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A Cure For Computer Headaches: Money-Saving Tech Support Tips

Learn The Tricks And Tips To Reduce Those Frustrating And Costly Tech Support Calls

by Wendy Gauntt

Don't you hate going to the auto mechanic. You start out annoyed, because something—who knows what—is wrong with your car. The only certainty is that it will take time and money to fix. You arrive at the shop, then wait, wait, wait...hoping to hear that it's an easy, quick repair rather than one that leaves you car-less for days, more expensive than your mortgage. What a headache!

Have you ever felt this way about your computer? The more dependent we are on technology, the greater the pain when something goes wrong. Here are some tricks and tips everyone can use to reduce those frustrating and costly tech support calls.

Reboot Your Computer

You've probably encountered this: you call tech support, you explain the problem, you expect a burst of brilliant insight, and instead, they tell you to reboot your computer.

Believe it or not, nine times out of ten, this actually works. It gives your computer a breather, a chance to refresh its memory, which solves a whole host of problems. If you continue to encounter the same issue, you'll need to investigate further, but don't sweat it if you need to reboot on occasion.

The process is simple: shut down your computer, leave it off for 30 seconds, then turn it back on. If the computer won't turn off, here's a special insider trick: press and hold the On/Off button for about 10 seconds. You will hear a click, then the computer should shut down. Press again to turn it back on (after a 30-second wait, of course).

Reboot Your Network

When a regular reboot doesn't solve your problem, try rebooting your entire network, particularly if you are having problems with the Internet. It's not a sure-fire solution, but it takes no more than 10 minutes and solves about 90% of all Internet connection problems.

First, you will need to unplug your cable or DSL modem and your router. The modem is the device plugged into your phone or cable line; the router, if you have one, is the next device between the modem and your computer. Next, shut down all the computers. Wait about 30 seconds. Plug your modem in, and wait again—at least another 30 seconds—until the lights are stable. You'll notice lots of flashing when you first plug it back in, maybe some fast blinking, but within a minute the lights should settle into a regular pattern. Plug in your router, then turn all your computers back on.

Backup Your Important Data Files

Recently, a client's hard drive failed. It was no big deal to purchase a new hard drive and reinstall Windows. What really ran up the cost was recovery of the files. Luckily—after about a week, a data recovery specialist was able to retrieve about half of the files, but this step added hundreds to the overall cost.

What if the client had a backup? In less than fifteen minutes, we would have restored ALL the files to the new disk. How long has it been since you've backed up all your files?

Protect Yourself

Unfortunately, we don't just have to be wary of mechanic failures—as with cars, you're likely

to find people trying to break into your computer or crash it.

Make sure your anti-virus software is working, up-to-date, and running regular scans (at least weekly). Renew expired subscriptions—otherwise, your software can't protect against new viruses, making it worthless.

Block unauthorized access from the Internet to your computer with a firewall. Windows XP has one built in; stronger ones can be purchased for \$20-\$50, and most routers have a good firewall, as well.

Watch out for spyware; in particular, be very careful of downloads and suspicious websites. If your computer suddenly slows to a crawl or begins behaving erratically, there's a good chance spyware is to blame. Two free utilities, SpyBot S&D and Ad-Aware, which can be downloaded from <http://www.download.com>, clean up most of it.

The really bad news? For severe infestations, it can be cheaper to buy a brand new computer than pay for a repair.

Replace Old Equipment

If your computer is more than four years old, consider a new one. A speedy new computer costs hundreds of dollars, not thousands, and Windows XP really does crash less than older operating systems. Older computers are slow and more difficult to hook up with the latest software, or new technology like high-speed Internet and wireless networks.

When you need outside help, newer computers are easier for your tech support person to troubleshoot, which will save them time and

you money. Even if you've got someone experienced enough to remember Windows 95, it's unlikely they have worked with it much in recent years.

Advanced Tip: Get Help Online

If you are patient and like to tinker, go online for incredible access to tech support information. Nearly every vendor, from Microsoft to QuickBooks to Dell, has detailed searchable support sites. Google is another amazing resource. Go to <http://groups.google.com> to search newsgroups, where people just like you post their problems and find solutions.

When you search, be as specific as possible. If you are at a vendor site, look up the exact product you are troubleshooting. On Google, enter the product name in the search box, along with the problem. If you are getting an error message, quote it exactly.

No More Headaches?

With a little patience and a little care, your computer will run smoothly for weeks, maybe months. Maybe years, if you are really lucky and really careful. But following these suggestions will help you avoid the most common problems.

When the headache becomes a migraine, here's one last tip: find a techie with a good bedside manner and the experience to do the job. Carefully describe all the symptoms to help with diagnosing the problem quickly. Then rest and relax as the techie finds the right cure for your computer headaches.

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