Something to Think About

Shut Off the Vampires

Story by MC1 Joe Garza

In the age of tweeting, texting and terabytes, staying “plugged in” has taken on a different meaning. Accessing social networks and staying up to date on information can be done quickly and conveniently with tiny, pocket-sized cell phones and computers.

That palm-sized cell phone with built in camera, keyboard and kitchen sink is costing you more than just angry glances from your fellow movie theater patrons, boss or spouse when your fingers blaze over the keyboard during a poorly-timed text. The case in question come not when the device is in use, but when it sits idly charging while connected to a wall socket.

Commonly referred to as vampire power, phantom load or idle current, the energy used by charging or simple plugging in cell phone, desktop computers, microwave ovens and your favorite electric toothbrush takes a tool on your pocketbook. They are continuously consuming energy even when operating in the off mode. The cost of idle current can be significant for the average consumer. Consider the impact this massive drain on energy has on the United States. While a Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkley, Calif., energy analyst Alan Metter estimated that residential consumers in the United States spend more than $5 billion annually on standby power. Products that commonly consume standby power because they contain a battery charger or have a soft-touch key-pad include; remote controls, external power supplies, digital displays, light-emitting diode status light or digital clocks.

It’s hard to believe that items in standby mode consume so much energy until you consider that power strips and wall sockets energize not just the television and personal computers but all of their peripherals. The computer will be accompanied by a monitor and printer, and the TV by a digital video recorder and Blu-Ray player.

But lets’ not forget that standby mode is often a necessity and contributes to may conveniences that we enjoy in modern, everyday life. A simple yet often impartial approach to save money on vampire power is to unplug the devices from the wall socket. While the removal of the cord from the wall may work for the third television set in the guest room, this power-saving tactic will not work for the refrigerator or VCR that will remind you when a flashing 1200 that is in midnight or noon no matter what time of day it is.

Energy analysts recommend consumers cluster their products together with a smart power strip that detects when a main appliance is turned off and cuts off power to peripherals. The smart strip separates itself from regular power supplying strips with this detection capability.

When you shut off you computer for the evening the smart power strip will cut the power to the printer, speakers and other gadgets attached to your computer. There will be no more vampire power to keep the dials spinning on the energy meter outside of your house.

A smart energy consumer should also know that the difference between standby and sleep mode. Standby power, which is the lowest amount of power a device can use without shutting off, requires the user to switch the device or appliance into standby mode and then manually switch it back on. Sleep mode, which uses more power than standby power, will switch a device into a lower power "sleep" mode after a specific period of non-use. Most computers can be placed in sleep mode and switched back to full power with a tap of the space bar on the keyboard. In order to get a better understanding of how much power an item used in standby mode, consumers can purchase a handheld watt meter to measure the electricity usage on each appliance. Now that you know that power vampires aren't lacking energy in their blood with the many appliances that don't actually turn "off" when they indicated they have, keep these energy drainers in line and your energy bill down.

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