

July 19, 2009

Theresa Lehman column: Roadblock: What people don't know, they don't know

Turn off the lights. Don't let the faucet run while you're brushing your teeth. Don't stand with the refrigerator door open. Keep the door shut, no need to heat/cool the outdoors.

We've either heard it, or we've said it. Translation, "Save money," right? Absolutely. But is there more? How about: Save energy, reduce carbon emissions and become environmentally responsible? All true, but bottom line, the universal language is money, no pun intended.

People naturally become more frugal, or in other words, make behavioral changes in an effort to save money when the economy is tight. Last summer when the price of gasoline was over \$4 per gallon, people drove less, combined errands into a single trip, carpooled, used alternative means of transportation and purchased fuel-efficient vehicles. But as soon as gas prices dropped, so did the conservative behavior of drivers. Which leaves me to wonder if the economy turns around and people start to purchase vehicles again, will the vehicle of choice still be the one that gets the best gas mileage?

Do you make energy conscious decisions and behavioral choices based on money, or because you have a general understanding of a bigger picture, or perhaps both? In asking several people this question, the majority of people responded similarly saying that at first their decisions are based primarily on money (i.e. operational expenses such as monthly utility and/or gasoline expenses, or initial costs), but are now influenced by several other factors including: self-sufficiency, less reliance on imported finite fossil fuel, reducing environmental impact through carbon emission reduction, and that there is free money available to assist with expenses associated with implementing energy-efficient measures and renewable energy technologies.

What can be done to save money and energy? Generally speaking, it boils down to consumer education — telling people how to do it, and then how to pay for it. So, here's how: Conserve energy through behavioral changes, implement energy-efficient measures and integrate renewable energy technologies. Yes, it is actually that simple. But who's got the money do this?

There are hundreds of low-cost and no-cost energy conservation tips offered free, such as www.energy savers.gov. These tips are often easy to implement, and typically do not require any capital investment, as they are primarily behavioral changes.

If the owner's goal is to yield higher cost savings and/or energy savings, they will need to implement energy efficient measures, which will require a capital investment. In other words, if a return is expected, an investment needs to be made.

Examples include increasing the quality of the building envelop (wall and roof materials, insulation, windows, doors) and installing high-efficiency mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems. However, when there isn't any capital to invest, what does an owner do? Find funding.

There are interest-free loans, grants, tax credits and incentives available to homeowners, businesses, manufacturers and nonprofit organizations from federal, state and local governments, utility companies, charitable foundations, and other agencies such as Focus on Energy and Energy Center of Wisconsin to offset the cost of energy-efficient measures. Additionally, some of these organizations may also offer free consulting and/or design assistance.

Additionally, if decreasing dependency on fossil fuels is of interest, there are many funding opportunities from the same sources for various renewable energy technologies such as wind, photovoltaics, solar, geothermal and bio-fuels, making such technologies affordable, if not a cost savings compared to "traditional" systems, especially if looking at costs from a lifecycle cost

perspective.

Something needs to be done to eliminate the roadblock, "what people don't know, they don't know" through education as well as word of mouth. Next time you're wasting energy talking about No. 4, do something positive and talk about No. 3 — the three ways to save money and energy through conservation, efficiency and renewable technologies.
