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The Smart Home - An Easy and Affordable Way to Lower Your Expenses!

By: Patrick Breen

Our home is many things - our shelter, a mental refuge, the family hub and is often the most valuable possession many of us will ever own. It is for all of these reasons, and more, that we need to protect and nurture our home as best we can.

The decision on how best to accomplish this goal often comes down to economics. What can we afford? Not just what the purchase price will be, but what does it require to maintain. One area often given little consideration, but is gaining momentum, is our energy consumption.

As Washington moves forward with promoting our Nations smart grid technology, and power companies roll out residential smart meters daily; we as home owners have the opportunity to become smart as well. To accomplish this we need more information. This data, or information, can now be available to us via our own personal energy dashboard.

On the simpler side: think of this dashboard as being similar to an in-house weather station. Instead of giving us digital readouts for inside/outside temperatures, barometric pressure, humidity and the time - we have continuously monitored energy consumption. With the more elaborate devices we can go further by influencing our energy usage. This can either be done while at home, or remotely from any on-line connection.

There are a handful of companies in the US, Canada and the UK that provide the hardware and software necessary to interact with your home electrical system. Even Google has teamed up with device makers to provide PowerMeter as it's on-line energy information tool. Devices can either read the Zigbee protocol coming from the smart meter that is attached to your house, or you can purchase one that attaches directly to your electrical panel. Your usage information is then displayed digitally on the devices screen as well as uploaded to a web site.

The purpose of developing our nations smart grid, and power companies installing smart meters, and for you as the home owner developing a smart home - is economics. How much electricity are you using and just how much is it costing you. The individual can then benefit by lowering home maintenance costs.

A conscientious consumer can make individual decisions about appliances, gadgets, computers, entertainment system and just how much each one is costing them to operate; often lowering your usage by as much as 20%. With the addition of smart controls on your heating, cooling and other home devices you can program each system for maximizing off peak hour usage, how hot or cold you want it at any time, or how long to run any system.

It was once thought that a smart home was something reserved for the Bill Gates of the world. Today that is no longer true. Devices range in price from \$119 to \$450 depending on the level of control you desire. With the passage of the 2004 Energy Bill a tax credit is also available. For more information on energy dashboards and suppliers log onto www.gigaom.com.