Troubleshooting Your PC

By Steven E. Fitch MBA

At a time when brand-new computers can sell for under $400, it's hard to make a case for spending $100 on a single tech-support call. Heck, PC's are becoming almost *disposable*. But you shouldn't have to buy a whole new computer just to eradicate spyware or fix your e-mail or a simple virus landed on your PC. Besides, you would have to migrate all your data to the new computer, and could quite possibly encounter the exact same problems again. When your precious data is at stake, or you have an urgent job to finish, your best bet is to work with what you have.

No one, not even me, a person who has been in the industry for over 15 years, want to hassle with tech support to begin with. Stepping through these simple suggestions could eliminate the need to call, or at least save you from going through them all again with the wonk on the other end of the line.

1 Reboot. As simple as this step is, forgetting it is even easier. If you can't click the Start menu to reboot, and Ctrl-Alt-Del doesn't work, try holding down the PC's power button for a few seconds to force the machine to power down. ***Rule number one… when in doubt, reboot.***

NOTE: I don't recommend yanking out the power cord.

2 Plug in. If you're having a hardware problem—something won't turn on or your computer won't recognize a peripheral—make sure all cords are firmly seated, both in the power supply and in the appropriate PC port. If you're comfortable with the Control Panel's area in Windows, navigate to System -> Devices (Device Manager) dialog, check to see if the device is recognized (or if you see any yellow exclamations

❗.

3 Update the Operating System (OS). Make sure your OS is up to date. If you're running Windows XP, visit *http://update.microsoft.com* and let Microsoft check for critical updates. Then check for non-critical updates that look as if they might be relevant to your problem.

4 Update the drivers. If you're having a hardware problem, check the manufacturer's Web site for an updated driver. Conversely, if you've recently updated, try rolling back the driver—going through the Control Panel's Device Manager, finding the device, and double-clicking for the driver dialog. Video card drivers in particular can cause problems that seem totally unrelated to video.

5 Go to the source. Do your software or hardware vendors owe you free tech support? Before you bug your kids, friends, or friends' kids—and before you pay anyone—check this out.

6 Back up. Yes, it's advisable in *any* situation. This won't help fix your problem, but you'll want to have a backup of all your important data before getting down and dirty with tech support.

Free Help on the Net

Believe it or not, there is FREE help available today. Most of which comes from a friend or family member. At this time, I'm referring to industry experts via the Web. See the list below for examples:

NOTE: *I offer two areas for assistance.*

Ask the Tech Guy (http://www.stevenefitch.com/AsktheTech.htm)
Site dedicated to asking (reading) technical questions from small businesses and individuals.

My Strategic Relationships (http://www.stevenefitch.com/StrategicRelationship.htm)
Strategic Relationships I have setup to provide subscribers and visitors alike trusted places to get assistance and/or purchase products and services.

Microsoft's SupportKnowledge Base (http://support.microsoft.com/search)
When Windows misbehaves or you are stumped on how to use a Microsoft application feature, your first stop should be Microsoft's Knowledge Base. Search using keywords or error messages: Most of the help is great step-by-step advice, but don't expect to find the answer you need every time.

Tech Support Guy (www.helponthe.net)
Mike the Tech Support Guy started this site as an antidote to overpriced technical support. His volunteers include everyday people who love computers and contribute often. The site is very simple to use, but you'll find some irrelevant information. Read the rules, search the forums, and register to post messages. With almost 200,000 members, Tech Support Guy is sure to have a hint or two.

WhatIs.com (http://whatis.techtarget.com)
WhatIs.com is part of the SearchTechTarget universe, a database search portal for IT professionals. Its growing encyclopedia is the place to visit if geek-speak is getting you down. Search by keyword or category, or alphabetically.

ExtremeTech (www.extremetech.com)
You might assume that Ziff Davis's ExtremeTech is too technical, but don't be intimidated. The site offers plenty of straightforward information and advice from experts, hardware and software reviews, how-to articles, and busy discussion forums. Often just browsing questions by topic is enough to find the information you need. It helps to know the configuration of your computer system, because if you post here, members will ask.

TechRepublic (http://techrepublic.com)
TechRepublic is an informational, help site for IT professionals and power users. It offers downloads, including printable keyboard shortcuts for Microsoft applications, articles from popular computer authors, and tips for networking professionals. You'll also find discussion forums with useful advice, links to blogs, and white papers.

As stated above, most of your problems can be resolved via the Internet, in most cases for **FREE** – via the listed sites above and/or from the manufacturers site. But nothing beats a good warranty plan on any device that you can *not* fix yourself. So, when the sales person asks you do you want the extended warranty, think about trying to resolve issues with your device and ask yourself, can I repair this?