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Audits that can save you money

By Sheila McNulty in Houston

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In the heat of the Houston summer, after hearing my husband complain yet again about our monthly bills averaging \$350 for electricity and \$75 for natural gas, I decided to do a home energy audit.

Audits in the US have become popular in recent months with energy companies, particularly those offering renewable services, because they often generate the sale of a solar attic fan, solar roof panels or other energy-efficient products. And the timing is ripe for customers looking to cut costs in a recession. Energy audits provide ways for residents and businesses to make investments now for lower energy bills in the future.

Standard Renewable Energy was offering a summer special for \$42. Bernardo Lopez, an SRE energy auditor, came out to my 1950s-era home and scribbled furiously, noting the single-pane windows, the naked water heater and the central air conditioning system that was supplemented by a window air-conditioner on the porch.

Off the top of his head, he recommended caulking the windows to prevent cool air leaking out in summer and warm air leaking out in winter. He suggested putting an insulation jacket on the water heater to keep the water warm for longer. And he said I should turn off the extra cooling unit on the porch and shut the door when not using that space, instead of hoping the additional unit would help cool the house.

A few weeks later, Ancil Ramsawack, an SRE energy efficiency consultant, brought me a 21-page booklet, complete with a glossary of energy efficient terms, outlining the failings of my home.

Jordon Fruge, senior vice-president of business development for SRE, says the number of people having energy audits has surged since the company started offering them in 2007. Last year, SRE performed 1,000 and this year it is scheduled to do 4,000, varying in sophistication from the basic package I bought to one costing \$849, which includes everything from blowing air throughout the house to check for leaking ducts to using infrared cameras to check for hotspots.

In relative terms, however, much of the US market has yet to be tapped. Only a small percentage of people have had them done and, of those who have, only about 50-60 per cent follow through on their suggestions.

David Dollihite, vice-president of product development for Direct Energy, said there was no tool that could show consumers how their electricity bills have crept up. "If your car went from 20 miles per gallon to 10 miles per gallon, you would have it in the shop tomorrow. There is no miles per gallon for your home," he says.

Yet getting a home energy audit is like getting a car inspection; it identifies problems that should be fixed for optimal performance. "Everybody could save 20 per cent on their energy bill if they improved the envelope on their home," says Mr Dollihite.

Yet, he notes, people remain sceptical, partly because many of the companies offering the energy audits have products to sell .

This is where the city of Houston is stepping in, with plans to show its 2m residents typical consumption rates for various types of house. The project, under the direction of the Greater Houston Partnership, a grouping of the city's business leaders, is to be rolled out later this month. It is developing a website so,

once people see how their consumption compares, they can click on to links explaining some basic steps they can take to improve their bills.

“We have to give them suggestions or tools,” says David Francis, chairman of the partnership’s Residential Demand Reduction Task Force.

Which takes me back to my own home energy audit. Changing the rest of the inefficient light bulbs in our house is easy. But replacing the oven, dishwasher, stove, water heater and blowing new insulation into the attic might have to wait in this economy.

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