

What Hohm and PowerMeter Will Leave Us

July 1, 2011

By [Steven Castle](#)

People Power's mobile app for energy monitoring.

First Google kills its [PowerMeter](#) energy monitor this week. Now Microsoft has announced it will curtail its [Hohm](#) energy monitoring/energy saving recommendations site, apparently because not many people were using it. Hohm will be available to users until May 31, 2012.

And boy, the “tributes” are rolling in—and I use that term facetiously. Abject ridicule, some of it quite [humorous](#), would be more accurate. And the conclusion of some who follow energy management issues is that no one wants to look at or track their energy consumption.

I disagree with that. It's a grossly simplistic judgment about a complex and nuanced topic. It's just the easiest thing to say.

While it's true that there has been limited interest among most consumers and homeowners in sitting at a computer and looking at your energy usage, we have to remember a few key points:

1. Energy monitoring and management is brand new to people. Most consumers don't know what it is, and don't know what the smart grid is.
2. We are used to getting our information on our electricity usage in the form of a paper bill, one month late. But when you really think about it, in this digital day of instant info via text messaging, the web and smartphones—doesn't that seem primitive and dumb? People will realize that in the next few years. It might just take spiking electricity prices to get us to care more.
3. We have been trained, for decades, to consume electricity without caring about its costs. It's one of the reasons for our economic prosperity in the last half century. Cheap electricity was incited and purchasing consumer goods that used electricity provided convenience and made our lives easier. Just plug it in and it works! We totally take electricity for granted. Think about this during your next power outage. Our attitude toward electricity has become embedded, if you will, in our cultural DNA. To get people to think in terms of electricity conservation now will take time. It may take generations. Or really outrageous electric bills. Read more about this in Alexis Madrigal's excellent book, [Powering the Dream](#): The History and Promise of Green Technology.

Like my colleague [Julie Jacobson of CE Pro](#), I've always found Microsoft's Hohm to be somewhat silly. So much so, I've barely written about it. However, there was a concept was there: to help people save energy by offering them recommendations and tips, and then tying into a monitoring product like the [Power Cost Monitor](#).



Hohm just never seemed to be a serious attempt at energy management. It appeared like something Microsoft slapped on the wall and hoped would stick with the minimum amount of effort. Or maybe the company was after that big yummy \$4 billion in matching stimulus funding that went to electric utilities to get going on smart grid programs. Never happened, no one cared, kill it and move on.

“From the marketing standpoint, both [PowerMeter and Hohm] missed the mark,” says Peter Porteous of Blue Line Innovations, marketer of the Power Cost Monitor that worked with both the PowerMeter and Hohm. “They didn’t necessarily meet the needs of utilities and end users ... by their inability to go to the next level.” By this he means in really understanding one’s energy performance and then controlling those key drivers in the home.

Control is Key

The control part has been the roadblock for the entire energy monitoring industry, though Porteous assures us we will see products from his company and others to address this. He says products are coming out that learn behaviors of homeowners’ energy usage and how to respond to their budget to save them energy and money. “I think that’s really where this space is going. Solutions that are going to win will have to show progression from 9 percent to 15 percent energy savings,” for example.

Blue Line Innovations is already partnering with [People Power](#), a company rolling out on iPhone and Android apps that show visualizations of energy usage and promises some control of appliances.

Ahead of Their Time?

PowerMeter and Hohm may have just been ahead of their time. And the execution—not the actually killing of these products, but the way their companies executed their alleged business plans—was definitely lacking.

Many companies in this space are still figuring out their business plans. That’s natural in a market that is so nascent you could say it’s still in gestation. We’ll end the analogies there. Google and Microsoft simply ran out of patience.

It’s also a natural progression that in young markets, products are introduced, and fail, and new and better products are introduced and fail, until finally the products that manage to engage and compel sales succeed. What was learned from PowerMeter and Hohm will likely be applied elsewhere.

From Microsoft’s blog:

Microsoft Hohm has helped demonstrate the critical role of information in helping people and organizations improve how energy is generated, distributed and ultimately consumed.

We are working with partners, utilities, universities, governments, building management companies and leaders in the IT industry to accelerate development of energy-smart solutions for growing cities. More energy-efficient cities are among our best opportunities to provide sustainable economic growth and quality of life in the long-term. Microsoft’s Smart Energy Reference Architecture (SERA) also helps utilities develop an ecosystem where thousands of smart devices can seamlessly plug into the grid with common standards and interoperability framework.

Will we move toward completely automated, set-it-and-forget it mode? Here's what [Julie Jacobson wrote](#) on CEPro.com:

Consumers don't care about their energy usage patterns. Now, tie that information into utility demand-side management programs and some home automation so the pool pump (always the pool pump) doesn't run during peak rates, and you may be on to something.

I fully agree with the control part. Though just getting people to invest in energy management-type home automation should require that they have some information about their energy use.

As I've written in a [previous post](#), this shouldn't be a either/or between using behavioral change and social psychology versus home automation set-it-and-forget-it. Both approaches can work.

PowerMeter and Hohm may have both been failed attempts, but we will learn by them.