Startups offer new ways to fix your computer

February 11 2009, By Troy Wolverton

Getting help for a problem PC can be a confusing and frustrating process. Tech support can be costly and impersonal. And often it doesn't fix the problem, or it requires consumers to call multiple times before getting help.

A growing number of startups think they have a better idea. Instead of asking consumers to call the typical customer support line, they are offering virtual marketplaces that aim to pair - over the Internet - consumers experiencing particular technology problems with experts who specialize in those issues.

Think of it as an eBay for tech support. You can choose among multiple technicians for the highest-rated one who offers what you need at the right price - and then get help from that person right away. In some cases, the services provide software that allows technicians to remotely diagnose and fix the computer problem.

The idea behind CrossLoop, a Campbell, Calif., company that offers one of these marketplaces, is to connect consumers to "a real person whose business is dependent on how they solve your problem," said Mrinal Desai, the company's co-founder and vice president of sales and business development.

As computers have become more complex and more pervasive, the business of supporting them has become more challenging and often more costly. Tech research firm IDC estimates that the broad U.S. market for support services, including the sale of extended warranties

and subscription packages, will grow from about $2 billion in 2007 to $3.6 billion in 2012.

Ironically, one of the factors likely to drive that growth is the economic downturn, analysts say.

"With the economy (in recession), consumers will choose first to look at fixing their computer problem or optimizing the performance of their PC before buying a new computer," said Kurt Scherf, vice president and principal analyst at Parks Associates, a technology consulting firm.

But while demand for technical support is growing, consumers frequently don't get the help they need.

Consumers who called their computer's manufacturer had their problems resolved only 59 percent of the time, according to a 2007 study by Consumer Reports. Meanwhile, more than half of consumers who experienced security-related problems - the second most frequently cited problem with PCs - ended up contacting technicians multiple times to try to get them solved, according to IDC.

Fortunately, consumers have a growing number of options. Services such as the Geek Squad will send technicians out to consumers' houses to examine problems in person. Others such as Peak 8, Support.com and PlumChoice offer support over the Internet.

CrossLoop and rivals such as SupportSpace and OnForce take the remote support idea a step further. In addition to allowing consumers to shop around for the best person to address their problems, the services also allow them to deal with the same individual technician in the future if they need to.

"It's like taking your car back to the same shop that you get your oil

changed in," Scherf said.

One of CrossLoop's listed technicians is Bob Ward, who lives in Shelby Township, Mich. He had offered in-person support before CrossLoop, but is now trying to convert all of his customers to his online business, in part because a recent surgery has made it difficult for him to drive around.

Through the service, Ward said, he has been able to help out a friend who now lives in Italy, and he's attracted new customers from out of state. He's found that consumers are often looking for the individualized support that he can offer.

"I get a lot of customers that are frustrated with other companies' remote support that comes from out of the country," he said.

While computer support marketplaces are still relatively new, they seem to be gaining steam. CrossLoop officially launched its support site in spring 2008 and now has 15,000 support technicians offering services through it. SupportSpace, which also launched its market last year, has now connected consumers and experts some 19,000 times.

Earlier this year, Michael Phillips, an author and marketing consultant who lives in San Francisco, contacted a technician on CrossLoop to help speed up the performance of his two computers. When Phillips had computer problems in the past, he took his machines to local repair shops. But it usually took them days to fix his problems, and charges were close to the replacement cost of his computers.

In contrast, the CrossLoop expert fixed each of his computers within an hour for $90.

"This is such an enormous improvement," Phillips said.

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WHERE TO FIND HELP

Here are some of the companies that seek to pair independent technicians with consumers needing help.

• CrossLoop: Based in Campbell and Monterey, Calif. Focused on building a market for remote PC support. Anyone can offer services through its site, and "helpers" can set their own fees. Customers can search for "helpers" by specialty, geographic location, language and availability. Site lists 15,000 service providers who use software the company has developed to allow them to connect to customers" computers.

• SupportSpace: Based in South San Francisco. Connects consumers to technicians on its Web site, and plans to also provide its service through partner sites. Company does a background check on technicians, seeks to verify their skills and promises to cull those who rate poorly in the market. Lists about 300 certified technicians. Offers support for gadgets like iPods and digital cameras as well as PCs.

• OnForce: Based in the Boston area. Lists more than 12,000 support professionals offering services for both PCs and consumer electronics devices. Generally focused on serving more expensive, complex and in-person service requests, such as cable wiring or device installations. Works on a request-for-proposal model.

Source: San Jose Mercury News research

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