



Consumer Watch: On-Site? Next Day? No Way!

Getting your PC manufacturer to make a house call can be a real chore.

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When the disk drive in Michael Segal's Dell Dimension bit the dust, he was not too worried. Back when he purchased the PC, he had shelled out a hundred dollars to pay for an extra year of on-site, next-business-day service. So he figured the fix was a phone call and a few hours away.

But that's not how things worked out. Segal, chief technical officer of a medical software company located in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, called Dell tech support and soon found himself involved in a lengthy diagnostic process on the telephone. "I didn't mind that," says Segal, "It makes sense for the company to determine what's wrong with the system before they send someone to repair it."

After the tech support representative confirmed Segal's suspicion that the disk drive needed to be replaced, however, Segal discovered that "next business day" service applies only when the necessary parts are in stock. And you guessed it--the disk drive he needed wasn't in stock.

The technician and the new drive eventually showed up six business days later. But Segal was left feeling that Dell had misrepresented its 'next business day' service. "[The company's failure] to stock basic parts converts the service to a 'next business week' plan, which should carry a very different price tag," he says.

More Than a Phone Call

Companies are quick to tout the ease and convenience of on-site service plans, which can certainly be tempting, especially to novices and users who reach for antacid at the very thought of going under their PC's hood. Ironically, though, the process of persuading your PC vendor to send a technician can be more frustrating and time-consuming than the problem itself.

Many customers incorrectly assume that with on-site coverage, all they have to do is pick up the phone and a trained technician will be on the way. The reality? That phone call is more likely to launch you into a round of telephone diagnostics. If you're lucky, the technician on the horn solves your problem. If not, you may be plunged into the nether regions of techno-hell, spending tedious hours on the line with tech support, repeated diagnostic procedures, software reinstallations, and reboots.

That's because almost all on-site service contracts specify that on-site technicians are dispatched strictly at the company's discretion, and only after extensive phone-based troubleshooting. If you've ever done time in a tech support phone queue, you know what that can mean: Clear your schedule and fire up the coffeemaker. In some cases, even if you qualify for on-site service, companies may expect you to install new cards or other parts that *they* think don't involve much technical know-how.

And even when the company concludes that an on-site visit is justified, it's not unusual, judging from the letters I've received from frustrated consumers, for the service to be delayed--as it was in Segal's case--by the lack of a part. Of respondents to a recent *PC World* survey who received on-site service, nearly 30 percent waited three days or more for a technician to arrive.

Dan Allen, Dell's director of consumer and small-business marketing services, cites a number of reasons why Dell

may not have a part available. The out-of-stock item may be an older part that seldom fails, or it may be a common part that the company has to install frequently and so may run out of. Or the industry may be suffering through a shortage, as with the scarcity last year of LCD monitors. "It's possible that the drive in [Segal's] case was unavailable because of demand," Allen says. Dell's description of its next-day service (which appears on its Web site) includes a warning that service may be delayed if a part is out of stock.

Dell recently downgraded the basic warranty plan for most of its desktop PCs from three years to one. The company currently offers a year of free coverage for parts, labor (including next-business-day, on-site service), and phone support, with options for extended coverage ranging from \$69 to \$119. Most other major computer vendors, including MicronPC and Gateway, offer similar service plans, with on-site service either free for a limited time or available for an extra fee.

When you pay for on-site service, however, it's important to know what you are--and what you *aren't*--buying. The best way to do that is to read the vendor's description of its service carefully. In virtually all cases, you'll find that one thing you don't get is freedom from having to try to solve the problem yourself with a phone technician's help.

Telephone diagnostics are essential to high-quality tech support, Dell's Allen insists. "The key to success is knowing what's wrong," he says, "and we can't dispatch a technician until we know what the problem is. And the fact is, we're able to resolve 80 to 90 percent of calls without ever dispatching a technician. You wouldn't go to the doctor and not answer questions or have tests--it's the same with the phone technician."

Well, maybe. But you wouldn't expect your doctor to keep you on the phone for hours while he talks you through removing your own appendix. And that's how the on-site service system feels to some consumers.

Lorna Rush, a real estate agent in Acton, Massachusetts, says she spent hours on tech support hold when her MicronPC notebook suddenly quit working. "I had to call back at least eight times," she says, "and each time I'd end up with a different technician and would have to repeat the entire history. I also got disconnected at least once and had to go back to the beginning of the queue after spending 30 minutes on hold. It took weeks to resolve the problems, and I felt like the technicians were simply reading to me from a textbook."

MicronPC representatives declined to comment on Rush's case. However, her complaint is a common one made about many PC makers.

Gateway representative Lisa Emard says, "There's no hard-and-fast rule about whether a technician will be dispatched to fix a problem, but the customer's attitude and comfort level definitely is a factor."

Okay, so getting on-site service isn't quite as simple as it sounds when you buy your PC. But that doesn't mean it has to be an ordeal. Here are some tips for making the process as smooth as possible:

Do your homework. Go online and learn everything you can about the problem by visiting your PC maker's and software developers' tech support sites, as well as resources such as AskMe.com, Expertcity.com, and PCWorld.com's Expert Help.

When you call tech support, expect to spend some time troubleshooting and be prepared with detailed notes on your problem. If you don't feel confident in the support technician's expertise, make sure you ask for a supervisor.

Keep a log including dates, times, names of technicians, and incident numbers. Take notes or consider recording the conversation (make sure you inform the rep that you're doing so, to conform to applicable state laws), so you can refer to the record later if necessary.

If you're uncomfortable with the level of technical expertise required for the diagnostics or repairs you're being asked to do, insist on a visit from a technician, even if the phone rep hesitates. Explain your concerns calmly and logically. If the representative still refuses, ask to speak to a manager. Well-managed support departments will honor reasonable concerns and requests from customers.

If a needed component or part is out of stock, ask for an alternative. You might not get it--Dell's Allen says such requests are honored only if the alternative is technically viable and "engineering approved"--but it's still worth a try.

You might just end up with an upgrade.

If you schedule a visit from a technician, back up your hard drive (if possible) well before the visit.

Clear your schedule and plan to be there during the visit. The technician will have plenty of questions for you, and you need to know what he or she is doing in case problems crop up later.

PC users shouldn't have to spend entire days of their lives coaxing a technician to make a house call. But until getting help for a problem PC is as easy as picking up the phone, you'll need a lot of time and even more patience.

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