

Hello? . . . Hello? . . .

Some computer firms' Web sites can be a dead end when you seek tech help / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

EVER SINCE THE Internet went big time, computer companies have been using it to provide support for their customers. But some do it better than others.

Some companies use the World Wide Web as little more than a means to publish an electronic brochure, hiding behind the Web the way they hide behind their clogged toll-free numbers. Others use the Internet to provide technical support that is truly useful.

A few weeks ago I had problems using my Dayna Macintosh PCMCIA Ethernet card with a PC laptop. I had encountered this problem in November, when I bought the card. At the time, Dayna's telephone tech support said they were working on a new driver – a little software program designed specifically to operate a piece of hardware – that should fix the problem. So I was overjoyed when I clicked into Dayna's site at www.dayna.com and saw that the new driver was ready for download.

Well, as is frequently the case with computers, the new driver didn't work either. So I sent e-mail describing my problem to the tech support address listed on the Web site. No response. A few days

later, I sent another e-mail to the Web site, this time identifying myself as a newspaper columnist. This got a response, albeit a not very useful one. They told me to download the new driver from the Web site. After a few more e-mail exchanges, in which I waited about a day for each reply, Dayna's tech support said I should call them. I spoke to a friendly tech support representative who told me to return the product.

What's wrong here, of course, is that in my first e-mail message to Dayna, I said there was something wrong with the card and it should be replaced. In fact, when I spoke with the tech support guy, all I did was reread my e-mail messages to him. Instead of cutting Dayna's tech support costs, the Internet actually increased them – the company had to deal with all of my questions multiple times, first by e-mail, then by phone.

Things were a little better at Compaq Computer Corp., but not by much. I'm reviewing a Compaq Armada 1510 laptop for a column later this month, and the touchpad has been driving me crazy. So I went to the Compaq Web site to see whether it had an updated driver for the touchpad. Not knowing where to look, I tried the search feature. Nothing came up. So I sent e-mail to Compaq's tech

support. Within a day, they sent me a note telling me where to look. I clicked in to the page, but there was no driver for Windows NT. So I sent another e-mail. Once again, I had an answer the next day: "For Windows 95 you can download the Alps glidepoint driver that we use for the Armada 4100. Download SP2050.EXE from our Web site. We don't have such a utility for NT."

I've also had problems with a Logitech mouse, which broke recently. Using a spare mouse, I checked the Logitech Web site to

find out how to return the mouse for repairs. I searched for an hour but couldn't find a single telephone number or address. I guess Logitech doesn't want their customers to bother them.

Many companies, it seems, don't see their Web site as an integrated part of their public image. For Dayna, Compaq and Logitech, there is a complete discrepancy between what happens on line and what happens by telephone. Unfortunately, while it may be easier for a company to build a stand-alone Web site, the Internet will ultimately be more valuable to these companies if it is integrated in their other operations.

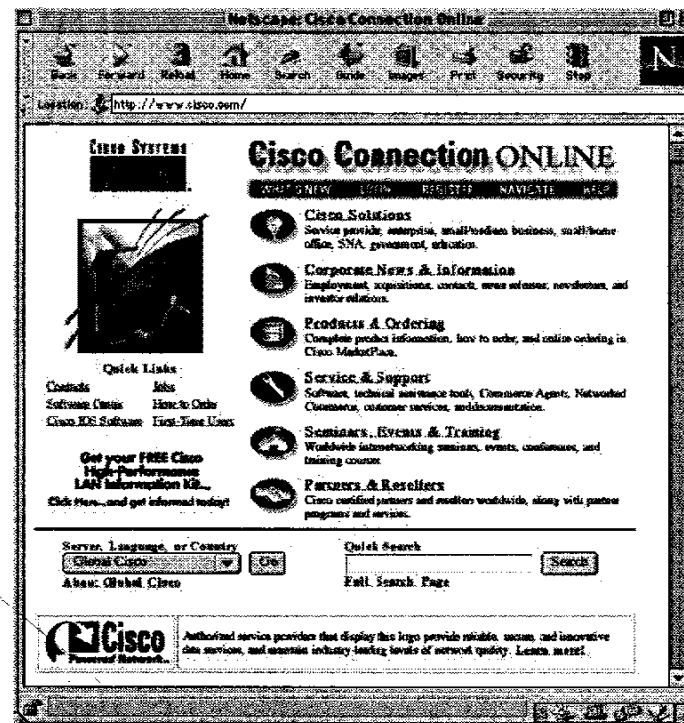
For an example of a company

that's doing a good job with tech support on the Internet, click over to Cisco Systems (www.cisco.com). Cisco makes the routers that run 80 percent of the Internet's backbone – as well as the router that provides my connection to the Internet. Cisco charges me roughly \$400 a year for a technical support and service contract. In return, I get a username and password.

A few days ago, I needed a piece of obscure technical information about my Cisco router. So I clicked into the Web site, typed a username and password, and filled out a tech support request. I typed in a description of my problem and asked to get a response by e-mail (I could have gotten it by phone). The Web site gave me a trouble ticket for my problem.

Within an hour, I received an e-mail response. Then, using the trouble ticket to identify myself, I could go back to the Web site if I wanted more information. When I wanted to talk to somebody by phone, I called up Cisco's toll-free number and gave my ticket number, and they were able to read all relevant previous notes on the Web site – saving everybody time.

This is not a matter of simply getting what you pay for. The price of technical support is factored into the cost of Compaq's systems and Dayna's ethernet cards. What's really going on here is that Cisco has built an integrated tech support system in which telephone and Internet are both used by the same support team. That's good service.



Cisco Systems, which makes the routers that run 80 percent of the Internet's backbone, knows how to provide useful tech support on the Web.

Technology writer Simson L. Garfinkel can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net.