



The ULS Report™

Helping people Use Less Stuff™ by conserving resources and reducing waste.

Save Your Energy (Redux)

Way back in October 1994, we wrote, “As most of us are aware, the issue of population control is grabbing headlines all over the world. Most growth estimates call for the world’s population to double sometime toward the middle of the next century. The related concern attracting the most attention centers on whether we will be able to feed all of these people. *Being overlooked is an issue of similar importance: the parallel increase in energy consumption.*”

We hate to say that we told you so. BUT WE TOLD YOU SO! (OK, we’ve got that off our chests. Let’s move on to see what we can do about it.)

When it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and financial expenditures, the place to start is home energy consumption. There are four main categories to look at: your home itself (what’s known as the building envelope), your heating & cooling systems, water heating, and appliance use.

The best way to improve energy efficiency and cut costs is by adding insulation. Doing so can reduce your heating and cooling bills by up to 20%. The place to start is in the attic, and the easiest, most cost effective thing to consider is do it yourself expanding blown-in insulation. If you buy the AttiCat version from Owens Corning at Home Depot, they’ll let you borrow an insulation blower for free. Your annual savings? Upwards of \$500.

Next comes heating and cooling. When improving the efficiency of your systems, Step One is to fix leaks with duct tape, putty and caulk. This is the most cost effective thing you can do, because \$8 worth of duct tape can lower your energy bills by 15%, which will probably save you over \$350 annually.

Step Two is to have a trained service technician give your system a tune up twice a year. Step Three is to replace your furnace or central air system’s HVAC filters on a regular basis. Your best bet for clean air and an energy-efficient system is to change them every 3 months.

Next, let’s look at water heating. Start by turning the temperature down 10 degrees on your hot water heater. You probably won’t feel it in the shower, but you’ll feel it in your wallet, as you can save about \$10 a month this way.

Then, turn down the temperature in your washing machine by switching to cold water cleaning. The average savings for cold versus warm water washing is \$0.25 per load, or \$98.00 per year. Make sure you use a specially designed detergent like Tide Coldwater. Testing indicates that it cleans as well in cold water as regular detergents do in warm water.

Finally, we need to reduce the energy used by idle appliances. Start by putting your computer, printer, and external hard drives on a single power strip. When you turn off the strip, you’ll turn off everything, quickly and easily.

We also like products that automatically turn lights on when needed and off when not. For example, the SensorPlug Motion Sensing Outlet turns the power on when someone walks into the room and turns it off after they’ve left. Try it in the bedroom on night table lamps and in the living room or den on coffee table lamps.

If new construction is your choice, consider building a smart house. Its computers can monitor and adjust heating and cooling loads as well as lighting usage in each room, basing decisions on season, time of day, typical usage and room occupancy.

By saving energy we not only reduced greenhouse gas production, we reduced our annual heating and cooling spending by almost \$1000! Not bad, considering how little work it took!

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Focus on Packaging: Socio-Demography Leads the Way

By Robert Lilienfeld, Editor

For over 15 years, we have been promoting the concept of product to package ratio, whereby the most sustainable packages are usually the ones that deliver the most product for the least amount of packaging. Because larger containers hold more product per ounce of package than their smaller counterparts, we generally recommend buying in bulk, saving both environmental and economic resources.



Photograph © 2009, Robert M. Lilienfeld

Has our strategy been effective? Unfortunately, demographics and sociographics are working against us. In 1915, the average American home included 4.5 people. Today, that number has shrunk dramatically to 2.6 persons per household (Source: U.S. Census Bureau).

To a great extent, this change has been based upon the loss of the extended family. Thanks to increased mobility, wealth and independence, older people are no longer living with their children or grandchildren, but living on their own for the balance of their lives. Each of the resulting households is smaller than the extended household would be, and there are (almost) twice as many of them!

When you add to these demographics the sociological

demand for ever-more-convenient products and processes, a new packaging trend has emerged: smaller sized convenience packs. Thanks to phenomena such as “dashboard dining,” single serve products are now the leading source of growth in many large food and beverage categories.

From a sustainability perspective, this looks like we are moving backwards, as we are now demanding containers that deliver less product per unit of package. In many cases, this is probably the case, especially for products that we want to consume, like cookies, candies, chips and other snacks. (Not surprisingly, research from the Garbage Project at the University of Arizona indicates that these are the least wasted products in our pantry.)

But what about highly perishable items? Here’s where the irony comes in. In a small household of 1-2 people, buying fruits, vegetables, and meats in bulk will probably mean that much of the food will spoil before it gets eaten, and will thus be thrown away. Since the environmental footprint of the food is usually 10-12 times greater than the impact of the package, it actually makes environmental sense to move to a smaller size product or complete packaged meal that guarantees total product usage, *even if the amount of packaging discards increases.*

Obviously, this doesn’t mean that we should give up on buying larger sizes when possible. But it does mean that it’s important to understand how and why a product is being used before determining what the most sustainable packaging option might be. ♻️ ♻️ ♻️

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