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Smart meters, tidy profits

While many energy users will welcome smart meters, it's mobile operators who stand to benefit most

Dave Bailey, Computing 06 Jul 2010

There was a time when kids wondered what that annotated dial rotating in the black bakelite housing in the dank, dingy corner next to the back door was. For me it was back in the 1960s, and that electricity meter from half a century ago bears a remarkable resemblance to the one currently installed in our house, except that today the dial rotates at a fair clip.

But that is set to change, with the electricity companies aiming to install super-sleek smart meters in all UK households by 2020.

A company called First:Utility is already offering this technology, which measures electricity consumption and transfers those readings every half hour over a mobile link to its information management systems. Customers can then log on to First:Utility's web site and view their energy use. This information can even be viewed using an iGoogle account on Google's new PowerMeter.

Hang on, every half hour over a mobile link? So every one of these smart meters will be sending 24 x 2 x 365 (17,520) mobile data messages a year. Hopefully, the bill for that will be going to the electricity company and not to your house. At least there will be no international roaming charges.

Reports in the business press suggest smart meter readings, which can also be applied to gas and water use as well as electricity, could be worth billions to mobile operators.

For enterprises I would have thought that a reading on power consumption every half hour wasn't enough, and I suspect they'll want power usage figures on a continuous basis, and sent directly to their own data management systems. That would most likely involve wireless technology, and firms tempted to go down this route would be wise to check out the ZigBee low-power wireless standard, which is a contender for the wireless standard for smart meters in Europe.

The cost per household to install these smart meters is estimated to be £340. So who will foot the bill? Well, the electricity companies say the costs will be covered by the efficiency savings that the smart meters are designed to deliver – you will have no more visits from a meter reader, for example. They also say that some of these savings will be passed on to consumers in the form of smaller bills. But given how much they'll be paying in mobile data charges, I won't hold my breath.

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