

The Importance of Uninterruptible Power Supplies

Friends -

Last night I was working, and out of nowhere the power went out. There was not even a millisecond of warning (e.g., flickering lights, etc.) and, bam, lights out.

The good news is that I have a pretty robust uninterruptible power supply (UPS). It has two banks of outlets - one bank has a battery back-up with surge protection, and the other is only surge protection. On the battery back-up bank, I have my main CPU and both monitors. When the power went out last night, the UPS started beeping to signify that it was powering the equipment. I was able to close Outlook, Word, Chrome, PCLaw and Acrobat Pro normally, and with no drama. There was plenty of time to close any open but unsaved documents. Once everything was closed, I was able to power down the computer and turn-off the monitors. It took five hours before power was restored.

Moral to the story: A quality UPS can be a lifesaver for people like us who rely heavily on our data, including word processing. For example, what if I was working on a long document, and had forgotten to save every few minutes? That work might have disappeared had I not had a UPS.

The sweet-spot for a good UPS for a normal desktop configuration with a couple of monitors is about \$125. It's a small price to pay given the risks. If you don't have one, you should.

Scott I. Barer, California

I've had UPS for years. Back when I moved into this office in '03 we had, for lack of a better term, "Iffy" power supply; perfectly clear day, no weather, no traffic incidents where someone hit power pole, and my power would go out. For a few minutes but of course I had no warning and it always was an unpleasant surprise. So I got and used UPS; and it has had to work a few times over the years and did allow me to save files and shut down my computer.

FWIW, that hasn't happened for several years; I think the power has gotten more reliable.

Ronald Jones, Florida

I have that and have had to use it more times than I would like when there was construction happening nearby.

All businesses need to think about what would happen if the power went out, either temporarily or for a longer period. We recently had a local brewery lose power (again, due to nearby construction) and they were going to be out for a couple of days, which would have meant the beer being brewed would be lost. There was a social media campaign to "SAVE THE BEER" and they finally found a generator, either from a farmer or another brewery nearby. They needed a certain type of power supply that was not common and not available from commercial rental places.

Just something to think about when we advise our business clients.

Michele Allinotte, Ontario, Canada

With regard to Michele's comments, make sure you have (and your clients have) business interruption insurance. Proper coverage would take care of the brewery she mentioned. If you are in an area prone to power loss, you should also consider a full-size instant on generator with sufficient power to take care of your needs.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

I'm a luddite when it comes to UPS. Is the purpose just to buy time to shut down equipment without damage or can you actually power equipment off a UPS for a period of time (e.g. run a computer for an hour)? I'm envisioning a Tesla PowerWall for the latter.

I'm laptop only now so even with no power, I just work off the battery. The problem is, however, my modem, router, and other Internet-equipment has no power. I'm stuck with a smartphone only.

Aside from the ~\$125 price, what other specs should a person look for when buying a UPS? Any brands to get or to avoid?

Andy I, Chen, California

The \$125 estimate from someone else referred to a UPS that could power a computer and peripherals for a limited period. It will allow an orderly power down so you can save files and shut down normally. Personally, I like APC equipment for this purpose as the overall reliability is better in my experience.

The availability of generators and the Tesla Powerwall are designed to operate all or limited electricity in your home or office. The Tesla Powerwall is an oversized battery. Generators are designed to run off of a fuel and power all or part of your home or office and you can buy them in varied capacities for permanent installations. Obviously, you have the small generators that you can buy at home supply stores also. You can also use solar or a wind generator to charge your Tesla Powerwall or provide part of all of your electric needs on a variable basis.

Essentially you are making cost benefit decisions on how much power you need and for how long. The reliability of the surrounding power grid as it sends electricity to your door is also of import.

Darrell G. Stewart

To add to what Darrell said...

I always recommend at least a UPS on key equipment. Servers, routers, firewalls, switches and high priority workstations - especially if you're in a building that has unreliable power.

In my 25 years in IT I worked with American Power Conversion (APC) equipment almost exclusively and in all that time I had exactly two of them (out of hundreds) fail on me. In both cases I called APC's 800 number, they asked me a couple of basic troubleshooting questions, asked for the serial number of the failed unit and promptly overnighted a replacement unit (with a prepaid return sticker for the bad one).

Any time I have to buy a UPS in the future it will be an APC.

Disclaimer: Still never been a lawyer at Microsoft or any other company

Ben M. Schorr, Washington

I've used APC and Cyberpower, and both have worked well for me. They both seem to be good units, and both take readily available replacement batteries. Costco sells both brands, and the Cyberpower unit is \$10 more, but has higher wattage rating (900 vs. 650) and has 10 outlets (five surge-only, and five surge/battery) compared to 8 for the APC. I haven't had the breadth of experience that Ben has had over the years, but from my admittedly limited perspective the Cyberpower has done the job well (and was online last night when the power went out).

YMMV.

Scott I. Barer
