

Building maintenance

Generator troubleshooting 101

By Eric Clark

Common sense says preparation for storms and power outages should be taken well ahead of time. We all know life gets busy and before you know it, the power is out and your generator is running ... or not running or running with no output ... or stops running mid-stream ... etc.! In today's world, we often expect all of our mechanical and electrical things to 'just work'!

Automatic standby generators can be quite complicated pieces of equipment, but that doesn't mean there aren't some basic steps owners should know and be capable of taking in preparation for a storm or in the event it does not do what it is supposed to:

- Locate, read and be familiar with your own-

er's manual. Many frequently asked questions are answered with this helpful guide as well as written instructions on many of the steps to starting and stopping your generator properly. Damage can be done to transfer switches or other components if not done properly.

- Know where your key to the generator is located at all times. The last thing you want to do is be locked out of your generator and feel helpless, in addition to being cold or in the dark.
- Know how to check and add oil. Many generators, especially residential models, run at 3600rpm and only hold a quart or two of oil. They will need oil added in an extended outage and will shut down when they run low. The owner should know where it goes and how to properly shut the unit down and restart it safely. Have some extra oil on hand or ask your service provider to leave some on site. Refer to the owner's manual for this information.
- Monitor and log the hour meter readings

and be sure it exercises each week at its regularly scheduled time. You do not have to be there when it runs if you check the hour meter each week to be sure it has changed. Make it part of your household routine. Many times the owners don't know it's not working until it doesn't work during an outage. The first notice the generator will give you of a problem is it won't exercise during its scheduled time.

- Use your senses of vision, smell, and hearing when it's running or has run. Look it over for anything out of the ordinary or fluids leaking or flashing red lights or funny smells coming from it. Of course, you have to know what the normal smells and sounds are first to have a point of reference.
- Locate three key components: the output circuit breaker, AUTO-OFF-RUN switch, and the fuel regulator and vent. These will assist in resetting faults or starting the unit in manual mode and are two common areas blockages occur inhibiting the engine from starting. Just because the generator didn't start automatically, doesn't mean you should



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sit in the dark or make a hotel reservation just yet. Try starting it manually. During storms and times of high volume experienced service providers are usually able to get half of all trouble calls running over the phone because it's a simple fix that with only a small amount of knowledge and education the owner can take care of themselves without making a call or feeling panicked.


- A generator uses an internal combustion engine; it needs fuel and air to run. Snow leaves and debris need to be cleared from

inside and around the inlet louvers so the engine can combust and stay running at its optimum temperatures for longer reliable run times.

- Be on site and available for initial startup, scheduled maintenance or service visits and ask questions or ask the technician for some operator training. They will show you what to do and what not to do and generally walk you through doing it. The time to practice and get comfortable is when everything is working and the stress of a storm isn't already upon you and you are trying to hear your provider on a cell phone with a dead battery in the whipping wind.
- If you are not at your home, have someone who can go by and check the generator for you to help ensure its operation. While maintenance contracts are a great thing, we as service providers are still only on site twice a year and rely on feedback from the owner the rest of the time. The generator needs interaction and monitoring to ensure reliable use. Remote generator monitoring systems are available to assist in monitoring

the systems status when nobody can do it.

Inevitably, failures can and do occur, have a backup plan just in case. If you plan for it, it generally doesn't happen!

The recent storms and power outages we have experienced in the area have opened many people's eyes, both in a residential and commercial setting, to the realities of losing power for an extended period of time. The reality of response times from service providers continues to grow as more and more generators go into the field and skilled labor becomes harder and harder to find to support the industry growth. Taking responsibility and educating oneself on the operation of their generator can help you during these events be better prepared to handle when things don't go as planned. We still feel an educated generator owner is the best support we can offer! 

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