

HOME ELECTRONICS

Photoelectric units have uses at home



BARRY JENSEN

Photoelectric units have been around for a long time. They frequently were used (and are still used) to open doors. But a homeowner can buy inexpensive photoelectric sensors for other uses.

A commercial example of photoelectric sensors you see often is the automatic door opener at, say, the local drug store. A photoelectric sensor is set up across the path of someone leaving the store. When someone passes in front of the sensor, light no longer falls on the sensor, so the electric door opener is told to open the door — so you don't have to open a door with your hands full of packages. (Pressure sensors are another way door-openers are controlled.)

The sun is a simpler and cheaper source of light to alert a photoelectric sensor — and frequent the best source of light.

The photoelectric sensor usually works by preventing current flow. How does this work? So long as light falls on the photoelectric cell, some action is STOPPED. But if less light is sensed, the current is no longer there to keep whatever it is from happening, so a door opens or an alarm sounds or a light goes on.

A homeowner can use a photoelectric sensor if he wants an outdoor light to come on at dusk to light the sidewalk. When the sun sets, the sensor notices the decline in sunlight and turns on the artificial light, making footing safer.

Photoelectric sensors also are available as part of free-standing "bollards," those short poles one sees along walkways or driveways that provide light at night. (They are often referred to as low-voltage landscape lighting.) The photoelectric sensor in each bollard senses when the light decreases below a factory-set or user-set amount and turns on the artificial light. A local retail electrical supply store sells bollard switch photoelectric sensors for \$60 and up.

Sometimes, the bollards are solar powered: They absorb solar energy during the day and then release it when the light level falls too low.

Such bollards are available at some large retail stores or from lighting specialists.

Outside the home, one or more photoelectric sensors can control holiday lighting. Just be certain the power rating of all the strings of light powered through one photoelectric sensor does not exceed the safe rating for that sensor.

Often as a part of a home security

system, several lights will be controlled by a central photoelectric sensor. When the sensor is triggered, it allows electrical energy to flow into the "security" lights around a home or garage or yard. Light has always been touted as a defense against crime. Hence the use of photoelectric sensors to turn night into day (or at least dusk).

But photoelectric sensors do not have to come only from a high-tech home-security service. Such sensors also are available for anyone who wants to have a light come on automatically after dark.

A homeowner can plug a photoelectric sensor into a yard light so that the yard light supplements the light provided the main street lights, but only when it is needed. This is especially valuable in those suburban areas where the street lights are few and relatively far between.

Your local supermarket or hardware store probably has photoelectric sensors that can be screwed into a normal incandescent light socket. The photoelectric sensor unit has a normal socket that a light bulb can then be screwed into and controlled by the sensor.

You just put the photoelectric sensor into a socket and screw a normal incandescent light bulb into the socket.

Most photoelectric sensors come with some type of control to allow you to adjust the level of light that will trigger the incandescent light. If they don't, you can use a piece of tape to cover part of the sensor opening. Do not use tape if the light bulb is below the sensor opening — the tape could dry out and catch fire from the heat of the light.

A small unit capable of safely controlling a 150-watt light bulb costs from \$5 up.

Inside the home, one or more photoelectric sensors can be used if someone in the house needs additional light to see clearly. Once set, the photoelectric sensor will turn on additional lighting at the level you want. Depending on how sensitive you make the sensor, it will turn on additional lighting whether the cause of darkness is cloudiness or on-coming evening or closed drapes.

Other uses around the home for the little cells you can buy at the store are for stair wells (when the light declines, the incandescent light goes on).

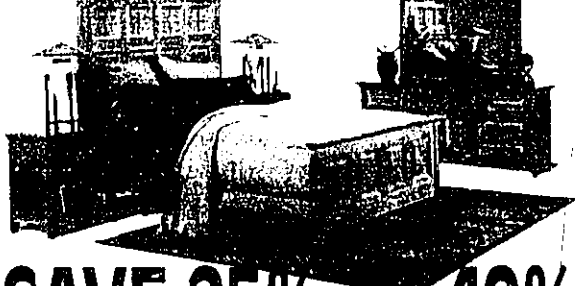
This goes for safety night lighting, perhaps at the base of the stairs. No more groping at 2 a.m. in a sleep-induced stupor for the light switch if the night light has come on automatically.

With a tiny night light with a built-in photoelectric sensor, no child need face

See JENSEN, G10

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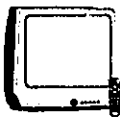
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