

Tech gadgets spell boom for support service

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From iPods to smartphones, some of the most sought-after gifts these days are tech gadgets. The problem is that the products sometimes require so much time and effort to set up that frustration surpasses the pleasure of acquiring them.

But that stressful experience can lead to profits for companies such as HiWired, which actually sees opportunities whenever an even more multi-functioning chip-laden product hits the stores.

Since it started operations last year, the Needham, Mass.-based company has found a steady number of customers who want help over the phone to use their gadget.

"About 95 percent of problems are solved over the phone," said Singu Srinivas, founder of the company. He said that the company receives about 2,000 to 3,000 calls each month, ranging from setting up the ubiquitous iPods to setting up wireless networks at home. The company has about 25 U.S.-based advisers on hand who are available seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. to answer calls.

Of course, HiWired is far from alone in providing support services for personal computers and other technological equipment for the average user. Some of the biggest players in the rapidly expanding market include Geek Squad, Geeks On Call and RESCUECOM, all of which offer round-the-clock information-technology support service by sending their IT staff directly to someone's home to solve the problem. Meanwhile, national retailers such as CompUSA are offering computer-

help services independent of their merchandise retailing and will send experts out to solve problems even if the customer didn't buy the product at CompUSA.

The price tag for home help services, however, can get rather high.

Carl House, who has used a number of computer-user support-service companies over the years, said having an IT expert come over to his home office "can cost anywhere from \$60 to \$140 an hour" and requires him to be available at home when the technician shows up.

With HiWired, though, House said he was able to get someone to help him out with his computer problems "from getting the printer working and getting the Internet going" immediately over the phone. Better still, the Florida resident said that the company was "much cheaper" than its competitors.

For instance, calling to get an iPod started with its basic functions and synching it with a computer will cost the caller \$30, while regular customers like House can subscribe to a monthly service where they can call the company a number of times for a fixed fee.

Perhaps as a result of its lower fees, Srinivas said about 75 percent of HiWired's callers are individual consumers, as opposed to companies like Geeks On Call, which find that about half of their customers are small-business owners.

Of course, calling up the customer-support service of the manufacturer directly would be the cheapest option of them all, but many are becoming increasingly wary of that option.

"You have to go through that horrible push-button options menu ... and then they say it's someone else's problem," House said, pointing out that

when he called the Dell help desk the company said it was unable to help because it did not support Microsoft's Outlook e-mail system.

On the other hand, Srinivas said that calls to his company are taken in three minutes or less, and the staff tries to solve the problem within 45 minutes of the call.

Meanwhile, the company is planning to forge an alliance with two major manufacturers by the end of this year, and if customers are unable to get sufficient support from the manufacturers' own help line, they will be referred to HiWired.

As a result, "every time a new device is launched, it expands our market," as the more complex a gadget is, the more likely people are to need help getting their gadget going, Srinivas said.

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