

## Industry Outlook: Look To Infrared As An Enabling Technology

Written by Thomas J. Scanlon, Vice President Americas, Thermography, FLIR Systems, Inc.  
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Regardless of the fluctuating price for a barrel of crude oil, the issues pertaining to energy in terms of availability, resource options, environmental impact and costs are here to stay. There doesn't appear to be one or two comprehensive solutions on the horizon that can address all issues. We're dependent on foreign oil and proposed local drilling has environmentalists up in arms. Alternative energy sources are being explored, but it doesn't appear we can move quickly enough on them. It's becoming apparent we'll need as many energy options as possible. And while we work to figure it all out, energy costs are eroding company margins and families are feeling the pinch in everyday purchases.

As a country with once seemingly endless resources, perhaps one of the greatest lessons we can learn from this is how to better manage what we already have—as in the old saying, *"waste not, want not."* When it's not possible to manage certain external costs, it makes sense to focus on managing in-house costs and waste is one of them. Waste in terms of energy consumption due to poorly maintained facilities and manufacturing equipment is one example. But, you typically can't fix and manage what you can't see. That's where infrared comes in.

Over the past few years, we've seen infrared cameras play a greater role in maintenance programs. We see our customers continually finding new applications for their cameras. From energy audits to surveys of mechanical and electrical equipment to automating manufacturing lines, infrared is helping find problems that— *if not addressed*—lead to waste and margins lost.

Heating and cooling large buildings and production facilities can be challenging and costly. Many companies now see energy management as an important aspect of managing their bottom line. Energy audits have become big business for professional thermographers and a top priority for maintenance departments. Infrared is being used to find missing insulation, problems with HVAC systems and water damage to roofs and building envelopes. Retail chains

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are using infrared to control parking lot lights during off-peak times to reduce energy costs. The list of applications is long, and fixing these types of problems can generate significant annual savings. Whether it's identifying missing insulation or faulty electrical equipment, infrared truly has become an enabling technology in uncovering energy-related problems that impact the bottom line.

For those in the energy-producing industry— *oil, gas and petrochemical*—waste or byproduct can mean lost revenue. It also can mean problems with equipment and a potential shutdown. Leak detection is an enormous issue for these companies. In a plant with potentially thousands of connections to be checked on a regular basis, finding leaks can be time-consuming, inefficient, potentially dangerous and costly. Costs also are of concern as these companies invest more heavily in predictive and preventative maintenance to meet regulatory requirements. Infrared cameras have made it easier and more efficient to help this industry improve leak detection as part of their maintenance programs, and detect volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and fugitive emissions deemed harmful to the environment.

With energy as our most precious of commodities— *and its impact on all that we buy and do*—it makes sense not to waste it. Infrared is an enabling technology helping us see both what we've been wasting and the opportunities we have to reduce consumption.

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*This article is part of Maintenance Technology's 2008 Industry Outlook, the annual executive roundtable. Columns from each of the 14 thought leaders who participated can be found at the following link: <http://www.mt-online.com/article/0808-industry-outlook>*

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