

Support Line!

Good computer support requires more than a service contract. *By Jon "maddog" Hall*

In a recent Internet column, a “gripe-line” columnist lamented that “support does not seem what it used to be” and wondered whether people ever got good support or whether they only received it after turning to a columnist like her to make the vendor provide it. Her column was followed by a series of comments that ranged from “no one will ever get good support again” to angry statements about our capitalistic system and how greed for profits marginalizes both good products and good support services.

I think users have seen the end of good support services on closed source products and will never see it on these products again.

In the early days of computing, if the one computer system you owned was down and your whole company came to a standstill – particularly if that one computer cost you millions of dollars – you breathed fire until it was fixed. Additionally, you were one of perhaps a thousand customers, and if your provider lost you as a client, it hurt them almost immediately.

Today, you might be one of millions of customers, and if a company loses your business, they will quickly get another customer. Even if they lost a thousand customers, they might not really “feel” it. However, the scramble for bottom line dollars is intense, so making your displeasure in regard to service known to thousands of potential customers can goad companies into action.

The real problem, however, deals both with the diversity of the audience and the complexity of modern-day GUI-based software and the ability to debug something over the phone or through email. Both of these issues are causing higher support costs for little perceived return on support revenues.

Consider switching this aspect of the computer industry from a closed source product business to an open source service business. For a closed source product, the ultimate support comes from the product’s manufacturer. If that manufacturer does not provide you with good support, you have two choices:

- Do without support.
- Do without the product.

If you have already bought the product and the warranty on it is “less than satisfying,” you probably can’t get your money back. And, because the vendor

already has your money, they might not be particularly motivated to spend more on you, even if you are paying a support contract.

Now think about buying an open source software service. The software itself typically costs little or nothing in license payments. You are allowed to use that software regardless of whether you have a service contract. If you purchase service and that service is not to your expectations, you can find a different service provider that might do a better job. Knowing this, the first service provider is likely to do their best to satisfy you because this is the only way they can continue to make money.

Having these service providers more local to you would be an interesting twist. For example, my niece recently had a problem with her computer system. She could not get dual monitors working for her Windows-based PC. When she plugged the second monitor into another PC, it worked fine, so she knew the problem was not the monitor. She then took the system box to a local repair shop, and they re-installed Windows and a second monitor worked fine. She retrieved the system, plugged in her monitors but the second monitor still did not work. Back to the store.

Three trips later, with ever more expensive bills, she still could not get the second monitor working. Then I showed up and volunteered to look at the system. However, I looked at it in her home and saw that the cable to her second monitor had two shorted pins. When she had tested the monitor with another system, she’d used the cable from that system, not realizing the monitor’s cable could be bad. I was able to determine the issue because I could see the entire problem, not just the parts she presented to the store.

Someone once said a picture is worth a thousand words. If that’s true, then having a support person sit down beside you and watch while you walk through the problem must be worth a million words – and a good salary. 

