

How Much Power Do Your Electronics Use? Ask Watts Up?



KEVIN HUNT
THE ELECTRONIC JUNGLE

OK, power trippers. Here's another weapon in the fight against high electricity bills, a power meter called Watts Up? that asks a question but knows the answer to what's abusing power around the house.

You know the major offenders — the refrigerator, the electric clothes dryer and, in the summer, the dehumidifier — but we're taking on "recreational" electricity here. It's the hi-def televisions, DVD players, audio-video receivers and iPod speaker docks.

Watts Up?, from Electronic Educational Devices of Aurora, Colo., comes in four versions: a basic \$96 model to the \$236 Watts Up?.net, which transfers data over the Internet. The entry-level Watts Up? that I tried works much like another power meter I tested about eight months ago, the \$20 Kill a Watt. Plug the meter into a wall outlet, then plug in the your HDTV or iPod dock to the meter's outlet.

Though both produce similar results, the Watts Up? is better on several counts. For instance, where the Kill a Watt requires the user to do some math to figure out the monthly electricity costs of your equipment, the Watts Up? does the computation. All you do is supply the cost per kilowatt hour — how the electric company measures power — from your latest electric bill.

So I knew immediately that if I left my monster 60-inch plasma on the entire month, it would consume 337 kilowatt hours and, at 18 cents each, cost \$60.60. It also told me that during a single viewing session, the television consumed anywhere from 425 to 633 watts. (That's a gruesome watt count, equal to about two refrigerators.)

This plasma looks great, but it'll never get Energy Star approval. A Toshiba HD-A30 HD DVD player, however, earned

its Energy Star rating by drawing only 0.7 watt in standby. Compare that to the 5 watts sucked up in standby by the Oppo DV-981HD DVD player.

Watts Up? power meter

PRICE: \$96.

HOT: Versatile electricity sleuth.

NOT: Doesn't store information like the other Watts Up? meters.

ALTERNATIVE: Kill a Watt (\$20 p3international.com).

AVAILABLE: www.cableorganizer.com.

INFORMATION: www.wattsupmeters.com.

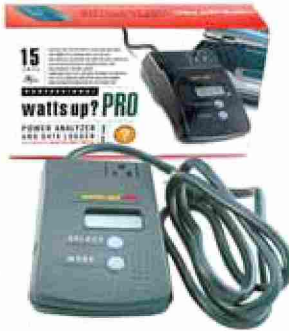
But in full operation, the Oppo (12 watts) would actually cost less per month than the Toshiba (17.75 watts) each month. With that information, I would turn off the Oppo completely (no standby) after each use but leave the Toshiba in standby mode.

The Watts Up? also measures cumulative cost — how much you've spent on power since you started testing the HDTV or DVD player — and can detect when your equipment has exceeded a designated power threshold. If you suspected a refrigerator was using too much electricity, the Watts Up? could tell you how often it uses more than, say, 100 watts. Excessive power consumption could mean a bad motor or low refrigerator.

Best of all, the Watts Up? is easily accessible with its power cord and compact-console design. The plug-in Kill a Watt, though tougher to use, is still the best deal in power meters.

Turbocharge Your TiVo

An HDTV paired with a TiVo Series3 HD DVR, which stores up to 32 hours of hi-def programming, is a knockout combo — at least until the TiVo runs out of storage. But you can hot-rod your TiVo with a 1-terabyte upgrade kit from Weaknees.com. The \$449 kit replaces the



TiVo's existing hard drive with the 1-terabyte version, which stores 144 hours of hi-def programming.

A 2-terabyte kit, which includes separate internal and external 1-terabyte drives, stores up to 292 hours of HD. (Isn't that a single season of "American Idol"?) That kit costs \$799.

If the DIY route makes you queasy, Weaknees.com will do the upgrade if you send in your TiVo. The service starts at \$49.

If you really want to save the programming on the original TiVo hard drive, an add-on drive is available but not recommended because this dual-drive system ultimately fails.

Plasma Vs. LCD

Where did it go wrong for plasma? Everyone wants an LCD set now. Not me. In the 42- to 50-inch category, plasma still has the better hi-def picture.

LCD beat plasma to 1080p and convinced consumers that the higher resolution is automatically better. Under 42 inches, LCD is the way to go. In a bright room, LCD is the way to go.

But a plasma's picture, with deeper blacks, better depth perception and wider viewing angle, remains the best.

Kevin Hunt, The Courant's consumer electronics columnist, wrote this for the Chicago Tribune. He can be reached at khunt@courant.com. To see previous columns, visit www.courant.com/shopping.