



# CONSUMER WATCH

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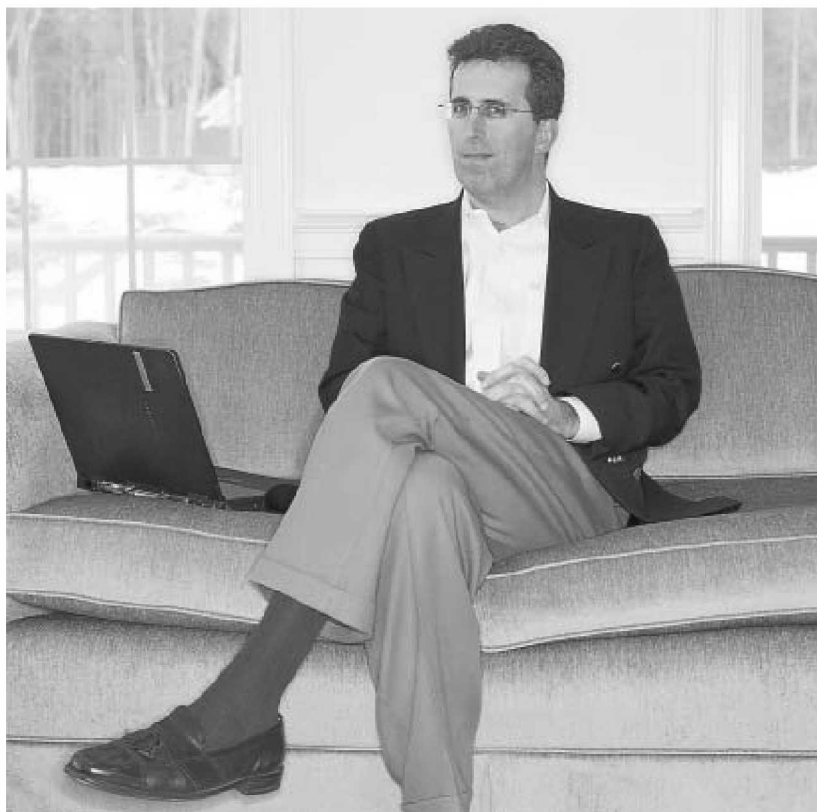
DEALING WITH OFFSHORE  
SUPPORT TECHNICIANS

PRIVACY WATCH: CELL  
PHONE TRACKING

ON YOUR SIDE: FATAL  
FIRMWARE UPGRADE

## When Help Is Half a World Away

Some PC users complain about overseas tech support representatives.



WHEN JOE DIAMOND had trouble installing a Zip drive on his Compaq Armada laptop, he called Hewlett-Packard's tech support line. A rep told him that he could avoid the problem by installing a second copy of Windows 2000. When he called HP again for help in getting rid of the second operating system, another rep told him he was on his own—HP doesn't support machines with two OSs.

How could an HP employee have told him to do something that violates HP's own policies? A frustrated Diamond believes it happened because he wasn't talk-

ing to true HP employees at all. Instead, his calls went to a company in Ottawa, Canada, that contracts with HP. That arrangement didn't just stick Diamond with some bad advice. He also had several dead-end conversations in which both sides frequently had to ask the other to repeat what they had just said because their accents made it hard to understand each other. The reps, who told Diamond they were located in Canada, had accents that Diamond says sounded Indian.

Diamond, the executive director of a Boston-based nonprofit, doesn't blame

the support technicians. Rather, he faults HP for shirking its customer service obligations: "Having support functions handled from so far away dilutes customer service and insulates the company from its responsibilities to its customers."

Monica Sarkar, HP's director of international media relations, disagrees. "I don't feel that there's a difference in calling a customer support center in Canada, in the United States, or in India, for that matter," she says. "Even if a call center is operated by a third party, it's common for them to be located at an HP site in order to facilitate a high level of teamwork."

After I called HP, the company offered to reimburse Diamond for the cost (about \$200) he had incurred to remove the second operating system from his notebook.

### LONG-DISTANCE SUPPORT

DIAMOND ISN'T THE ONLY customer of a U.S. corporation who has called a tech support line and talked to someone in Canada, India, or elsewhere around the globe. Outsourcing tech support—either to another U.S. company or to representatives abroad ("offshoring")—appeals to many companies trying to trim overhead.

I've heard from a multitude of readers annoyed by language difficulties when their calls go to offshore service reps. They say that offshore techs often seem to be reading from a script instead of listening to details, or that they seem ill-informed about products or company policies. And many complain that calls to far-flung tech support centers often get disconnected.

Certainly not all service snafus can be blamed on offshore tech support. Most of us have encountered American-born ►

PHOTOGRAPH: WEBB CHAPPELL

support reps who read from a script and have little knowledge of a product.

But once a company removes tech support from its core business, it's legitimate to ask whether the quality of the service will suffer. And of course language difficulties can be a significant barrier; describing over the phone what's happening to your computer and understanding the recommended fixes is tricky even with no accent problems in the way.

Like it or not, outsourcing is clearly here to stay. Forrester Research projects that by 2005, nearly 600,000 U.S. jobs—including many customer service and tech support positions—will move offshore; by 2015, that figure could reach 3.3 million.

Major players such as Microsoft, AOL, and Oracle already depend on offshore companies and workers for customer support. EarthLink recently announced plans to lay off 1300 U.S. employees—

representing 40 percent of its workforce and the majority of its customer support staff—and send some of those jobs to offshore companies. And outsourcing isn't limited to support tasks: IBM reportedly plans to move several thousand software coding, help desk, and back-office administrative jobs overseas in coming months.

### CUSTOMER BACKLASH

OCCASIONALLY, COMPANIES decide that the savings aren't worth the potential loss in customer goodwill. Last year, Dell, facing a flood of complaints from corporate customers about poor service from a call center in Bangalore, India, responded by shifting some tech support for those customers to domestic centers. Calls from Dell home users still go to Bangalore.

Some companies are finding that even outsourcing to domestic firms isn't worth the money it saves. After more than seven

years, Visioneer, an imaging equipment maker based in Pleasanton, California, recently replaced the Oregon firm that had been handling its support calls with a combined Web-based help system and in-house telephone support team. By bringing support back in-house, Visioneer can better train its support reps, President and CEO Murray Dennis says. "They are right next to the engineering department, so we can do constant training."

If language problems are torpedoing your next support call, here are some ways to keep communication flowing.

- **Organize** your thoughts before you call. Jot down such details as error messages and other symptoms, and keep your descriptions and explanations simple. Speak slowly and clearly, and avoid using slang.
- **Ask to speak** to a supervisor if the language barrier between you and a particular rep seems insurmountable. Or hang

up and try your luck with a different rep. Or try solving your problem via an e-mail conversation or an online text chat with the company's support department.

• **Tell the company** how you feel if you have a disastrous support experience.

Companies have a responsibility to provide high-quality service and support for their customers, period. If they choose to hire an outside company to handle that job, it's up to them to ensure that their customers are satisfied. Because no matter how much money it saves, poor customer service is bad business. ■