

Device helps reduce energy use

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Technology: PowerCost Monitor gives real time information to home owners

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Technology can be very entertaining. From children playing video games to adults fooling around with their fancy gadgets, electronics seem to bring out playfulness and curiosity in people.



Devon Judge/Canadaeast News Service

Peter Porteous is chief executive of Blue Line Innovations Inc., the company selling PowerCost Monitor.

But what if that "playing" could help the user save energy and reduce his or her carbon footprint?

A St. John's, N.L.-based business with a New Brunswick link makes that possible.

Blue Line Innovations Inc. has been quietly selling a device that helps people cut their residential energy use for five years and is ready to push its product across the continent.

The PowerCost Monitor can be attached to 90 per cent of electricity meters, where it will measure energy consumption and wirelessly transmit the data to a handheld device that displays the info in real-time.

"We provide the information to the consumer, and then its up to the consumer to use that info to save energy," says Peter Porteous, the company's chief executive.

Because residents using the technology know how much energy they're using at any point in time they can see how much more or less electricity they use when they turn something on or off.

Studies at more than a dozen utilities across North America show residents that have instantaneous information about their energy consumption save between six and 18 per cent on their electricity bills.

"Spending \$120 to save \$200 to \$300 every year is a pretty logical decision for a customer," says Porteous.

The savings come from experimenting with electricity use in the home - turning off lights, turning down the heat or using the oven less for example - and learning from that. So to make the process easier Blue Line has incorporated two functions on the remote-like display that comes with the monitoring system.

"You walk to the appliance, you hit the appliance button, which just zeros it out," he says describing the function that saves users from having to remember energy use levels before experimenting and then having to do the math.

"It's going to report how much did energy use go up or down."

Once a user has been making an effort to use less energy for a few days, they can take advantage of an estimating feature.

"What it works off of is your recent behaviour. It needs a couple of days of data. Then you press a button that will say based on your recent consumption your estimate for the next 30 days is X," he says.

The company launched in 2003 and had the first PowerCost Monitors ready the next year. Since then more than 100,000 units have been sold, including some made by Black&Decker, under special license, which had a shorter wireless communication range.

But Blue Line's focus has been on working with utilities to prove the patented technology helps people save money.

"We're confident because we're validated both on the product side and the consumer acceptance side," says Porteous, who works from his house in Woodstock.

He came to New Brunswick 16 years ago to work for Barrett Corp., before taking this job about a year ago. The company's lead investor, who Porteous says would prefer to be anonymous, is also a New Brunswicker.

Porteous believes there is a huge market for the product because of rising energy costs coupled with the green shift. The company is looking to find retailers to sell the product across North America, but instead of having the device available in every electronics store in any given city Blue Line is taking a more targeted approach.

"We want strong regional partners to help spread the word," Porteous says.

The company is currently running a pilot at two Kent Homes locations in the Halifax area.

Porteous sees the PowerCost Monitor as better than other similar devices, which track consumption for a single electronic device such as a fridge or stove, because Blue Line's product looks at the entire home.

He says there are two other ways of accessing residential consumption information for the entire home but both are more difficult and costly.

Another technology involves attaching clamps to the breaker panel in a home, which requires an electrician to install.

The other method is to get the information from the utilities, which technology giants Google Inc. (NASDAQ:GOOG) and Microsoft Corp. (NASDAQ:MSFT) have begun doing, but with so many different utilities across the continent using different systems, that can also be difficult he says.

But Porteous says his company has the potential to integrate with a company like Google, which currently provides free web-based applications to help people reduce their carbon footprint, and Blue Line is currently exploring that business path.