

Learn-IT Newsletter for the month of July, 2005

7 Steps to Make Your Tech Support Call More Effective

by Mark Flores, MCP, MCSE

You're just adding the finishing touches to that proposal due by the end of the day when suddenly the screen goes completely blue and the following cryptic message displays in bright white letters:

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EXPLORER caused an invalid page fault in module MFC42.DLL at 0177:6c3cbf55
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When your mind finishes racing to remember the last time you saved your document, and after pounding your keyboard a few times for good measure, you realize that you need technical support. If you are like most people, calling for tech support is usually not the most pleasant experience. And if you are in the midst of a deadline, tech support can be a downright horrible experience. If you are ready to call tech support, here are 7 things you should do beforehand to get the most out of your call:

1. **Reboot the machine.** Strangely enough and more often than not, the problem you experience will be a one-time glitch that can be resolved by simply rebooting your machine. A one-time error is a glitch that can be ignored, but if the error happens again, your computer has a problem.
2. **Get the specifics.** If you are receiving an error message, either print the message (see below for help with the 'Print Screen' button) or write it down. If you are getting multiple errors, note each one. If you are not getting an error message, carefully note what is happening, what programs are running when it happens and whether the problem can be reproduced.
3. **Get the vitals.** If you are calling the computer manufacturer, have the service code, serial number and/or model number handy. It's also helpful to know the operating system you are using.
4. **What's new?** Errors usually occur after you have either added or removed a piece of equipment or software. Think back to the last major addition or deletion from your computer and note it.
5. **Know who to call.** If you have a brand name computer, call the company who makes it, especially if your machine is still under warranty. Almost all computers have at least a one-year warranty on parts and service, and you should take advantage of that added value. If you are adding a new part or software package, call the specific manufacturer for support.
6. **Call during 'off-peak' hours.** Everyone discovers their computer problems when they get to work in the morning. If you want to avoid hours of hold Muzak, try calling in the early afternoon or evening.
7. **Get the name and number.** When you finally do get to speak with a tech support agent, be sure to get his or her name, get a case number so you can reference your incident if you need to call back, and if possible, get the tech support agent's direct number or extension (this can save you a whole lot of headache with future calls).

How to take a snapshot of your screen:

Your keyboard has a button labeled "Print Scrn" (print screen). When you press the Print Scrn button, whatever your screen is displaying at the time will be transferred as an image to your operating system's clipboard. You can open a blank document (Word, Wordpad or Notepad, for example) and Paste the image into the document which can then be saved, printed or e-mailed as necessary.

The more information you have before making the call, the faster you will find a resolution for your computer problem. These days, companies are retaining or losing customers based on the quality of their technical support. If you need to contact tech support, try to be patient, but report any problems you have with your experience so these companies can make the necessary improvements.

Relevant Terminology

Driver – A driver is a piece of software that allows a physical device in the computer to communicate and work with the operating system. For example, when you first plug in your mouse, your computer will need to install a mouse driver so the operating system can recognize the mouse's input. Operating systems already have many drivers pre-installed, but if your OS does not have the correct driver, you may need to install it from the disk that comes with your device (or download it from the manufacturer's web site).

Registry – The registry is a database of every installed hardware device, software application, setting and configuration for your computer. The registry runs behind the scenes, is very complex and should only be manually accessed by a computer professional. Accidentally deleting or modifying a setting in the registry can ruin the installation of your OS and lose your data. However, the registry is often where the root of computer problems exist, so you may need to make changes under the direction of tech support.

BSOD – When Microsoft Windows wants to let you know that something is very wrong with the OS, it will sometimes display the “Blue Screen of Death”. This term was coined by Windows users for the common blue screen that appears with an error message. Usually the error can be fixed, and does not necessarily mean the ‘death’ of your computer.

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