

LES L. SHU

EDITORIAL SAMPLES

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Energy Monitors: Seeing is Believing — and Saving

Published: February 17, 2011 | By: Les Shu | Be the first to comment

Tagged in: **Green Living** **Saving Energy** **Home Electronics**

Energy monitors make managing your power consumption enjoyable and easy to do.



The Energy Detective, or TED for short, monitors your energy usage. Image: The Energy Detective/www.TheEnergyDetective.com

We're taught from an early age to turn off the lights when we're not in the room, but conserving energy today is really complex —thanks to our wired-up homes and our always-on electronic gadgets and appliances.

Thankfully, energy monitors take the guesswork out of watching heating and cooling costs. Sure, it's yet another gadget, but energy monitors are strangely fascinating. They provide exact details of how much juice your house is consuming, and they actually make managing energy

consumption enjoyable.

The Prius Effect in your living room

Researchers have shown that the well-known hybrid car **saves energy** for two reasons: It efficiently uses both gasoline and electric power, and it also provides a display screen that lets drivers track their real-time MPG efficiency.

Various **environmental reports** have suggested that home-based energy monitors have the same effect—keeping an eye on the display screens encourages savings of up to 10% of a home's heating and cooling costs.

Do-it-yourself monitoring

Energy usage monitors are readily available and affordable. A system like TED—The Energy Detective (\$120 to \$455)—has a measuring unit connected to your home's circuit breaker panel. Data, such as energy consumed in watts and dollars, is sent to another unit called the Gateway, which delivers energy usage info to your computer or wireless dashboard. TED stores up to 10 years of data.

Similar systems are available from Blue Line (\$100) and the upcoming EnergyHub.

Smarter meters

Utility companies are starting to replace analog electricity meters with **digital smart meters** that offer two-way communication, allowing utilities to regulate energy distribution more effectively. Smart meters transmit info via a secure radio frequency network so that utility workers don't have to brave growling dogs and muddy side yards to read your meter.

If your home is one of the early adopters, you can track your hourly energy usage through your utility's web-based application. That way, you can discover when in the day is electricity the cheapest, and schedule laundry and other power-hungry tasks for that time. In addition, your utility can send you a detailed electricity bill instead of an estimate of charges.

Smart meters also can transmit data to indoor display units that work like off-the-shelf energy usage monitors. A smart meter also can include details on gas usage.

Note that smart meters require professional installation by your utility, so call to find out if your home is on their roadmap.

Google your savings

If you want more use out of the real-time data, Google's free PowerMeter is an advanced web-based graphical application that works with your home's smart meter or energy monitor to track usage over time, set energy savings goals, and predict your energy bill based on usage.

The software can help you tailor your usage to bring down costs. It's available through devices such as TED and utility companies such as San Diego Gas & Electric.

Affordable portables

If outfitting your entire home for energy monitoring isn't feasible, you can still track the energy use of household items with the small, portable **Belkin Conserve Insight** (\$30). It can tell you an appliance's usage in dollars, carbon dioxide emitted, and watts consumed, and it offers monthly and yearly estimated costs.

Similar devices from Kill A Watt EZ include an energy usage monitor power strip, and range from \$16 to \$60.

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Home Improvement Apps for iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry: Your Digital Toolbox

Published: February 17, 2011 | By: Les Shu | Be the first to comment

Tagged in: **Maintenance & Repair** **Home Improvement Apps**

Downloadable iPhone and Android apps offer ways to maintain, improve, and save money on your home.



Smartphones like Apple's iPhone and those based on Google's Android do more than make calls, thanks to hundreds of thousands of downloadable mini-software items called apps. There are many home improvement apps designed to help you save money or take care of projects. Here are some of the best:



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Match that paint color

If you see a color at a friend's house that would look great in your home, use Benjamin Moore's Ben Color Capture or Sherwin-Williams' ColorSnap, free mobile apps for iPhone, to conjure up a matching paint color and code in a jiffy. Take a photo with your phone, and the app matches the paint as closely as possible, and will display secondary and complementary colors. (ColorSnap is also available for BlackBerry.)

Get rid of stains

Good Housekeeping magazine has placed all their best stain-removal and cleaning advice into their free @Home app. It also includes decorating ideas and a searchable list of the 5,000-plus products that have earned a Good Housekeeping seal.

Look for recycled stuff

If you're searching for a cheap replacement part, or looking for a deal on slightly-used appliances and materials, eBay's free Mobile app lets you search the auction site's entire marketplace from iPhone, Android, Windows Phone 7, and BlackBerry devices. You can also put any of your disused-but-functional household items up for sale and recoup some cash.

For listings close to home, search the popular Craigslist site through the free Craigsnotifica for Android or Craigspro for iPhone.

Price comparison

Finding lower prices on electronics and appliances used to mean driving from store to store or scanning Sunday circulars. With the free **Price Check** by Amazon, you can scan a product's barcode at a store and compare the price against Amazon and other merchants. (Android and BlackBerry versions are also available.) **PriceGrabber** has a similar app for iPhone and Android.

Carpenter's tools in one

For \$1.99, the **iHandy Carpenter** app puts a ruler, protractor, bubble level, surface level, and plumb bob into your iPhone, allowing you to make measurements without lugging out the tool box. It's perfect for simple jobs like hanging frames and mirrors.

Need just a level? There's a free app for iPhone from **iHandy** and for Android from **Johnson**.

Calculate materials you'll need

Before you approach a home improvement project, use the \$1.99 **Handy Man DIY** to record dimensions of flooring, windows, walls, and more. It calculates how much material you'll need and gives you a cost estimate.

Order supplies

If you're in the middle of a home improvement job and need supplies, use the \$4.99 **Work Shop** app to order them from your iPhone. It's also a great tool for keep track of expenses or plan your budget for a future project.

Light the way

With the iPhone's bright display and the super-bright LED flash, you can use it in place of a traditional flashlight to illuminate crawl spaces, attics, cabinet recesses, and other dark spots. There are many apps for this purpose, but two favorites are the 99-cent **Flashlight** (and 99-cent **Flashlight+**).

Know what and when to plant

Wonder why certain vegetation isn't growing in your yard? **Landscaper's Companion** provides a reference guide to more than 2,000 plants. You can search for a plant based on your garden's sun exposure and garden zone, helping to ensure you won't get any dead leaves after planting. The app costs \$9.99.

Find a stud

Using your iPhone's magnetometer, **StudFinderPRO** can help you locate studs by locating the magnetic fields emitted by metal objects like screws and nails. The app costs \$2.99. A free **Magnetic Stud Finder** is available for Android devices.

Hire a virtual designer

Need decorating ideas for inspiration? Check out **Home Interior Layout Designer—Mark On Call** for \$2.99. Created by an interior designer, the app can help you plan a space and determine if furnishings will fit. Also consider the \$4.99 **Living Room** app for iPad and the 99-cent **Dream Home** app for iPhone.



Motion Sensor Lighting: Safety and Security Indoors and Out

Published: February 17, 2011 | By: Les Shu | Be the first to comment

Tagged in: **Home Improvement** **Lighting** **Home Electronics** **Outdoor Lighting**

Adding motion sensor lighting in and around your house provides an automated, hands-free way to turn on lights when you need them, and off when you don't.



Motion sensor lights, which can be installed indoors or out, add safety and security to a home. Image: OSRAM SYLVANIA

Motion sensor lights are eager helpers and good little guardians. They illuminate the way to your front door when you pull into your driveway, light hallways when you get up in the middle of the night, and turn on lamps when you enter a room.

They also provide **safety and home security**, powering up exterior floodlights should someone attempt to trespass when it's dark outside.

In addition, they watch over your budget, dutifully turning themselves off after you've entered your home or left a room—saving you money on energy bills. Light-sensing diodes prevent them from switching on during daylight hours.

Plug-and-play lighting solutions

Many motion sensor lights don't require elaborate setups or wiring; they simply plug into any wall outlet. Battery-operated types can be mounted onto your walls using adhesives, magnets, or screws.

Sylvania's LED Motion Sensor Light runs off batteries, is easy to install in any room, and is especially handy for small spaces, such as closets. Cost: \$13.

Put a sensor on anything

Have a lamp in your living room you want to turn on automatically when you walk in? The SensorPlug Motion Sensor Outlet Plug from Adev plugs into any standard wall outlet. In addition to lamps, you can use it with equipment that doesn't exceed 500 watts, such as fans and radios.

The SensorPlug Motion Sensor Outlet Plug costs between \$10 and \$20.

Sun power

If your home gets ample sunlight during the day, install a solar-powered light and avoid the need to do any wiring. Designed for the outdoors, the **Solar Security with Motion Detector** from Concept helps you save money by not tapping into your home's electricity.

It uses 32 long-lasting LED lamps, providing bright illumination for places like your driveway and front door. Since only sunlight is needed to recharge the battery, you can attach it anywhere on your property, such as the far end of your yard.

The Concept Solar Security with Motion Detector is available through Amazon at \$49. The **Solar-Powered 80 LED Security Floodlight**, an even brighter light with 80 LED lamps, costs \$105 from Smart Home Systems.

Overhead detection

You can easily add a motion sensor to an existing overhead light fixture by adding adaptive devices, such as the **Motion Sensing Light Socket** from First Alert.

Simply screw the motion-sensing light socket into an existing wall or ceiling fixture and add a 25- to 100-watt light bulb. Some motion-detection light sockets won't support energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs, but for rooms that are infrequently used, such as an unfinished basement, it's a quick solution. The First Alert Motion Sensing Light Socket sells for \$25.

Home automation sensors

Home automation systems, such as those based on X10 and Z-Wave technology, are great for controlling your thermostat and home entertainment center, but they also are useful for home security purposes. Linked to motion sensor lights, your home automation system can send a signal to have lights turned on when triggered by a timer or by your smartphone.

The **HomeSeer HSM100 sensor** is available for Z-Wave systems for \$74, and the **Eagle Eye Indoor/Outdoor Motion Sensor** costs between \$18 and \$30.

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No Sweat: Programmable Thermostats Reduce Your Energy Costs

Published: February 17, 2011 | By: Les Shu | 1 Comment

Tagged in: [Maintenance & Repair](#) [Preventative Home Maintenance](#) [Heating & Cooling](#) [Home Electronics](#)

Advanced programmable thermostats give you precise control over your heating and cooling, helping to reduce wasted energy.



It's no secret that heating and cooling account for the bulk of a home's energy usage — an average of over \$1,000 annually. Switching from a manual to a programmable thermostat is one simple way to save as much as \$180 a year.

The most basic programmable thermostat can be self-installed in an hour, and comes with preset temperature settings for different times of the day.

Some of the latest models offer greater control, easy programming, sophisticated displays, and even communication with



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you via the Internet. Here is a look at some of these smart units.

High-def, high-tech settings

You wouldn't think of spending much time in front of your thermostat, but the newest advanced models—with their colorful touchscreen displays—are an engaging, interactive experience. They offer separate programs for each day of the week, and can even alert you if service is required.

With its high-definition screen display, Honeywell's Prestige Comfort System resembles a mini-computer more than a traditional thermostat.

In addition to indoor temperature, the Prestige's graphical user interface can display outdoor conditions and humidity with an add-on sensor. An onscreen wizard interviews you about your usage based on simple questions, and then sets a program accordingly. A portable controller lets you adjust settings from any room in the house.

The Prestige is priced from \$250 and up.

If you can live without a fancy display, an advanced programmable thermostat from HAI

costs around \$300 to \$400, while a simpler seven-day programmable model from Hunter costs \$99.

Control from afar

What if you're on your way to a long vacation, and you suddenly realized you'd forgotten to turn down your home's thermostat?

If your home is equipped with the Smart Thermostat from ecobee, you can tap into the system through a personalized web portal anywhere there's Internet access. Log in to check on your HVAC's performance and make adjustments on the fly. The unit sells for \$469.

Manage your home's HVAC via a home automation app from Control 4. The sophisticated system allows you to change thermostat settings from your smartphone, pad, and PC. In addition, you can control the lighting, music, window treatment motors, and a wide range of Control 4 devices.

Know the price before you turn it on

Pilot programs for installing smart thermostats that display "time of use" pricing information are underway in regions like Florida and California. These thermostats receive a wireless signal from the utility company, and adjust the temperature according to the price of electricity during different times of the day.

With costs for air conditioning at about 70 cents to \$1.20 per hour, reducing AC usage only an hour per day would yield a savings of \$65 to \$110 over the course of a summer.

Check with your utility company to find out if such a program is available in your area.

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Home Security Cameras: Peace of Mind While You're Away

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Tagged in: **Protect Your Home** **Home Security** **Home Electronics**

Easy-to-install security cameras let you keep an eye on your home from afar, ensuring safety and security for you and your family.



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Camera surveillance was once available to business owners and the ultra-rich, and required professional installation. Thanks to Internet-based **web cameras**, adding home security cameras is an affordable weekend project.

Security cameras offer peace of mind. They let you log in remotely and view what's happening at home, like keeping tabs on an elderly relative, the babysitter, and your pets. They also let you monitor your home while you're away on vacation. These cameras can help deter break-ins, and you may get a discount on home

owners insurance, depending on the system you've installed.

Network cameras

Internet-based network cameras are a quick solution in setting up home surveillance. They connect to your broadband connection and don't require difficult wiring or mounting.

Logitech's Alert lets you view either real-time or recorded footage—with audio—of the inside and outside of your house through your iPhone, Android, or BlackBerry smartphone, and the system is expandable by adding additional cameras. You'll get text or email notifications on your phone or computer if the camera's motion sensor is triggered.

Panasonic's BL-C131A goes one step further by giving you remote pan and tilt control from your smartphone or computer, allowing you to view in eight different positions.

The Alert 750i Master System starts at \$299.99. (A similar device from D-Link costs \$119.99.) The Panasonic BL-C131A costs around \$300.

Riding the Z-Wave

If you have a **Z-Wave-based** home automation system installed, you can add wireless cameras to create a security network inside and outside of your house.

ADT's **Pulse** is a complete home alarm system that uses Z-Wave cameras for home monitoring from your iPhone, BlackBerry, or Android. ADT Pulse service plans start at \$48 a month, not including installation and cameras.

Schlage's **LiNK** offers its Z-Wave Wireless Camera as an option to its electronic locks. Like ADT's Pulse, you can also perform additional home management functions with compatible Z-Wave products like thermostats. Schlage LiNK starter kits cost around \$300, and the Wireless Camera costs around \$150.

Similar wireless security cameras are available for X10 home automation systems.

DIY camera

You can turn a basic computer webcam into a surveillance system using free downloadable software from Yawcam and EyeSpyFX. You're required to have your computer remain on, but once set up you can log in remotely from another computer—say, at work—and view streaming video of your home. Just position the camera at what you want to monitor.

Yawcam offers motion detection and can send a snapshot to your email when triggered, while EyeSpyFX lets you view footage from dedicated iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry apps.

An affordable webcam like Microsoft's LifeCam VX-2000 costs about \$30 or less.

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