

No smart meter for you? Prepare to pay

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In an age where we take it for granted that we can call people on the go, browse the web from anywhere and order anything from a pizza to a stock trade from the palm of our hands, who would object to having access to real-time details on how much energy they use at home and which uses contribute most to their utility bills?

Quite a few people, it seems. From California to the Netherlands to Maine, vocal groups have called for smart meters to be wired rather than wireless, optional or — in at least one case — banned entirely in “smart meter-free zones.” It’s hard to imagine average folks today advocating similar measures for, say, cellphones, laptops or baby monitors.

Some of these opponents say they’re worried about the potential health impacts of the radio waves that enable advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) communications. That’s a concern that been pretty thoroughly put to rest by the Maine Centre for Disease Control, the World Health Organisation and a number of peer-reviewed academic studies. So why else are smart-meter foes so hot and bothered?

For many, two words sum it up: Big Brother. These people don’t want anyone knowing when they put the kettle on every day to make tea, how much hot water they run into their baths or whether they leave lights and appliances on during the day when they’re at work or school. For these folks, smart meters are bad because they make it possible for utility companies to know what they’re doing and when.

How can utilities battle this perception? In one way, they can’t. Because it’s not an objection that can be salved with facts, case studies or pdfs of smart-grid security standards. But they can borrow a page from the smart-grid playbook by using data intelligence to attach a real-life price to requests for AMI opt-outs. Show how much it will cost each opt-out to retain a meter-reader the utility wouldn’t have

otherwise had to pay, based on travel time, how long it takes to read the meter and the cost of gas used for each trip ... with an added penalty for the extra carbon emissions that trip produced. Calculate the amount an opt-out will be charged for every billing question, based on the added time it will take a customer rep to look up those much more cumbersome records.

The bottom-line cost might not dissuade every smart-meter opponent. For some, it could look like a worthwhile tradeoff ... as it does to people who, for instance, still forego electronic billing to write out paper checks, pay for stamps and travel to the post office to take care of their regular expenses. Others, though, might find the price of AMI aversion is too steep.

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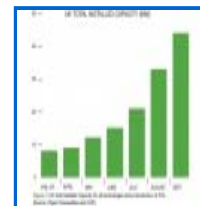
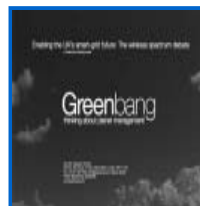


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