

“It just takes a few minutes to get back an ENERGY STAR® score once you enter the benchmarking info.”

Rick Sullivan,
Principal Engineer,
AEP Ohio



AEP Ohio's Automated Benchmarking tool was used at this extensively remodeled Wendy's in Grandview Heights, now among the chain's most energy-efficient restaurants

The beauty of benchmarking

Building a case for a more energy-efficient building has never been easier

Ask anyone who knows the energy efficiency game for commercial buildings and they'll tell you the same thing. You must benchmark. And, you must do it now.

What is benchmarking, anyway?

Benchmarking is an ongoing accounting of a building's energy usage. Consider it ground zero for an energy-efficient building—a sort of baseline for improvement.

The gold standard for benchmarking tools is available on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ENERGY STAR® website.

There is the ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager for commercial buildings, an ENERGY STAR Energy Tracking Tool for manufacturing facilities, and an ENERGY STAR Target Finder for buildings in the design stage.

All of the aforementioned tools provide a 1 to 100 ENERGY STAR score that allows a building owner or manager to compare their building against others in their category. For reference, a 50 is typical, while a 30 means it's only more efficient than 30 percent of peer facilities. Scores of 75 or higher are top performers—and eligible for ENERGY STAR certification in some categories.

Why it's important

According to a recent EPA study, consistently benchmarked buildings reduced energy use by an average of 2.4 percent per year, for a total savings of seven percent. And, buildings that started out as poor performers saved even more.

One true believer in the power of benchmarking is Wendy's. Scott Moline, the Dublin-based company's

Manager of Engineering, says that benchmarking is central to what they do.

Wendy's was among the first restaurants to participate in the Department of Energy's Better Buildings Challenge. "One of the very first requirements for participation in the Challenge is information, and benchmarking is high-quality information," said Moline.

Moline says that benchmarking allows Wendy's to make more meaningful comparisons between their restaurants, and provides better clarity in their efficiency performance. And, he points to a more inspirational effect of benchmarking: bragging rights. "Our people are competitive by nature," he says, "and they like it when their restaurants achieve better benchmarking scores than their peers."

Why doesn't everyone benchmark?

It seems like a daunting task at first—even with the relative ease of ENERGY STAR online tools.

"A customer feels like they have to sit down with a pile of information like they're doing their taxes," said Rick Sullivan, a principal engineer with AEP Ohio.

Fortunately, Sullivan and his team have collaborated with Columbia Gas on a new tool that, like income tax software, greatly simplifies the benchmarking process.

A new benchmark in benchmarking

The two utilities worked together on the Automated Benchmarking tool, essentially automating the process.

Here's how it works. A customer establishes a user ID and password through the Automated Benchmarking portal, and enters information from two different AEP Ohio and Columbia Gas bills spaced at least 14 months apart. The customer also answers a few basic questions like the building classification (office, retail), company name and street address, gross floor area, number of workers and hours of operation.

"It just takes a few minutes to get back an ENERGY STAR score once you enter the benchmarking info," said Sullivan, "and our customers just love it." Sullivan adds that the system automatically updates the score monthly once the building's AEP Ohio and Columbia Gas accounts are linked to the program.

Sullivan says that the Automated Benchmarking tool is particularly popular among hospitals. "The OHA (Ohio Hospital Association) is pushing for facilities to be more efficient," he says. And with good reason—an ENERGY STAR Certified hospital saves about \$3,000 per bed annually according to an EPA study.

For his part, Moline appreciates how the Automated Benchmarking tool supports Wendy's efforts in the Better Buildings Challenge. "It encourages participation because it streamlines the information process," he said.

For building owners and managers still on the fence about benchmarking, Sullivan offers even more handholding. "We have no problem helping our customers to use the Automated Benchmarking tool," he said. "We find that once we help them through the first time, they're hooked in a good way."

It's his way of showing all commercial customers the beauty of benchmarking. ■