

How Low Can You Go?

Jeff Dover

Further reduce utility consumption with manual utility controls

Utility-saving technology has come a long way over the past 20 years in the restaurant industry. Automation and controls with great ROI have shown up in HVACs, lighting and equipment. There has been a tremendous amount of electric, gas and water saved by leveraging automatic systems, but there still is a large potential for even more savings. This article will briefly discuss and review the manual part of utility control, namely how store management can effectively reduce utility consumption in their restaurants.

Opportunities to Save

Manually controlling and monitoring equipment operation presents a great opportunity to save additional utility dollars. To find the best methods to save energy, you must be trained to know what to look for and how to monitor and control electric, gas and water equipment. You need to “own” energy management in your restaurants and treat utility costs as you would in your home. Would you light a grill at 3 p.m. for a 6 p.m. dinner? Would you leave the lights on all day and keep the thermostat at 68 degrees in the summer when no one is at home? Common sense says no.

Facility managers know how to monitor and save energy in the stores. They should be the point-person for providing training and holding regular meetings with store operators.

Faced with high industry turnover, facility managers need to have an ongoing program with their restaurants. There are a few ways to accomplish the process: store audits using checklists, inhouse store meetings, conference calls or written follow-up. Checklists generally provide the best information and uncover the most potential energy savings. They can be short, no more than a page or so, and must be able to be completed in less than five minutes, as managers simply do not have a lot of time available.

Items to Prioritize

The following are items that need periodic checking:

- Thermostat settings. Are the times and temperatures set properly? This may be the single most important item to review. Proper thermostat settings and operation can save up to 10 percent of the electric costs in certain facilities. Managers and employees also must have the option to override the system to make minor temperature adjustments. Most thermostats have either preset or manual override capabilities. This is crucial for a successful program. Managers must have some control over the system, or they will not completely buy into the program.

- Lighting controls. Are the exterior building lights, parking lot lights and signage turning on and off at the correct times? Are the lighting controls set properly? Do managers know how to adjust the settings? Sometimes, with automatic controls, employees simply do not notice when the lights and signage are turning on and off. Visual confirmation is periodically needed.
- Cooking equipment and exhaust hoods on/ off times. This may be the easiest and quickest way to save on gas and electricity costs. What times are the ovens, fryers, grills, exhaust hoods and related equipment being turned on in the morning? In almost all cases, a store employee is required to turn them on and off. Why turn on anything until it's needed? Most gas cooking equipment needs only 10 to 15 minutes to reach cooking temperature. Invest in "start time" stickers that show the correct times to turn the equipment on and off. They can be stuck right next to the on/off switches and dials. Additionally, some equipment can be turned down or off during slower periods.
- Interior lighting. Are the lights being turned on and off at the correct times? Are the correct bulbs installed? When a bulb needs to be replaced, ensure the replacement matches in wattage, color rendition, etc. Turn them off when not needed.
- Exterior door sweeps. Make sure all exterior doors have sweeps installed and in good condition. This will keep outside air and pests out.
- Walk-in cooler freezer strip curtains. Are they in place and in good condition? These pay for themselves in a matter of months in keeping refrigerated air inside the walk-in when the door is open.
- Refrigerator/freezer door gaskets. Check that they are in place, completely around the door frame and are clean and not torn. Replace/clean as necessary.
- HVAC/R and cooking equipment preventive maintenance. Are these being completed on a regular basis?
- Water leaks. Are any of the faucets or sprayers leaking water when turned off? Check all restroom fixtures and exterior spigots.
- Dishwasher. Run only full racks.

The Big Picture

Lastly, for feedback, provide the store with usage data every month. Show the utility invoices. By tracking usage and costs every month, everyone can see how the store is doing. Usage is the main metric to review because it is controllable; cost is not. The rates are set by the local provider or contractually for a set amount of time.

Understand that weather and customers may account for yearly variations during the billing period. Stores may be doing a great job in managing their utilities but the weather may have been harsher than the previous year, which would explain increases in usage.

Store managers have a lot of control over their stores' energy consumption. It is in their best interest to conserve as much as possible. In most cases, their bonus can be affected by the monthly utility bills. Every dollar saved goes directly to the bottom line. They, in turn, must train their employees on energy-saving tactics and explain why it's in everyone's benefit to conserve. It really is a never-ending commitment by all parties.

I welcome comments detailing your energy-savings programs. Please feel free to contact me at (972) 805-0905, ext. 3, or by email at jeff@rfmaonline.com.

Dover and out.

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