



Power Player

Sonja Ebron's company helps the black community go green and save money

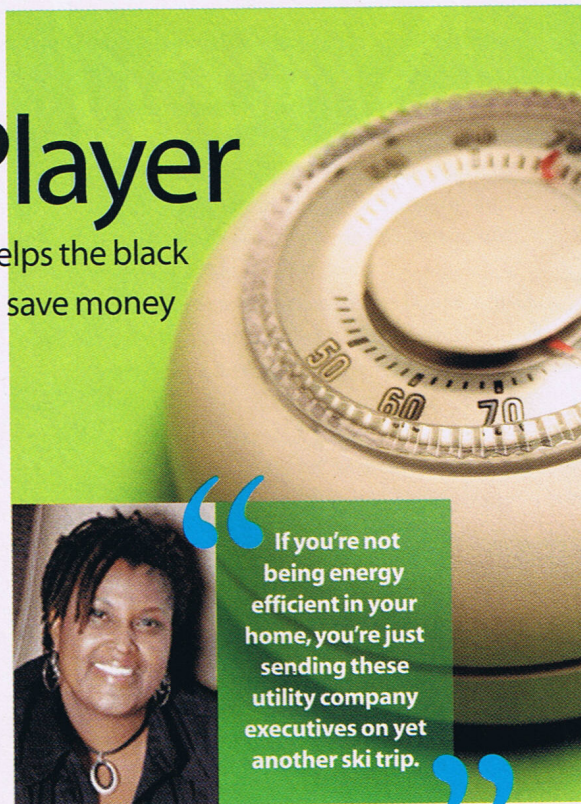
by chandra r. thomas

Sonja Ebron's got the power—and she's got it for a cheaper price. Ebron is chief executive officer of blackEnergy LLC, a unique business that helps African Americans lower their heating bills and purchase more energy-efficient green products at discounted rates.

Guided by the motto “the power to empower,” customers enroll for the free service by logging onto **blackEnergy.com**, and the company uses its relationship with gas providers in Georgia to work its magic negotiating rock-bottom rates. “We also arrange for the energy company to make a small charitable contribution in the customer's name to a non-profit of their choice,” says Ebron, 45, of the company she established in 2001. “It's a win-win situation for everyone.”

The Atlanta-based company's services are now available in deregulated utility markets—cities and towns where multiple service providers are available to customers—across Georgia, but Ebron eventually hopes to branch out nationwide. The company's other offerings seem well-timed with the country's ongoing economic challenges.

blackEnergy.com also hosts “energy town hall meetings” upon request several times a year to help African Americans learn ways to improve energy efficiency in their homes. And through its Web site, blackEnergy sells environmentally friendly products, such as low-flow shower heads, programmable thermostats, weather stripping and attic fans—often at lower prices—which help



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customers lower their home utility bills. blackEnergy's services are marketed to African Americans, but are open to all.

“We decided to target the black community because on average African Americans tend to pay more on their utility bills and we tend to know less about energy efficiency,” she says. “Many of us are wasting up to 80 percent of our energy because we don't know how much money we could save by making simple changes, like changing out the light bulbs and filters and caulking windows.”

Ebron's environmental efforts have landed her on the pages of *Ms.*, where she was cited as an agent of change for “the belief that environmental and social consciousness can create satisfaction in the soul and the wallet” and as a “Super Woman” of 2008 by the *Atlanta Tribune* magazine. A senior fellow of the Environmental Leadership Program and a member of Engineers Without Borders, Ebron has also earned “non-traditional business” kudos from the Atlanta Business League.

She shrugs off her accolades, insisting that her green work is a labor of love. She says the concept of her business was in-

spired over the 20 years she spent “teaching, studying and researching” energy systems. During that time, Ebron, who has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, says she gained insight into the inner workings of utility companies, particularly as it relates to small-scale residential customers.

“We usually get the short end of the stick,” she says. “During my speaking engagements I start off by asking the audience if they think they're not paying enough for their monthly utility bills. I tell them ‘if you're not being energy efficient in your home,

you're just sending these utility company executives on yet another ski trip!’”

Gloria Ware, who last year launched Black and Into Green, a weekly environmental blog targeted to African Americans, says efforts like Ebron's are critical for the black community. “Her efforts are very timely because more African Americans need to be involved in the environmental movement,” contends Ware, a Cleveland banker. “From an economic standpoint what she's doing makes sense. Our community tends to be affected disproportionately in a crisis, primarily due to economic disparities, so it makes sense to make the investment now to better manage our resources.”

Ebron is especially excited about President Barack Obama's pledged commitment to environmental initiatives. She hopes this year to expand her business to include a “green team” that would dispatch trained technicians to African-American homes to assess and implement energy-saving tactics. “Small changes,” she says, “can save you some change in the long run!” ♥

Chandra R. Thomas is an Atlanta writer.