which seems to be the smallest rate the device can measure. We use some compact-florescent bulbs, we've been hanging our clothes to dry since the dryer motor broke this summer and we didn't have the money to fix it. We don't have a microwave and try to turn off the lights we're not using; plus our heat, hot water and stove are gas. We've been seeing our energy use fluctuate between $0.02, $0.04, $0.08, a whooping $0.12 and $0.00/hour during typical usage.

Installation took an hour or two of fiddling with the sensor, getting it on the meter right, looking up our utility rate structure and punching it all in.

Seeing our usage has made conservation kind of like a video game, and we all keep trying to see if we can get it down to zero and keep it there. Installing the device inspired us to police the rooms to unplug any devices with always-on displays (like the printer and the stereo) or with transformers, because these bleed a constant trickle of power that does nothing and adds up over time.

Because our power use is already so low, it doesn't seem possible to make drastic improvements (Editor's Note: unless we turn off the power completely and light our way with beeswax candles, the way No Impact Man did during his year-long experiment), but we have become aware of how to keep our everyday usage to a minimum.