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The New York Times

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From the Desk of 

Tech Support Gets a Reprieve While Users Take a Hit

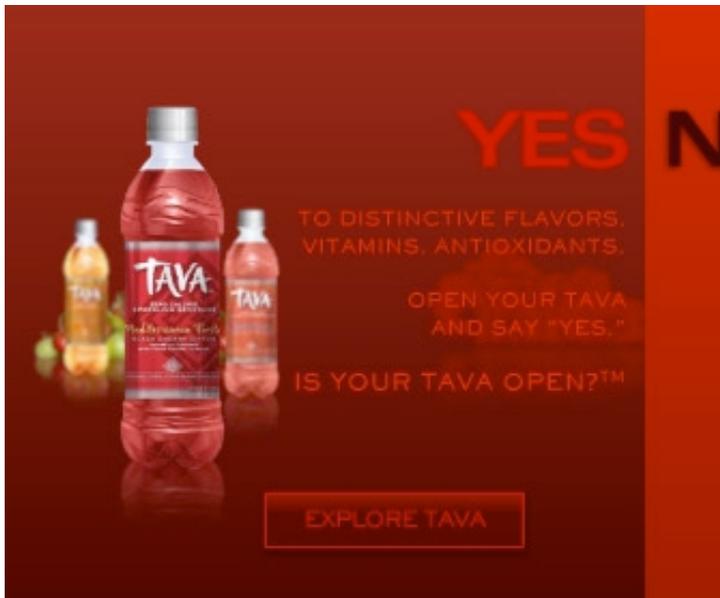
By DAVID POGUE

On my blog recently (nytimes.com/pogue), I've been making fun of bad tech-support reps. Actually, not just recently—they've been one of my favorite topics for years.

Deep inside, though, I have a lot of sympathy. By definition, the tech-support job entails talking all day to angry and unhappy people, which surely can't make you feel like skipping home from work. Meanwhile, at most tech-support centers, you have to fulfill an hourly quota of calls processed—so the job is stressful, too. No wonder the burnout rate is so high (and so many of these jobs are moving overseas).

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So today, equal time. It's time to place half of the tech-support blame where it belongs: at the feet of Them. The Users.

Several years ago, I had the chance to visit a tech-support call center for one of the big computer companies. The technician gave me a second pair of headphones so I could listen in on his conversations with the hapless users.

I learned so much that day. I learned that all computer companies outsource tech support to dedicated call-center companies. I

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By JOHN BIGGS

learned that the Users can be outrageously rude to these hapless tech-support reps, taking out their built-up frustration on somebody who had nothing to do with causing the problem.

And I learned that when they say, "Your call may be recorded for quality assurance purposes," that's only partly true. They also record your calls so they can pass around recordings of the funniest ones.

They actually gave me one of those "Best Of" disks at the end of my day in the call center. Herewith: a few actual calls from that disk or that I heard about from the agents themselves.

Caller: So, I'm having a problem with my mouse? It's, like, squeaking?

Agent: I'm sorry, did you say squeaking?

Caller: That's right. The faster I move it across the screen, the louder it squeaks.

Agent: I'm sorry—are you pressing your mouse up against the screen?

Caller: Well, sure! There's a message that says, "Click here to continue!"

Caller: Hey, can you help me? My computer has locked up, and no matter how many times I type eleven, it won't unfreeze.

Agent: What do you mean, "type eleven?"

Caller: The message on my screen says, "Error Type 11!"

On one call, the caller seemed to be taking an inordinately long time to complete each instruction she was given.

Agent: Ma'am, I can't help noticing that every time I give you an instruction, it takes a really long time before you get back to me. Is your computer that slow?

Caller: Oh, no, it's just the stupid, stupid design of this computer. Every time I want to click something, I have to unplug the keyboard to plug in the mouse. And then every time I want to use the keyboard again, I have to unplug the mouse. Because there's only one jack.

Agent: Ma'am, you do realize that there's a jack on the keyboard itself? You're supposed to plug the mouse into the keyboard, and the keyboard into the computer.

Caller: Are YOU KIDDING ME!? Oh, wait a minute—yes, I see it now! Oh, holy cow. That's going to be so much easier!

Agent: Just out of curiosity, how long have you been using your computer that way?

Caller: Six weeks!

A Canadian customer was calling to find out if there was a faster

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way to trigger menu commands than mousing up to the menus.

Agent: Certainly, sir. There are keyboard shortcuts for many of those commands. For example, suppose you want to trigger the Select All command...

Caller: Yes, I use that one all the time! How do I do it?

Agent: Well, you just press Control-A.

Caller (after a pause): Well, that's not working for me.

Agent: Do you have a text document open in front of you?

Caller: Yes, I sure do.

Agent: OK, now press Control-A.

Caller: I am, but nothing happens.

Agent: The text isn't highlighted?

Caller: No, there's no change at all.

Agent: That's odd. If you press Control-A, the whole document should be highlighted. Try it again. Press Control-A. Tell me exactly what's happening.

Caller (nearing his Canadian breaking point): Listen. I'm pressing Control, eh? And nothing's happening, eh?

So there you have it, folks: a little equal time for the downtrodden reps on the other end of the line.

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