

# Technical Support Forum

by Paul Black – Pleasant Hill, Calif.

## Part 1: How to Get the Best Service from the Manufacturer

*Investigating, evaluating, budgeting, purchasing, installing and using equipment, are all important steps in making operational improvements at any facility. But, what do you do when trouble happens? How do you get the help you need, when you need it? The **Technical Support Forum** is designed to provide tips and tricks of getting the best possible tech support. This month, Paul Black helps us get connected. [Ed.]*

[Pleasant Hill, CA - March 2003] I happened to notice a cartoon, in a magazine lying around our house the other day, that probably expresses what a lot of people think about technical support in general. It showed a young woman sitting at a computer with a telephone headset on. I don't remember the exact caption, but it was something like: "If you'll wait just a moment I'll try to find a Technical Support representative to abuse you."

I suspect we have all had trouble with technical support reps from time to time. Either we can not hear them clearly, they do not seem to care, the tone of voice they have chosen is, shall we say, less than complementary, or something else about their "assistance" doesn't sit well with us. Usually, we are not in the best mood to begin with.

Normally, you only need to call for help when something is wrong. The bank balance was not correct, or the book club got the billing wrong, or some similar mistake took place. Facing five minutes on hold while they get around to you is no one's idea of a good time, either.

Of course, the problems broadcast engineers face are usually a little more serious than a billing error. Calling a manufacturer for technical support normally is done only when you have a critical failure on your hands. The rig has blown its primary breakers and will not come back, the computer is frozen and the jocks are playing CDs out of the production room – or something similar is keeping the station from working right. You are in trouble, and you need fast, competent, professional help! And you need it NOW!

### Help is Available

That is exactly what the TS (Technical Support) person is there for. But how you go about accessing, and using that help can make the difference between getting out of trouble quickly or making the situation worse.

I have a long history as a working engineer in radio and television. I have been out there on the "firing line" when a blowup happened and it was up to me to restore things. I also have spent many years working for different manufacturers, as an "Applications Engineer" (that is, telephone troubleshooter) and as a "Technical Support Engineer" (also telephone troubleshooter). Having ridden on both ends of the seesaw, I have come to know clearly what each side is up against when the nasty stuff hits the fan.

So, if you are out there in front of that fan, and getting peppered by the unpleasant waste, what are the best things you can do to make it easier? Here are four points to keep in mind.

### 1. Stay Calm.

As silly as this looks at first glance, it is the best advice there is. I quote Botterell's Law, after Art Botterell, an old friend and disaster recovery professional: "Stress creates stupidity." Nothing was ever more true.

Remember the old Navy saying? "When in danger, when in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout." That is what we all tend to do, even if we are not aware of it.

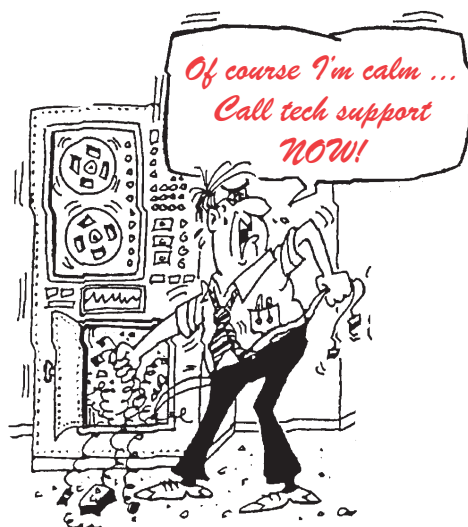
You have to make a conscious decision to keep your wits about you when things blow up. There are a number of obvious reasons for this, but here's the best reason: A calm person is a better observer and reporter. If you call tech support for emergency, or even post-emergency help, the calmer you are, the faster the tech support person will help you get to the bottom of the problem.

A tech support person is depending on your eyes and ears to observe the data necessary to solve the problem. While it is very likely that they have seen or heard of your problem before, or a problem just like it, *you* are the one that controls the information they get, by means of your description of what the sick widget is doing (or not doing).

Do not interpret the support person's attempt to sound calm as being an attitude of "I don't care." Some customers think "It's not *their* station, and *they* don't have a GM breathing down their necks to get things running again."

That is not why that voice on the phone is staying calm. The support person sees trouble all day long. They have learned to stay focused on the problem and ignore the side effects, like yelling co-workers. They also know that if they can keep *you* focused, it will take less time and effort to get the problem under control.

If stress creates stupidity, calm fosters control. Help out the support person ... stay calm.



### 2. Have a Clear, Complete Report Ready

The more complete you can be in reporting trouble symptoms, the better the support person can help you. There is nothing wrong with grabbing the nearest piece of paper and making a few quick notes to read to the tech support person. Having your "ducks in a row" on paper will help a lot.

Of course, to really help, writing out the symptoms needs to be an exercise in accuracy. I once received an e-mail from a customer that said (and I quote): "Our XXX suddenly failed last night. It just quit working. Please e-mail us *the cause of the failure* as soon as possible." (The italics are mine.) I kid you not; this was the actual request.

Well, if I had that kind of "second sight," I could put all those psychics you see on the late-night infomercials out of business. Unfortunately, that is not a talent most technical support people have.

Today even the simplest and least complex piece of equipment will likely have multiple causes for the same failure. The above-referenced XXX was a

complicated digital audio unit. Such a "sudden failure" could have a dozen or so causes. Only by playing detective can the actual cause be found. And to play detective on the phone, you need clues – lots of them.

Some tech support people use the "question" method to get data. The validity of this is that by asking you things in a particular order, they can build in their mind a picture of what is going on. Be willing to answer questions about the problem, even if you have already stated what is going on in your own words.

Another helpful tip: Have your test equipment close-at-hand when you call. The TS person may be able to tell you exactly where the problem is, and how to fix it, if you can just take one quick measurement with your VOM or DMM. If your meter is out in the car in the toolbox, or at some other remote location-like your garage at home, then it might take a little longer to fix your problem. Fire up the scope, the DMM, the trouble light, and whatever else you think might be handy. It could pay off, big time.

### 3. Leave Useful Messages

I have received messages from customers asking me to call "Joe" at "Monsterdopoly Broadcasting in Bigtown" and, upon calling back, have been informed they have four people in Engineering named Joe, plus two salesmen and a traffic coordinator. Which one do I want, they ask? A very good question.

Always leave a last name. It does not matter if you are the only Joe or Tom or Rich or Vladimir working there. Leave a full name. It always makes it easier to get back to you.

As to products, you would be surprised how much it helps to leave a model number, type number, etc. If the TS person knows what item you're dealing with, they can "shift gears" in their head and bring up all the memory stuff they know about that particular item – and also get their computerized help system pointed in the right direction. (Most TS people use a computer database when dealing with problems; information on both customers and equipment systems are usually kept in such a database.)

They can also get a manual for that product out and in front of them, if necessary. This will allow them to get you the answer you need more quickly.

Never leave a phone number where you can't be reached for the next two hours or so. If you carry a cell (and how many radio and TV engineers do not have pcs/cell phones today?), and are going to be on the move, leave *that* number. You need not worry it will "get out" to someone it should not. Technical support people are typically extremely respectful of their customer's rights and privacy.

If you are a contractor, it is especially important that you leave a number where you can be reached. I've found that many station employees do not know the name of the contract engineer and are of little help when the technical support person calls back and asks for the station's engineer. Don't expect the technical support person to have to chase you down.

Remember, too, having the TS person leave a voice mail for you can not solve most technical support problems. The TS person will probably have to talk to you to get you out of trouble.

One last tip: if you do leave your callback number on a voice-mail, leave it s-l-o-w-l-y. To "parrot" out a name or number can make it really tough to understand. It does not hurt to say it twice, by the way, especially if you are on a pcs/cell phone. There are such things as dropouts, even in the digital world.

In Part II, we will offer some further points to help you have the best possible experience you can with the Technical Support people you contact.

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# Technical Support Forum

## How to Get the Best Results From Technical Support

### Part 2 – by Paul Black

[PLEASANT HILL, California - April 2003] In Part One of this article we laid out some general points to consider when you have to call for Technical Support (or TS, as we have been abbreviating it). So, now let us continue the discussion from where we left off. Here are three more important things to remember when you call for Tech Support:

#### 4. PATIENCE

Patience is not only a virtue; sometimes it is a necessity. It is true that some companies have periods of time when their TS people are not available, such as during the local lunch hour, or at night and on weekends. Since broadcasting is a business of immediacy, this can be frustrating.

What is the best way to get a callback when the place is closed and you have to leave a “general voice mail?” Again, be calm, state your problem, and explain you would like to be called as soon as possible when the company opens. Those companies without 24-hour customer service do check the general voice-mails first thing in the morning and send them off to the correct people.

Personally, I do not agree with having TS service unavailable during off-hours or days. It is silly for a company to have an ironclad rule where all employees will eat lunch between Noon and One p.m. local time. It is equally silly if there is no “employee-rotation” rule for nights and weekends. As to those companies like that ... well, here is where you need to make your voice heard. Let them know you do not like it!

This leads me to a point which might sound unnecessary to say, but is applicable to staying on the air during emergencies.

#### 5. BACK UP CRITICAL EQUIPMENT.

Pretty obvious, is it not? But we all know some owners just will not do it. They will not spend the money for backup gear, or to pay you to install it correctly – or both.

One of the best ways to view your plant is to use the concept of “revenue stream” equipment. What gear is in the “revenue stream?” It is anything necessary to keep you on the air and playing commercials; that is where the money is (unless you are a non-com, of course!).

Apply the “revenue stream” rule to your plant. Anything in the “revenue stream” should be backed up. Management should realize if they are not willing to do this, they must expect there will be times when they will be off the air due to lightning, floods, fire, plagues of locusts, etc. These things happen. They are beyond anyone’s control. Urge your management to make the investment in backup systems. Finally, last but not least:

#### 6. REMEMBER JUST WHO THE OTHER PERSON IS

You probably are talking to Private Sad Sack, not General George Patton. The TS people for most companies usually do not have much authority. If you are mad as the Devil at some piece of gear, or if you cannot understand why they will not send you a new one of whatever it is that is broken, do not “vent” on the TS person. It is very likely they are required to get permission from someone higher up to do anything.

If there is some design flaw you think should be corrected, do tell the TS person about it. At some companies, many product managers and designers pay little attention to suggestions from the TS people. (Sad, but true.) But the TS person will be glad to pass your comments, written or verbal, on to their superiors.

Executives, like designers, do not always believe their TS people, but they will listen to customers very carefully. Why? Because there is where the money is! Any company not listening to its customers is not going to be around very long. Good management knows this.

A brief word about e-mail: Most international technical help now is accomplished this way as the time zone difference usually demands it. Of course, this may create a slight language barrier, but that can usually be overcome. The real challenge is making sure all the symptoms are understood clearly.

Many times it is necessary for the TS person to e-mail back to the customer to gather all the needed information. If there is no hurry (not an emergency failure, for example) then this is a great way to get help. But if you are in deep stuff, and need help now, a phone call still is the best way. Check manufacturers’ web sites for their e-mail assistance address. Most will have one.

Very likely, the technical support person to whom you are speaking was a working engineer at a radio or TV station sometime in the past. It is very possible they have been on top of a mountain at a transmitter building at Midnight with a sick something-or-other that has the station in trouble. I do not know if past experience as a working broadcast engineer makes a TS person any more qualified to help you with your problem than someone who has not been one. However, I can tell you it probably will make them have a lot more sympathy for you than someone who has not. If you want to benefit from such sympathy, and get the best help you can, remember the points we have discussed in this article. Working together, you and Technical Support will cure the problem and get your station out of trouble and back on line.

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