

Savvy Tips For Calling Tech Support

By Bruce Pechman, The Muscleman of TechnologySM
bruce@mrbicep.com



The Dreaded Call to Tech Support. Nobody likes to call the support number for assistance with any product whether it's for software or hardware, new or existing products. Dialing that dreaded support line means we have pretty much exhausted our own ability to deal with issues preventing us from executing some computer-related function. There is good reason users face apprehension when getting ready to call. Unless you're dialing "Dell or Gateway", there is no guarantee you will even reach manned support personnel. Most software and hardware vendors retain a bare bone skeleton crew these days. The rationale from the corporate standpoint is Support and Help Desks are not "profit centers" (the pay-per-incident business models just don't work for end users) and there is an enormous industry shift to web related support and assistance. In fact, if you have called any support line recently, you will have gotten the heinous 3-5 minute automated voice cue advising you on how to get just about any type of support sans a live technician. Reminds me of a saying I once heard—"You don't tell the rats that the rats are in the maze do you?" Yes, this is all intentionally set up this way to make sure we don't call support at the drop of a hat. Toll-free support has just about vanished. A popular alternative is free support, but you rack up the long distance charges (another reason to re-read my October "Talk is Cheap" article).

The Boiling Point is Near. Now imagine some desperate user from Perry, GA with an emergency situation such as a computer that won't boot or a critical document that fails to print. After what probably seems like an eternity, he may get a support rep that has less than 2 months on the job, which in turn may seem like the blind leading the blind. The ugly truth in Tier 1 support is that many help desk jockeys will try and match your problem or symptoms from an internal database of past solutions and known problems. If your problem does not match that database...let the games begin! These support reps are notorious for dispatching a "kill a mosquito with a hammer" solution, with no regard for your data or system stability.

Eternal Hold Times, Incompetent Help Desks, My Problem is Still Unresolved, Oh My! To help keep you from losing your sanity on your next journey down the halls of hellish support, I have compiled some tips and strategies to weave your way through the support maze, and turn the nightmare into a pleasant dream. OK, I exaggerate a little, but I promise you improved results.

The Ball is in Your Court. Although obvious, there really is a wealth of good technical resources available on the web. It goes without saying to at least check the manufacturer's site and search their on-line knowledge base and FAQ's before calling. While you're there, check to see if a patch or upgrade is applicable to your problem. By the way, don't you just hate it when you're ready to spill your guts to the first breathing human that comes on the line, only to hear them burp: first name, last name etc. The first thing I would change in the training of support personnel is the greeting. "You have reached the support staff at ABC company and we are going to try our best to help you resolve your problem but will need a little information from you first". Seems apparent to me—why not to them? OK, let's get down to business. Calling in the early morning is key; I have found about 15 minutes after opening is best. Call right at opening and they may not be in yet, or just getting settled in and cranky. Depending on your problem, you would best arm yourself beforehand with the following information:

- Product Name
- Date Purchased
- Model Number
- Serial Number

- Driver Version
- Operating System Version
- Peripherals attached to your system
- Specifics about error message (if displayed, use ALT+Print Screen if necessary)
- Any applications running when error occurred
- Have you changed anything to your rig recently that could have percolated this
- If you already tried some things, let the rep know...been there done that

If you're calling about an online or Internet issue (like your ISP), then be prepared with your Internet browser version, modem make and model, your account number, user name and password. Nevertheless, have a pen and pad handy because you need to do some grilling up front as well. Get the rep's direct phone number and extension, full name (if last name is off limits, get the rep's ID number). You will also need to jot down what is called the Case Number or Incident Report Number that they may generate for your call. This will protect you in the event of disconnection or if further action is required. One last thing that will be very helpful to the ear on the other end of the line is whether you can reproduce this problem, or if it is intermittent.

Getting Satisfaction. If you are frustrated with the rep that is working with you, there are options. Sometimes the rep just may be hard for you to understand due to poor connect or nasty dialect. You may get a rep that you can tell is bad news (like the newby on the job explained above). Remember, just like a Doctor recommending surgery, a second opinion can be insightful. You can either politely ask to be transferred to be next in the queue, or just call back. You must be diplomatic, but you have the right to ask for a more experienced rep or an escalation of the call. One trick that I do is ask "Can you check real quickly if any of the other reps have heard of this problem?" Never hang up without a plan of action! At the conclusion of your call, ask specifically what the next steps are. If the call is being elevated, ask when you can expect to hear back from them, and what to do if you don't hear from them by that time. Ask who will be following up with you and what department they work in. Ask for the name of their superior or their manager's name in the event of an impasse. When you ask questions like these they can ascertain you're not a rollover type and mean business. You will have a much greater chance of satisfaction. Good luck and remember to never lose your cool, ever.

RESOURCES: These resources are a good starting point for asking questions on-line for FREE. The Microsoft FAQ's can be a real time saver, and Protonic offers a very nice free service. There are also several other sites out there to assist with your problems, so get hunting.

<http://support.microsoft.com/directory/faqs.asp>

<http://www.protonic.com/>