

From entrepreneur to 'green' detective

In 1996 David Bolt and three other entrepreneurs started the multiple listing service software company MarketLinx in his house. He says they were the first to create an Internet-based MLS for a large board of Realtors. Their initial contract was with the Middle Tennessee Regional MLS, serving 5,000 real estate agents at the time.



RONDA ROBINSON
Seeing Green

In 2003 Bolt and the other founders sold their remaining stock to First American. At the time they had captured about 25 percent of the national MLS market, with more than 200,000 real estate agents using MarketLinx.

In 2006 Bolt began living on 10 kilowatts of energy a day or less.

This isn't a riches-to-rags story. Since selling MarketLinx, he has devoted his energy to becoming a detective on sustainable living. After a few years of full-time research, Bolt made himself part of the experiment. He moved into the family's lake house and resolved to limit his daily energy consumption to 10 kilowatts.

"I've been very uncomfortable with the amount of waste our society produces," he told me recently. "I was in a position financially to experiment with this stuff."

The experiment has meant adding 3,000-watt solar panels and a solar water heater, increasing roof ventilation, replacing an energy-hungry refrigerator and switching light bulbs to compact fluorescents in the test house on Watts Bar Lake.

Bolt's home has been "zero-energy" since April 2006. Thanks to the different energy-efficient technologies and practices, the 30-year-old residence produces as much power as it uses.

In fact, at this rate Bolt may earn a refund on his energy bill. Imagine that. I recently wrote about



Three-thousand-watt solar panels top Davi'd Bolt's Watts Bar Lake home (above); at left, Bolt holds evidence of his negative utility bill; and center, the inverter which converts the DC power generated by the solar panels to AC power used within the house.

voluntarily paying more to KUB for Green Power Switch, and now I learn that with a lot of effort someone like Bolt can receive money back.

As of November he had accumulated a \$171 net credit on his energy bill.

He hasn't written a utility check since last April. "Every month I accumulate a little bit of credit," he said, adding if that remains true after one year, Harriman Utility Board will send him a check for green power credits.

This has taken work, physically and mentally. For Bolt it's all about mindfulness. The spiritual notion, "Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water," applies.

He's chopping wood more than carrying water, but I get the idea. I stopped using credit cards 12 years ago. The tangibility of cash makes spending more of a concrete notion than does plastic. I'm more in touch with my outflow.

Credit cards can distance us from the money we're spending. Similarly,

flipping the thermostat when cold can distance us from the energy we're using.

Chopping wood to burn for heat is mindful living. So is switching off the microwave or computer plug when not in use. Bolt talks about getting rid of the "phantom load" when trying to live on 10 kilowatts a day. He's referring to household items that burn energy even when they're not actively engaged. An example would be the digital clock flashing on the VCR when you're not using the unit.

When unoccupied, the Bolt family's lake house consumed 500 kilowatts a month in phantom load. David Bolt has slashed that dramatically while living in the house. In November he used 161 kilowatts.

Trying to live in a zero-energy house, you become aware of a lot of habits, Bolt says.

He'll keep tweaking his technology and practices until the rest of the family joins him from their city home next year. The goal is to make

the residence a zero-energy house when everyone is there.

Bolt also wants to help others interested in sustainable living. He's building another company, Sustainable Future, to offer education and products to support them.

"A sustainable future is one in which resources are used at a rate equal to or less than the rate at which they are created," according to his Web site, www.sustainablefuture.biz. "Resources include money, energy, soil, emotional capital, trust, health, clean water or anything else needed to sustain life. No resource can be consumed indefinitely at a rate faster than it is being replenished. The first step in creating a sustainable future is to create a desire for a sustainable future."

The changes can be small ones. "You don't have to go as extreme as I did," Bolt admitted. For good ideas on how to take baby steps, check out his Web site.

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