



Personal Tech: TECHNOBUDDY: Expert's advice: Be prepared when calling tech support

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Sunday, May 9, 2004

If it had been an election, the feds would have started an immediate investigation to see if it had been rigged.

The loads of e-mail to me were that one-sided: My readers were darn near unanimous in thinking that the biggest aggravation from technology these days is the lack of technical support. I counted the votes myself.

I agree. It's my biggest gripe, too. It still is, even after an eloquent and helpful note from Roy Laudenslager, a technical support expert who wrote to say that while "there are justifiable complaints against customer support ... the complainers need to accept that they have a major share of the blame for the present state of customer support."

I don't agree with Roy that customers bear the largest part of the blame. The major blame lies with the companies. The old-fashioned concept should still rule: The customer is always right. We are the ones who paid the money; the companies took the money and promised us a good product and good technical support.

But whether or not Roy and I agree completely, his suggestions were great. He's had a long career in tech support and now works for a Eugene, Ore., consulting firm. He's right. It makes sense for customers to do a good job preparing for a call to technical support.

And I can't think of anyone better than Laudenslager to offer advice on how to do that. He's the fellow on the other end of the phone and has literally heard it all --- including horror stories of his own.

Before I turn things over to Laudenslager, I want to mention some advice he offered that could prevent many calls in the first place.

Most problems with a computer are one-time glitches. Instead of trying to fix them, he said, just "power down the computer and then restart after a few seconds. I would hate to guess how many problems I have solved by simply having the caller reboot the system."

He's right. I've seen many problems caused by enthusiastic attempts to fix a one-time glitch. You should worry only about recurring problems.

Sometimes, however, the problem is serious, and you need help from the

manufacturer. I sure can't promise that following Laudenslager's suggestions will make the experience pleasant, but they should make the call more efficient. I'll comment briefly after each of his six suggestions.

Jot down just what you were doing immediately before the problem occurred. Try the same steps again to see if it happens again.

Despite the fact that computers seem about as logical as a house cat high on catnip, computers really are logical machines. Problems usually come from some change you've made --- whether it was installing a new program, adding a new bit of hardware or changing software settings.

Jot down the text of any error message. If there is more than one message, note the sequence in which they were displayed.

Error messages are how the computer tries to tell you what's wrong. Many times it's like listening to a gifted teenager. But you don't have to understand the error messages. Just write them down. That will give the tech support person concrete clues.

If the computer is functional, click on Start, then click on Run, type MSINFO32, and click OK. Jot down the following from the System Summary: OS Name, System Manufacturer and Total Physical Memory.

That's an easy way for you to gather information. Even if you don't know RAM from "Rambo," you'll be ready to answer the questions from the tech support person.

Be at the computer and have it powered up and ready to run tests.

As is often true of the obvious, many people don't think to do this. After all, it's your own time that you are saving by being ready when tech support gets on the line.

Make sure you have a phone at the computer. I've actually had cases where the phone was across the room from the computer, and the caller tried to go back and forth between the phone and the computer.

Again, this is just good sense, often in short supply.

Remember, support tech is trying to help. Answer questions clearly. Being angry with the support tech won't help get your problem fixed.

I've had to keep this in mind myself, especially at times when I wasn't convinced that the tech support person really was trying to help. But common sense tells you that losing your temper won't help anything. Even when you're not satisfied with the help you're getting, you are more likely to get help when you're polite.

Does that mean you have to put up with rudeness or inept help? No. But, when that happens, ask for the tech support person's name or ID. Then ask for a supervisor. By being polite, your complaint about poor service will carry more weight. Many a tough boss has taught me that it's possible to be demanding without being rude.

I hope that you never have to use any of these suggestions. But if the time comes when you need to make the call, be ready. And say a silent prayer that a guy like Roy will be on the other end of the line.

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