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EcoConsumer

Slay perpetually plugged-in "power vampires" with one simple yank of the cord

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

If you leave your cellphone charger plugged in all the time, I have a bit of bad news: You have a vampire.

But you don't need to drive a stake through its heart. You simply need to unplug it when it's not charging your phone.

A cellphone charger is a small but common example of a "power vampire," and one of the easiest to eliminate. Vampires (also known as "standby power") exist when an electronic device consumes power when not actively in use. You may have lots of them — the TV, DVD player, computer, microwave, breadmaker — all furtively sucking electricity when turned off.

Standby power consumes 6 percent or more of the electricity in a typical home, according to Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, at an annual cost of more than \$50 per household.

Defeating the "vampires"

Since many homes have about 20 electronic devices that use standby power, you would not want to bother with unplugging all of them when they're not in use. And you shouldn't have to. With a little effort, manufacturers can make products that consume a minimal amount of standby power, while still turning on promptly or lighting up a small digital display. Indeed, some manufacturers already have improved their products in this regard.

But other companies have lagged, because products that devour excessive standby power are often



SUSAN JOUFLAS / THE SEATTLE TIMES

cheaper to produce. One solution to level the playing field: State or federal legislation that would require manufacturers to reduce standby power in their products. Several states have considered such laws recently, but the electronics industry has resisted.

Resources

Energy Star: www.energystar.gov. Click on "Products."

Federal Energy Management Program:
www.eere.energy.gov/femp/procurement/eep_standby_power.cfm

Standby power products comparisons:
<http://oahu.lbl.gov>

Until the industry addresses this problem in a comprehensive manner, what can you do? Whenever possible, choose products that do not consume excess standby power. Products with the "Energy Star" label fit this criteria.

On a Federal Energy Management Program Web site, www1.eere.energy.gov/femp/, you can compare products such as TVs, DVD players and computers to see which models meet recommended limits for standby power (this Web site is aimed at purchasers for federal agencies, but useful for consumers).

The perils of plugs

When a charger is plugged in but not charging anything, you do not exactly have standby power, but more accurately "no-load power," a closely-related vampire problem. If you have several chargers for cellphones, iPods and other devices, consider putting them all on one power strip with an on-off switch. That way you can just turn off the power strip when not charging, and you won't have to unplug the individual charger units.

Chargers have a little rectangular transformer box at the plug end. Keeping these chargers or "wall warts" plugged in all the time raises safety concerns as well, since they have been known to overheat. If the box feels especially warm when plugged in, it's probably an older charger, or cheaply made, and wastes a fair amount of electricity.

To really get a handle on your standby power consumption, consider buying a Kill A Watt electricity usage monitor, made by P3 International. Available from online retailers for under \$30, it will show how much power and standby power your electronic equipment consumes — useful knowledge for slaying vampires.

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.