

TECH SUPPORT INSANITY:

How to Turn Nightmares Into Sweet Dreams

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It's late at night. You're up putting the finishing touches on that killer proposal. The deadline is tomorrow. All of a sudden, you get a blue screen on your computer that says, "Beginning dump of physical memory..." (or for Mac users: you get a picture of a bomb and then a feminine, mechanical voice starts to repeat "Error..."). Being the 'all-hat-wearing-super-entrepreneur' that you are, you reason that a simple reboot will solve the dilemma. You try to reboot and it's a 'no-boot'. Your system might be dead and you're losing precious deadline time. And what's worse? You have no idea how to fix it or even go about fixing it! Arrgghh! Jane, stop this crazy thing!!

We've all been there. And if you haven't, then rest assured, your turn is not too far down the road. Small business owners count on their equipment to work and work hard. For them, there's no help desk just an extension away.

Rebecca Lane has been one of the fortunate ones. Lane, the President of Digital-Women.com, reports mainly sweet dreams and really has had, "no problem with any hardware." She even purchased a scanner that didn't work and the company took it back with, "no questions asked." However, Lane could remember tough times when her ISP (Internet Service Provider) was purchased by another company and they changed support hours from 24-hour support to 9am to 5pm. But, she "stuck with them and they eventually switched back to 24-hour support and things were better than ever before."

Fixing computer problems is a nightmare for most small business owners. And make no mistake, support nightmares reach everyone everywhere. Just ask the staff over in Hertford, NC, at Design By K, a web design and marketing resource company. Kim R. Howell, had just purchased a new computer. She called the computer manufacturing company for support but, "the only way to get support was through a 900 number," she exclaims. Howell states, "It cost over \$80 for the phone call - just to find out how to configure the modem. And they didn't even know what was wrong. We were left on hold several times so that they could figure out what the problem was - on our dime!"

It may seem as if small business owners have been forsaken by the support industry and left to handle technical malfunctions on their own. Or have they? Maybe not. There are hundreds of services, technical professionals and tech-guru-wanna-be's that are there to help you. They make fast promises to be quick and painless and to have you up and running in no time. But, they can't do it alone. Enter due diligence.

Help Yourself

Be proactive. "IT support is essential for any business. One mistake that small businesses make is underestimating the internal costs of providing support to employees," says Joanne Charley, Director of Marketing at PCsupport.com, a leading provider of eSupport solutions for businesses and consumers. In other words, small businesses owners should factor support into their budgets when purchasing anything requiring technical support.

Know your stuff. Keep a list of the software and hardware that you have in your office. For software, include dates of purchase, versions (yes, you should include the numbers after the 'dot') and Product ID and license numbers. For hardware, include dates of purchase, the place of purchase, serial numbers and the version, Product ID, service packs and license numbers of the software that came with the hardware if any. Keep in mind that most companies have several, if not many, versions of the same piece of software. The chief complaint of support companies is customers that don't know which versions of the

product they have installed on their computers. Keep these lists updated and off-site. It won't help you if you have all this wonderful information saved to your hard drive that just crashed.

Just the facts. When calling for support, they don't need to know where you live or what you do at your place of business. They do, however, need to know the basics. What make and model computer you have, what OS (operating system) you are using and the specific details of the problem. Be short and to the point. The less time you ramble about your problem, the more time you give them to help you. If they want to know anything else, they will ask.

You've Got Options

So, you ask, "Just how do I get this support anyway?" Well, look no further, business-owner, you've got options.

You can purchase the extended warranty when you purchase the equipment (but, this is only good for hardware). You can: 1) purchase blocks of general support time, 2) get support 'insurance' to cover each PC individually from a company like PCsupport.com, 3) go to a web site like epeople.com, where users who need help are matched with IT service providers who can deliver the assistance needed or 4) stop by TechPointer.com, for more advanced, self-directed computer users.

At PCsupport.com, "Customers have two options - they can choose to pay \$149.95 per PC per year or they can hire PCsupport.com to develop their own customized, web-based support service," Charley says.

The Moral Is...

To all you support companies and departments, small business owners want you to know that they want quality, toll-free support - especially if they've just purchased the item. I know, I know. The whole question of toll-free support has been an issue of heated debate. Maybe a solution would be to offer toll-free support for the first thirty days (which, by the way, is what many companies are doing).

And not all customers need toll-free support. Some are just fine with email support. KJ, of ALEASE COMMUNICATIONS, a business consulting firm in New York, states that her ISP wasn't proactive in getting back to her. KJ complains that, "The ISP sent the wrong software for our DSL installation. The solution was so simple solution that they could have just sent the patch via email with instructions and we could have been up and running faster." KJ's advice to these companies? "LEARN THE RULES!"

To all you small business owners: stop expecting the impossible. Especially if you haven't given the support company all the information they need to slay the technical dragons. Be thorough with your system configuration details. Give them time to respond and thank them for a job well done when you get quality support. Following these simple tips will ensure that your next support experience is a dream.

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