

Computer Tech Support

The Same Old Story Revisited

This month's column is on a favorite topic of "Tools and Tips" readers: computer tech support. This is a hot-button issue, with received mail peaking on it. Here's the best of that mail, plus the continuing saga of my computer experiences. On the latter, you'll read how I retired the trouble-prone old Pentium, and bought a new Pentium II office machine.

Computer Tech Support: This was first a column topic in the Aug. 4, 1997 "Tools and Tips," and was later revisited in the Nov. 3, 1997 column. And, the mail still comes in!

We start off with a thoughtful letter from Gordon Carter, chief engineer of Chicago's WFMT radio station, and associated radio networks.

I just read your Nov. 3, 1997 piece on computer tech support. I missed the first, so I may not have all the details, but I wanted to comment on your video problem story.

You didn't mention who was the PC vendor, so all of this may not be applicable. Many "manufacturers" of PC's are simply assembly houses. They buy the case, power supply, motherboard (MB), etc. from various vendors and put it all together into a computer. They slap their logo sticker on the case, and it then becomes an "XYZ" computer.

The problem with this business is that, in many cases, no one there has any idea about the complexities of drivers, chips, etc. If it doesn't work, they have no idea why, and assume it is the fault of the software or peripheral. Rarely do they expect the problem you had, because they have no idea what is happening on that board anyway.

If the problem was with the board, they should have referred you to the MB manufacturer, who could have directed you properly.

The best way to deal with a computer is to know who makes every component in it, and contact them. The "fix list" is endless for various combinations of parts—you need a computer just to keep track of the options.

For those who are serious about PC service, there is a priceless CD-ROM publication, the "Micro House Techni-

cal Library," also known as "MTL" (www.supportsource.com/ssready/mtl.htm, or call (800) 926-8299). Most Certified Netware Engineers (CNE) know about it.

Novell incidentally, has a quite thorough certification program. A CNE probably knows a lot about the inner workings of PC's as well as networking, since that's all part of the testing. There are courses you can take (usually in the \$5000 range), or you can self-study. There also are some excellent books available for \$100 or less.

The "MTL" CD-ROM is rather pricey, but you do get quarterly updates. It includes data and pictures of virtually every PC part made, including MBs. I have a demo, and have found just that to be useful. You can browse through the pictures until you find a match. Yes, I know this isn't audio, but it is a matter of our professional survival.

Hi Gordon, good to hear from you. Yes, I've used an "XYZ" computer from the local computer store, and have seen the sort of process you describe. This scenario is most certainly a buyer-beware conditional deal.

Nevertheless, it can work, if you have a PC shop nearby with an individual who is technically very knowledgeable, and willing to work hard in supporting customers. I bought an "XYZ" computer under those circumstances, one which had incubation-stage MB problems. The shop owner hung in with it, and replaced things until it finally worked satisfactorily.

On keeping your own PC records, you are dead right on this one. This is basically what I've done on all the computers I've used. You do need to stay in touch with various USENET and other support groups, keep good files, and so on.

TIP: I checked further into your two recommended tools, the MTL and the CNE training, and found some useful information. In addition to the MTL, Micro House also has more gen-

eral support available for hard disks and other computer items, at:

www.supportsource.com/s2main.htm. I also found a listing for CNE training related books, one example being a series by Michael Moncur, available for \$30 and up. You'll find these at: www.starlingtech.com/books/store.htm. (Note: I haven't seen these books in the flesh, this is simply availability information.)

A Problem PC Dies, and a New One Is Born: Readers following this column know that the genesis of the tech support topic came from problems with my 100-MHz Pentium machine, bought in the fall of 1995.

Almost two years to the day, this machine delivered its final "straw" of misbehavior, when it mysteriously shut down abruptly (in the middle of doing nothing). When a reboot was attempted, the ominous blue screen of a unique "Windows Death" reported "missing files." The machine would only boot to DOS. Closer examination showed a Windows directory just about completely blown away. Running Scandisk produced a cheerful creation of over 200 file fragments, and dozens of "DIRxx" recovered directories. *What to do now?*

Under such circumstances, the computer techies tell you to: 1. "Reinstall Windows 95, plus any additional applications necessary," and if that doesn't work; 2. "Repartition and reformat your hard disk, then do step 1." Nothing like a day or so of lost time doing 1 and 2, then weeks of reconfiguring those application settings.

Reinstalling Windows 95 got the machine up and running again, but in a crippled mode. The only good news in all this folly was that my data files, containing various working documents, hadn't been damaged.

At this point, I had had it. I wrote a letter to the company president documenting all of the machine's pathetic history (including copies of the two past columns describing it), and then began to research a new machine.

My complaint was acknowledged a month later by a form letter, informing me they would be in contact. Another month later, I got the final kiss-off from this PC company, whose analysis



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(without any contact whatsoever) showed that my machine problems "stemmed from software." As the letter went, this made the problems unsupported, "since we do not support software after the first 30 days." Disk controller chips are software related?

To relate back to Gordon's comments, in this case, the MB manufacturer is the PC vendor. They wouldn't service my requests on the hard disk controller chip bugs, that is, the flaky chip that they had selected for use on their MB! The computer's crash-and-burn saga was a third and final strike. Time to move on.

TIP: Is there a lesson in all this? I think so. The message is that complaints to the top don't always receive a just resolution. So be prepared to trim your losses and move elsewhere.

Given all that, I then worked hard on identifying a suitable new machine. At the time, early December 1997, the PC market was populated at the high end by a number of 266- to 300-MHz Pentium II PCs. I studied reviews and web sites, trying to pin down the best combination of features, performance, vendor support, and integrity of the MB and its associated feature set, plus price.

I considered custom mail-delivery PC vendors such as Gateway 2000 and Micron, as well as more traditional vendors like Compaq, HP, and IBM. I leaned toward a final choice of a completely assembled, integrated name-vendor system, one which also had an Intel MB with the related "LX" chipset.

The final choice was a preconfigured Micron Millennia SKU 300, a 300-MHz Pentium II system with 64 Mbytes of RAM, an AGP video system, and a large hard drive (www.micronpc.com/products/computersnow/). The machine came in three days, and worked right out of the box in almost all regards. I did call the 24-hour tech support about a small configuration item, but that was readily resolved.

Things seemed OK, until I noticed after a day or so, that when in DOS, the three drives (C, D, and E) available under Windows were reduced to just C! And, F disk also reported that I had didn't have three drives either. To make a long story short, this problem was found to be related to a nonstandard hard-disk partitioning, as part of the original set up. This condition produced some ominous sounding error

messages from my favorite hard disk utility, Partition Magic from Powerquest (www.powerquest.com/). Among these were: "Partition didn't end on cylinder boundary," and "Starting sector of partition is inconsistent."

I wanted to be able to access all of the three drives, from either DOS or Windows, and ultimately, also be able to boot from another partition. To address the problem, I had to remove all the original data from the hard disk, then repartition and reformat it in a standard fashion. If this sounds a bit scary, it is! But it also happens to be much easier with the use of Partition Magic and a spare hard disk I happened to have on hand. So, after the repartitioning, I ended up with the same three drives, but all accessible from either DOS or Windows 95. Plus, I now had the ability to set up a second partition as bootable for a future OS such as NT or Linux.

In fairness to Micron, I ran this entire article by them for comment, and they had this to say:

"Micron Electronics currently sets all hard-drive partitions to use the maximum amount (2 Gbytes) permitted by the DOS FAT16 architecture. We don't use 'non-standard hard-drive partitioning' in any case. Even in the best of circumstances, after a machine has been used for any length of time by the customer, it is extraordinarily difficult to diagnose partition problems and determine an exact cause of failure.

Use of FDISK commands, software, any number of viruses, and many other factors can all cause the symptoms Mr. Jung describes. In the case of partition corruption, regardless of the cause, the correction is to FDISK and reformat the hard drive to ensure the proper partition creation. Perhaps distasteful, it does ensure that the hard drive is functioning properly.

During Mr. Jung's experience with the Micron Millennia XKU, he notes that he had 'a small configuration item, which was readily resolved by Micron tech support.' In his effort to resolve the partition configuration issue, he did not indicate (and our records do not show) he contacted our Technical Support team.

Regardless of where the problem occurred, Micron Electronics stands behind its products with the best war-

ranty and service in the industry. Contacting our Technical Support about this problem would have quickly confirmed the existence of the problem on the phone, and they could have offered one of two courses of action: 1. Help Mr. Jung reformat and reload his system to correct the problem (a few hours to complete), or 2. if still under 30 days from shipment, offered to replace the system at no charge (a few days to complete).

Micron Electronics wants our customers to be pleased with their purchase and performance of their Micron computers. Should Mr. Jung, or any Micron customer, encounter problems with their Micron product, we strongly encourage them to contact our Technical Support team at 888-FIX-MYPC anytime, 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

With regard to disk partitioning on the as-received machine, I have furnished Micron with a Partition Magic created data file of the machine's partition analysis in parallel with this article (originally made within a few days of receipt). Since I started using the new Pentium II machine on a day-day basis, it has been generally reliable (but not without some typical Windows 95 quirks). Only time will tell how reliable the new machine will be longer term, and more importantly, how support problems will be resolved.

Computer Tech Support in future columns: My feeling is that there is only so much that we as individuals can really do to change it. And, we have already discussed some very important basic points. In truth, the really worthwhile improvements in support need to come from the PC hardware and software vendors.

We simply need better answers to these problems. These difficulties lie not with us, but with the software (and hardware) that runs our PCs. See, for example, the USENET newsgroups alt.windows95, microsoft.public.win95.setup or "Bugging Out," by John C. Dvorak, *PC Computing*, Feb. 1998. I can only hope that the future holds better experiences for all of us.

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