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Online tool rewards ComEd customers who save energy

Site uses personalized profile to track results, doles out discounts in return

By Julie Wernau, Tribune reporter

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Ten 100-watt incandescent light bulbs, burning four hours a day, replaced by ten of their fluorescent equivalents, burning four hours a day: How much can you save over a year?

No need to do the math. An online tool introduced Wednesday by the Citizens Utility Board does it for you; the answer is \$241. CUB Energy Saver automatically links to your Commonwealth Edison bill to track savings, rewards your energy savvy with points redeemable for gift certificates and lets you compete against your neighborhood and friends.

The free program, available at cubenergysaver.com to ComEd customers, is the first online program in the nation to reward consumers for reducing their energy usage and combines elements of similar programs that are being tested but have yet to be introduced on a large scale by ComEd and other utilities. According to CUB, customers in its 3,000-person pilot program saved \$200 annually and earned points toward gift certificates averaging \$130 per year.

Utilities have been experimenting with everything from iPhone-like apps to neighborhood competitions to help consumers get a better handle on their electricity consumption. But getting people to pay attention to the information has been a challenge.

"It's great to tell someone to wash in cold water. But by giving them a reward for doing that, you encourage them to continue that behavior over the long term," said Matt Tucker, president of RecycleBank, a New York-based rewards program that teamed with CUB on the project along with Efficiency 2.0, an energy-efficiency program administrator to the utility industry also based in New York.

To sign up, customers enter their address and ComEd account information. The program personalizes each person's account using data such as property records, energy-usage history, census data, weather analysis and neighborhood information. The result, says Adam Sandler, vice president of online marketing at Efficiency 2.0, is a personalized profile that provides an educated guess on where the most energy is being used and offers savings tips. Customers can also enter information to further customize the tool.

"This isn't your typical program with generic advice," said David Kolata, executive director of CUB. "... Obviously, the more you put in, the more accurate it becomes."

For now, the point-earning component of the program is available only to the first 10,000 people who sign up. Points are redeemable for gift certificates that can be used at local businesses and national retailers. For instance, 50 points get a customer \$5 off a purchase of \$25 or more at Leona's Restaurants. In another, 100 points can be redeemed for one child admission to the Museum of Science and Industry. Customers earn two points per kilowatt-hour saved and are given 100 points on sign-up.

Customers can also choose not to share their information with their neighbors, in which case, said Sandler, their data will be aggregated anonymously so it is still possible to compare the energy savings of Uptown, for instance, to that of Logan Square.

Privacy settings can be adjusted to allow neighbors to pinpoint a home and its energy profile on a map of the neighborhood.

CUB's project comes as utilities have been under political pressure to curb energy use.

The state's utilities are forecasting renewed demand for electricity this summer as the economy improves. ComEd is predicting its peak summer load will be the highest since 2006.

The company rolled out a smart meter program this week that provides more than 100,000 households and businesses with information on their energy usage over the Internet. The customers have had meters installed in their homes to provide up-to-the-minute data.

CUB's program estimates energy savings and reports back with real data monthly — an expansion of a concept introduced in a recent ComEd pilot conducted on 50,000 customers in which they were compared to their neighbors and e-mailed results monthly, along with tips. ComEd reported that the program spurred a 2 percent reduction in energy usage.

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Program details

How do I join?

Go to cubenergysaver.com, click "get started" and enter your contact information and ComEd account information.

What information does CUB Energy Saver track and share?

If you link to your ComEd account, the tool tracks your monthly electricity usage and does not share that information. Privacy settings can be adjusted to allow people to see certain information about you,

including actions taken to reduce energy costs, estimated annual savings, your home's location on a map and basic personal information.

How does a business become a rewards partner?

Contact RecycleBank at rewards@recyclebank.com or 888-727-2978. Participation is free.

Source: CUB Energy Saver

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