

SBM

The Source for Business Owners

ST. LOUIS
**Small
Business
Monthly**

VOL. 19, ISSUE III

APRIL 2006

Do You Trust Your Tech? Tech Support Challenges

by Wendy Gauntt

Most people don't call for tech support until they're ready to pitch the computer out the nearest window. What a way to start a client relationship. The tech arrives to find an intensely frustrated person cursing at a useless computer, hours behind on work due to mysterious problems that will now cost them money to resolve.

On good days, the tech gets to save the day by fixing the computer quickly and efficiently. But not all days are good.

On a bad day, the tech takes on a new client with a hodge-podge of old, outdated equipment. The tech arrives to solve a few issues, but instead encounters an unheard-of cascade of equipment failures: a once-in-a-lifetime catastrophe. The chain of events started sometime ago, but unfortunately the tech is the one on the job when the chain disintegrates. Finally, the client is back up and running. However, the client blames the tech, who worked around the clock to solve the problems, for the equipment failure and moves onto another tech company that recommends spending thousands of dollars for unnecessary new equipment and services.

So how do you know whom to trust?

You Must Buy New Equipment NOW!

How often should you buy a new computer? Many techs make money off equipment sales, so exercise caution on new purchases. It is quite reasonable to recommend PC replacement every 3-4 years, and server replacement every 4-5 years. Technology changes rapidly; it can be absurdly expensive to maintain old equipment. More

frequent upgrades are rarely necessary unless a machine dies.

What about upgrades on older machines? That's another money-maker for techs, but except for inexpensive five-minute memory upgrades, it's generally best to save for a brand-new, up-to-date, spyware-free machine. By the way, it's almost impossible to build a computer cheaper than mass producers like Dell.

That Took A Long Time to Fix!

In the corporate world, PCs are loaded with identical software, from operating system to Office to anything else that's corporate standard. Expensive security systems lock down the computer to the point that it's hard to do serious damage. In this environment, it's a breeze to fix rebellious PCs. Any problem more complicated than a quick setting change can be solved by re-imaging the PC. It's pretty simple: insert an image CD, run it to restore the computer back to normal, plug the computer back in to the network, and voila!

In the small biz world, life is not so simple. Every client has a different setup, with few consistent standards, no imaging CDs, maybe not even the original restore disks. Varying degrees of security and computer expertise makes it difficult to find problems.

The bottom line? The average small-business owner will have more computer problems than his corporate counterpart, and the problems will take longer to fix. While you can't change the circumstances, you can minimize the problem by selecting good tech support. Find someone experienced in working with companies of your size, with similar tech support needs. No

tech knows the answer to every question, but the good ones are excellent diagnosticians with the resources to find the answers you need.

Now Something Else Is Wrong!

Unbelievable. You get that spyware cleaned up, or your email working, or your server online...but now something else is wrong. Your tech has to come out again! Don't take this as a sign of incompetence or an attempt to pad the bill. It's simply a consequence of running complex systems. You have several hundred thousand files on your computer, along with registry entries, configuration files and more. In the corporate environment, with tight standardization and controls, follow-up visits are unusual, but in the small biz world it's an all-too-frequent occurrence.

Shouldn't This Popular Software Program Actually Work?

Everyone, from Microsoft to Intuit to Adobe, has bugs in their software. Consider the number of operating systems, dozens of different computer processors, thousands of peripherals, and millions—if not billions—of computer configurations, and it's a small miracle that software products work at all.

Reputable vendors usually provide stable software year after year, but there are notable exceptions. Just this year, Norton 2005, Act! 2005, and the latest version of Retrospect Lite have all been bug-infested. The next releases will improve, I'm sure, but what a shock to uncover these unexpected issues!

Good techs keep up with this and will quickly uncover problems with new software updates to popular programs. Power users

of complex packages like QuickBooks or Act! may wish to work with a specialist who can fill them in on the details and quirks of each new release.

Finding A Trustworthy Tech

The difference between a trustworthy tech and a terrible tech can be hard to discern, especially when you run into issues. Despite the myth of the “easy-to-use computer,” tech support is a complicated business that requires expert skills.

How can you tell if a tech company has these skills? Look for techs with a long line-up of satisfied clients, and pay attention to how they work. Good techs are quick to admit they don’t have all the answers, but they have the resources to find them. They take an organized and logical approach to troubleshooting. They ask good questions, to ensure that they understand what you want and need, both now and in the future. The very best are able to explain what they are doing, patiently and in plain English.

On good days, you need a trustworthy tech; on bad days, you can’t do without one.

*Wendy Gauntt (wendy@cioservice
sllc.com) is president of CIO Services,
LLC, a technology consulting company
that specializes in small business solu-
tions.*