



## Get the Most Out of Software Tech Support

(Including Ours)

By Frank Gallinelli

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Maybe it's because our software products are intuitive and easy to learn; maybe it's because we provide readable documentation; or maybe it's because our customers are intelligent. Probably it's all of the above, but whatever the explanation, we are blessed with receiving a manageable number of technical support requests for our products. That's why, after more than twenty years in the software business, we still don't find it necessary to chase people away by charging for single-user support.

Most companies really do want you to enjoy the benefit of their products and are genuinely willing to provide help when you need it. It's also good business. Many of our own sales are repeat sales or referrals from current customers.

Some companies just don't get it, however. Probably everyone reading this article has had at least one experience like this one: Several years ago, we used a particular company to host our web site. Things generally went well but no technology is perfect and from time to time we would encounter a problem. We would send a very precise description of the problem. The reply, if any, would either have nothing whatsoever to do with our question or would be 10 or fewer cryptic words which no amount of parsing could convert into English. The only way you could possibly improve your customer support experience with such a firm would be to end it.

On the other hand, if you're dealing with a company that does want to be helpful, you can contribute mightily to the solution by following some simple guidelines.

- 1) Identify yourself. Give your name, of course, as well as your customer ID if you have one. Providing your telephone number can also help most companies find you in their database. If a company provides free tech support for software they usually want to know that they're talking to a registered user.
- 2) Provide the name of the program and the version number. This is really important. Unless a company has only one product and it's in its first release, the support tech will almost surely have to write back and ask you for this information. If you specify this up front, you'll eliminate one round-trip set of emails that stands between you and the answer.
- 3) If the software is available for both Windows and Macintosh, specify which. It can sometimes be useful to mention which version of the operating system.
- 4) To get a specific answer you have to ask a specific question. This is the most important issue and it is the greatest cause of delay in solving a user's problem. If you send an email that says, "I can't install the program," you might as well send one instead that says, "Shaquille O'Neal is big." We would need to write back and ask, "What program, PC or Mac, how did you try to install, what happened when you tried?" If you take the time to ask a detailed question, (i.e., "When I did A and B, the program did C although I thought it would do D. Why not D?") then your chances of receiving a useful answer on the first try are vastly improved.

In a perfect world, none of us would need tech support. We heard that's coming in the next upgrade, Life, V. 2.0. In the meantime, these guidelines may help us all do a better job.