Cures for High Utility Costs:10 Energy-Saving Tips for Urgent Care Centers

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Back-to-school, football, and shorter days are marking the end of another HOT summer here in Texas, in which continual days of 100-plus degree temperatures have kept utility meters spinning. And as if increased electric utilization weren't enough, power rates per kilowatt hour have gone up by more than 50% since 2006.[1] Drought-laden summers, erratic winters, and rising rates are trends that are continuing to make electricity an increasingly significant part of an urgent care center's operating budget. And while other industries have scaled back, health care's energy utilization has continued to grow—according to the EPA, health care is second only to the food service industry in power use—despite annual double-digit increases in the cost of energy.[2]

If you've noticed your power bills going up, you're not alone—87% of small businesses think rising energy costs have hurt their operations and 92% remain concerned about the volatility of energy costs in the future.[3] "Given continuing energy price trends," concluded a study by the National Small Business Association, "it's reasonable to assume that even more small firms will see their competitive positions weakened, leading to…the potential for small business closures."[4]

However, there is hope—in the form of *conservation.* On average, the most energy-efficient companies in America use 35% less energy than their less-efficient competitors.[5] To get your urgent care center started, here are ten practical tips—call them a "Cure for High Utility Costs"—to reduce energy consumption without compromising either patient comfort or quality of care.

1. **Take the pulse of your energy use.** An economics podcaster recently described how the fashion that was once called *"conspicuous consumption"* has been replaced by *"conservation consumption"*—so while it may seem academic and Hollywood types are strutting their rooftop gardens, windmills and solar panels—you *don't have to* begin with a complete overhaul. The starting point is to *simply understand* what energy is costing you. Start by looking at your power bills. What did you pay last year for electricity? How large was the check you wrote to the power company last month? How is your power usage trending? To eliminate waste, you need to establish benchmarks and set goals, because, as a popular business maxim states, "you can't manage what you can't measure." Once you have a feeling for what you spend, check each month's statement, and watch the savings accumulate as you put your plans into action.

2. **Take advantage of free energy audits.** Many power utilities offer free energy audits for their customers. I recently took advantage of such an offer advertised in my power co-op's statement insert. The auditor, an employee of the power company, reviewed my electricity utilization compared to similar sized homes in the neighborhood; used an infrared device to search for air leaks around windows, doors and joints; evaluated my hot water heater, furnace, heat pump and attic insulation; and provided guidance on setting my automatic thermostats. He also left me with two dozen free CFL lightbulbs, a mail-in rebate for my annual air conditioning service fee, and a copy of his hundred-item conservation checklist. Contact your power company to see what types of energy audits it offers commercial customers. Even if there's a nominal fee, likely there are direct incentives offered that will offset the cost.

3. **Pull the plug at night.** As much as 30% of your electricity bill comes from what's known as "vampire" or "phantom" power.[6] Even when you turn off equipment and electronics at night, they still suck up electricity

[1] "Shocking electricity prices follow deregulation," *USA Today*, August 10, 2007.
[2] "Reverse Auction for Energy Procurement," *Ingalls Health System*.
[3] "2011 NSBA Energy Survey," *National Small Business Association.*
[4] "Rising Energy Costs Hit Small Businesses Hardest, Says U.S. Small Business Administration," *PR.com*, August 7, 2008.
[5] "United Natural Foods Awarded EPA's ENERGY STAR Rating for Its Chesterfield, NH Distribution Facility," *PR Newswire*, January 26, 2012.
[5] "Vampire Power Beware, Radiant Heat is Energy Efficient," *WarmlyYours.com*, October 28, 2011.

at an alarming rate. To eliminate these "bloodsuckers," unplug non-essential equipment at the end of the day. Power strips or a central switch can simplify the process as can a "closing checklist" that assures employees turn off all non-essential equipment before leaving the center. But—make sure what's turned off is truly *non-essential.* An urgent care center on the frontage of a heavily travelled freeway set a timer to turn off its exterior signage when the center closed at 8:00pm. While such likely did save power costs—the center *lost* the marketing opportunity to raise awareness of thousands of cars passing by between 8:00pm and midnight.

4. **Screen savers don't save money.** "There is a common misconception that screen savers reduce energy use by monitors; they do not."[7] So says the SBA, as a reminder to businesses to use the "sleep" mode on their computers. By following this power-saving practice, you'll save as much as $75 each year, per computer.[8] Plus having computers automatically "lock and sleep" after 5-10 minutes of non-use is a good privacy practice. Check your copiers and printers, too. Many have similar settings. And when you're ready to replace a computer, copier or other device, make sure you look for one with an Energy Star label so you'll get the most efficient products available. If you're buying new computers, choose laptops whenever possible—they use a third less energy than desktop models.[9]

5. **Give lighting a facelift.** Lighting alone accounts for about 35% of most businesses' utility bills.[10] Of all the major upgrades you can make to your urgent care center, lighting potentially offers the highest return on investment.[11] Though you may have to spend some money to convert to energy-efficient bulbs, you'll chalk up noticeable savings each year. On average, you'll use 75% less energy each year for every incandescent bulb you change to compact fluorescent lamps (CFL), and over the lifetime of each bulb, save approximately $30. Another benefit? Though they cost more up front, CFLs last about 10 times longer. Take a look at those tube lights in the ceiling, too. A 2,200-square foot business in Maryland now saves $450 annually after upgrading to more efficient T-8 lighting.[12] Many websites offer online calculators to help you determine the cost savings you'll realize by upgrading to energy-efficient lighting.

6. **The lights are on, but nobody's home.** Reduce energy use by installing sensors that turn on the lights only when someone is in the room. Such sensors work well to regulate lighting in rooms that aren't used consistently, like restrooms, closets, and storage areas. Average energy savings from installing a sensor in a restroom range from 30%-75%; in a storage room, from 45%-65%.[13] In addition, you can save money by opening your shades and practicing "daylighting" to maximize your use of available natural light. Install controls that adjust lighting levels based on available daylight, or simply have staff turn off or dim lights when there's sufficient natural light to do without. Remember that in Summer months, sunlight can drive up your air conditioning costs. You can minimize heat gain by using window treatments or solar window films.

7. **Get annual check-ups for heating and cooling.** Since HVAC systems consume about 40% of the electricity used in commercial buildings, it's vital that they function optimally.[14] Sign up for an annual maintenance contract with your HVAC service company. These contracts provide preventive services such as checking and replacing filters, belts, sensors; draining and replacing freon; and cleaning coils and ducts. You'll ensure the longevity of your equipment and add to your energy savings.

8. **Program thermostats.** If you don't already use programmable thermostats in your office, install them. Use different settings to make sure room temperatures are comfortable during business hours, but save energy when you're closed. You can also program them to optimize temperature and savings when the seasons

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[7] "Save Money on Your Office Electricity Bill," *The Small Business Authority*, October 19, 2011.
[8] "Why Should I Use Power Management Features," *EnergyStar.gov*.
[9] "Putting Energy into Profits, Small Business Guide," *EnergyStar.gov*.
[10] "Putting Energy into Profits, Small Business Guide," *EnergyStar.gov.*
[11] "Lighting," *Midwest Light & Energy, LLC*.
[12] "Success Story: Signs by Tomorrow," *EnergyStar.gov*.
[13] "Buildings & Plants: Lighting," *EnergyStar.gov*.
[14] "HVAC Systems," *SBA.gov*.

change. Another idea? If staff members constantly change thermostat settings, consider covering the devices with a clear locked box. Also discourage the use of space heaters—which can pose a fire hazard—and consider installing ceiling fans to improve the efficiency of the HVAC system. The direction of the ceiling fans should be changed seasonally—counter-clockwise to pull up warm air in the summer and clockwise to push it down in the winter.

9. **Get out of hot water.** Check your hot-water heater, and set its temperature to the lowest legal limit (code varies by locale). Insulate the first three feet of heated water out-pipe. If you have an older water heater, wrap it with an insulation blanket. When you're ready to upgrade your water heater, choosing heat pump water heater will really add to your savings. You may also consider doing away with a hot water heater altogether—particularly if nobody's taking a shower or doing laundry in the center—and installing instantaneous hot water devices under each sink, which deliver near boiling water at the spigot without the cost of continually heating water in a tank.

10. **Exit efficiently.** In new construction avoid doors that exit directly to the outside—in cold climates they can create an uncomfortable draft for patients and staff every time they're opened. A revolving door or entrance vestibule with two doors reduces the amount of outside air entering the building and improves efficiency of the HVAC system. And, believe it or not, those old "exit" signs over your doors are costing you money. LED exit signs cost between $20 and $90, consume 80% to 90% less electricity than older signs, and are fully compliant with local fire and building codes. Upgrading to energy-efficient models can save $10 each year, per sign.[15]

What kind of annual savings can you expect when you put best practices like these to work in your urgent care center? While it's difficult to find a published case study for urgent care, consider the following examples in spaces similar in size to many independent urgent care centers:

- A Florida not-for-profit with 2,400 square feet upgraded its HVAC, installed programmable thermostats, changed out light bulbs and exit signs, and installed a more efficient hot-water heater. The changes have led to $1,200 in savings each year, and the outfit reports that employee productivity has improved as well.[16]
- A Louisiana law firm with 2,800 square feet of office space now saves $6,100 each year after similar upgrades. The firm is so pleased with its results that it strongly recommends, "other small businesses integrate an energy efficiency plan into their space plan."[17]

Conclusion

"Being green" has become big business and large corporations have invested millions to promote their efforts to progressive and earth-conscientious consumers. For some businesses, "being green" will attract and retain customers who want to deal with companies that "share their values." But for all businesses—when they lead to cost savings and increased productivity, investments in energy conservation are *smart* business. It does not take a lot of time or effort to find ways to reduce electricity utilization in an urgent care center and the impact of doing so will go straight to the center's bottom line—resulting in growing dividends to the center's investors rather than larger checks to the power company.

[15] "Putting Energy into Profits, Small Business Guide," *EnergyStar.gov*
[16] "Success Story: Three Rivers Resource and Conservation Development Council," *EnergyStar.gov*.
[17] "Success Story: Jerry F. Pepper, APLC," *EnergyStar.gov*.