

# Keeping an eye on energy use cuts costs

Dear Mr. Energy,

Last year I had an energy audit, just like you always suggest, and I made several of the improvements my auditor suggested. I'm not seeing the results that I thought I'd see. What gives? Why am I not saving more money on my energy bills?  
— *Disgruntled in Durham*

## ASK Mr. Energy

Dear Disgruntled,

First, let me express my sincere apologies that you are not seeing better results from the weatherization you've done on your home. In our experience, an energy audit and follow-up weatherization generally can save a homeowner 20-30 percent on his or her energy bills, depending on what's been done. It's distressing that you're not seeing the results you want.

That said, there are a number of reasons why you might not be seeing that 20-30 percent drop. First, check to be sure you're comparing apples to apples. Are you looking at the same month's worth of bills from previous years? Was the weather comparable in that month? In central North Carolina we have variable weather;



Don't forget  
to turn off  
and unplug!

this past December was a much colder month than December of the previous year. Along those lines, have energy prices gone up this past billing cycle? In Mr. Energy's house, propane went up by a good 40 cents per gallon. This made our bill go up while our energy use hadn't.

If you've adjusted your expectations because of increasing costs or because of weather changes, another possibility could be the "Snackwell effect." Remember when fat free cookies first hit the market? People went crazy and ate as many cookies as they wanted, thinking that since they were fat free they wouldn't make them gain weight. Then – blammo – people gained weight because although the cookies were free of fat, they sure weren't free of calories or sugar. This scenario can be applied to energy-efficiency, too. If you've made energy efficiency upgrades you may have gotten more lax with your energy habits, as well. In Mr. Energy's house we upped our thermostat by a degree this winter, for example ... and we are paying for it. Perhaps you've decided to take advantage of your snuggler house and made your surroundings more comfortable. Just because your home is tighter doesn't mean that you can use more energy and not pay for it.

Along these same lines, you may have purchased a new or bigger appliance that is sucking up more energy than your old one. A large flat-screen uses more energy than older, smaller TVs. And if you didn't replace your smaller TV, but simply moved it to another room to make room for the new, big TV, you've doubled your

TVs – doubling your energy use. Energy Star appliances are more energy efficient than non-Energy Star appliances, but more of anything = more money spent on energy.

Another lifestyle possibility is that in your effort to save money you may be staying home more than in years past. Staying at home more means that heating and cooling systems are on more, your television is on more, you are cooking more, and you are using all other appliances more. This can add up.

And finally, look at the report your auditor gave you. Did you do everything on it – particularly the items on the list related to your duct work, attic, and crawl space? Have you kept up with yearly HVAC tune-ups? If you had major energy upgrades done, like new ductwork or insulation, did you ask the auditor to

come back to do a post-test of your house? It may be worth asking your auditor back to ensure that the installers did a good job.

Dear Mr. Energy,

All my kids want to do is play video games, watch TV, or use the computer. Everything they enjoy has to be plugged in! I'm convinced that what they see as "free" entertainment is actually costing me money every time they turn it on. How can I make them care about saving energy?  
— *Frustrated Mama in Mebane*

Dear Frustrated Mama,

Mr. Energy feels your pain. He feels as if he spends most of his weekend walking around the house turning off lights that his children have left on. Now, Mr. Energy is not qualified to give you parenting advice, but he can tell you the single best way to save energy when plugging into electronic entertainment: turn off the console, TV, or computer when play is over. Better yet, plug the console and TV into a power strip so the whole unit can be turned off when not in use. Unplugging, or simply turning off, this equipment when not in use can cut energy consumption by up to 90 percent. That'll add up!

Mr. Energy is the combined effort of Adrienne and Mark Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC, an energy auditing, energy rating, and home weatherization contracting company. They can be reached on the web: [www.homeperformancenc.com](http://www.homeperformancenc.com) and by phone: 919.360.1570.

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