

SMART BUSINESS

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The power within

How to reduce your energy costs by 20 to 30 percent with a minimal investment

By Jessica Tremayne

The days are long past that energy was so cheap you could afford to waste it. Now, financial and environmental concerns have made saving energy a priority for every business. When done right, you can expect to achieve a savings of 20 to 30 percent off your current monthly utility bill, with minimal investment.

Getting started on saving can be as simple as making employees aware that energy efficiency is a priority for your company. Employees who regularly turn off lights and computers at home don't bring that same mindset to work. By recruiting employees to help manage your company's energy usage, you can start to save money.

"When considering energy efficiency, the savings don't stop within altering actions within a facility," says Brian Falony, director of marketing, Habif, Arogeti and Wynne LLP, a 350-employee accounting firm. "By allowing employees to work from home part time, you'll save on operational costs, and they'll be happy to save their fuel."

Why managing energy use is important

Energy efficiency is a prime example of what you don't know can hurt you. Few people are aware that energy-efficient business desktop computers are available that cost about \$10 a year to operate and are about 75 percent more efficient than typical PCs. Installing certain models of smart thermostats allows you to program them wirelessly through the Internet, allowing for temperature adjustments without physically being at the facility. Also, new smart electric meters translate energy wattage use into dollars and allow you to track energy use online.

Applying new technology can help, but don't overlook the traditional things.

"It is best to concentrate on basics first, such as high-efficiency lighting upgrades, HVAC improvements and building controls, then progress toward alternative energy, such as solar and bio-fuels," says Richard Crowther, energy efficiency manager, The Coca-Cola Co. "Considering energy costs have increased substantially over the last five years, it's easy to build a positive business case for energy efficiency, but a focused, long-term strategy is key."

ENERGY STAR, an Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Energy program, along with your utility provider and local city hall can help you reduce energy waste by providing regional energy-efficiency tips, financial incentives and energy audits of facilities.

"Energy rebates are available in Georgia as well as additional incentives from the federal government and utility companies," Crowther says. "This provides a catalyst for action, especially when new technology is involved. I would encourage all businesses to learn of what incentives exist and take full advantage of them."

ENERGY STAR endorses more than 50 types of products, which are identifiable by a label that indicates the amount of energy it will require during average use and will tell you the savings you can expect by choosing that product over products that aren't approved by the ENERGY STAR program. Purchasing the proper equipment and carrying out good habits will reduce your energy expenses exponentially. For example, you will use 30 to 35 percent less energy using an ENERGY STAR battery charger or power adapter over conventional products.

"Businesses are largely unaware of all options to save energy," says Fred Fox, president, Fox

Independent Energy LLC. "There are circumstances in which investing in alternative energy sources can be profitable in the short-term. By calling local solar and other renewable energy dealers, you can make an informed decision for your business that spans beyond today."

By changing purchasing habits and being more cautious of efficient equipment operation, you'll immediately reduce your energy bill. By purchasing ENERGY STAR-qualified products, you'll use about half the amount of electricity that would be used without the efficient product. For example, when a computer is placed in sleep mode, it uses 75 percent less energy and a copier uses 40 percent less energy.

Most businesses use 25 percent of their energy on lighting. Compact fluorescent bulbs last longer than traditional bulbs and use 75 percent less energy. Even if it means renovating your entire lighting system, you'll see a return on your investment in anywhere from five months to three years.

What you need to know

Performing an energy audit of your business is the first step. This is often performed for free or at a minimal cost through your utility provider. In this audit, you'll learn what areas of your business are using the most energy. You'll then be able to work on a strategy to reduce waste.

By visiting the ENERGY STAR Web site at www.energystar.gov, you can compare your company's energy use to similarly sized companies within your industry and region.

After your energy audit, you'll need to strategize a plan of action and goals, and then formally deliver the message to employees.

"Set goals based on local rates acquired through your utility provider," Falony says. "Rewarding employees when individual goals are accomplished is important, because it provides an incentive for them to be cautious of energy use."

Assigning an employee to manage energy initiatives and communicate them to the staff will help keep everyone involved and informed about the process. You may want to take things a step further and provide training to employees that can explain operating methods and procedures to reduce energy use, along with ways to monitor and report collected data. ENERGY STAR provides free online training sessions for employees and is a good place to start.

"Employee training is probably easiest through a third source," Fox says. "By contacting ENERGY STAR, you can get free statistics detailing operating costs of companies similar to yours and also downloadable information that takes you through energy-efficiency changes step by step."

When establishing a project timeline, consider attainable energy grants, rebates and tax breaks weighed against necessary operational changes to accomplish goals. Once you know what you need to change to be more efficient and what finances you have available, you'll be able to better chart progress and predict the time frame for the return on your investment.

"While new technologies represent great potential, most of them will not yet support themselves without incentives," Crowther says. "Make sure you are making financially intelligent as well as environmentally smart choices."

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Local Energy Management Companies

By

Ambit Energy

1801 N. Lamar St., Suite 200

Dallas, TX 75202

(877) 282-6248

Helps reduce monthly bills, Energy provider

CenterPoint Energy

14785 Preston Road

Dallas, TX 75254

(972) 789-5560, www.centerpointenergy.com

Provides natural gas and electricity, Provides energy-saving tips

Endigo Energy LLC

100 North Central Expressway, Suite 502

Dallas, TX 75201

(214) 655-6320, www.endigoenergy.com

Provides energy consulting, Assists with energy budgeting

Energy Future Holdings

Energy Plaza, 1601 Bryan St.

Dallas, TX 75201

(214) 812-4600, www.energyfutureholdings.com

Committed to innovative environmental actions, Privately held company, energy retailer

GSE Consulting LP

Two Lincoln Centre, 5420 LBJ Freeway, Suite 1355

Dallas, TX 75240

(469) 533-7400, www.gseconsultinglp.com

Natural energy procurement and management firm, Helps companies reduce energy costs

Luminant

Lincoln Plaza, 500 N. Akard

Dallas, TX 75201

(214) 812-4600, www.luminant.com

Invests time and money in local initiatives, Provides clean energy

SMI TXU Energy

9330 LBJ Freeway, Suite 1185

Dallas, TX 75243

(214) 575-4100

Offers energy-saving tips, Long-term local business relationships

Tara Energy Inc.

4925 Greenville Ave., Suite 200

Dallas, TX 75206

(214) 520-8272, www.taraenergy.com

In business since 2002, Provides competitive electricity products

Thermal Energy Co.

3517 Lexington Ave.

Dallas, TX 75205

(214) 521-7600

Alternative energy, Cost-effective

TXU Energy

300 S. St. Paul St.

Dallas, TX 75201

(877) 460-7066, www.txuenergy.com

Provides services and products for business needs, Offers regulated energy billing

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