

Poor **customer service** is a software standard. Brian Clegg asks, when will the industry grow up?

Are you being served?



The PC software business is immature. I'm not referring to programmers who look young enough to still be in kindergarten, or even billionaires who are yet to discover the joys of shaving.

It's a simple statement of fact

about the business. When an industry is young and fresh, it is propelled forward by "gee-whiz" power. The early days of personal computers provide a superb example of this. When the Altair, the grandad of them all, was introduced, it was a nightmare for buyers. Everything was delivered late. Memory boards didn't work. You had to build the thing before you could use it, and then there was no keyboard, screen or storage. But it didn't matter, because it was thrilling (I'm told by those who are old enough to remember).

As a business matures, things ought to change.

Funnily, this argument doesn't apply at the level of corporate finance. You might think that the internet was in a similar honeymoon period, as we see companies that lose money hand over fist and haven't a single solid revenue in sight, valued at millions of dollars. Yet corporate finance has always been susceptible to dreamy unreality. You only have to check out the airline business to realise this. If you look back over the history of commercial aviation, adding up airlines' costs and revenues, the business has yet to make a profit. Rarities like BA buck the trend, but you just know that a lot of capital is invested in it for purposes of national pride and the associated prestige. Plus, of course, the sheer exhilaration of driving big metal tubes through the sky. However, things should be different for consumers — consumers of PC software, for instance.

Once a market has a good range of competing products that meet our functional requirements, customer service becomes a major deciding factor. If you're ordering a pizza, you may prefer one firm's dough or another's pepperoni; but how would you feel if your favourite company started delivering late, or forgetting to deliver at all? They wouldn't stay on your shopping list for long. Now look at the customer service in the software business. Once upon a time there were

freephone numbers for support. Then they moved to a local call rate. Then, because it was so easy for us (and much less pressure on them) we could email a support query. Now you can search a fair number of vendors' sites and not find the email support — because you have to pay for it. Let's make this absolutely clear: they are charging to tell you how to use their software. And that often means how to get round the bugs and poorly written help files. This is the latest in customer service, as far as software vendors are concerned: state-of-the-art technology coupled with low-rent support.

So what do we do? Do we move to an alternative vendor who is offering great customer service? No. We wait excitedly with sweaty palms for the next thrilling release of the software and rush out and buy it. No matter that the existing version does everything we need. We do it. Now I'm not one of those columnists who moans about software bloat, and is still using a 286 with DOS. I'm a new-version lemming with the best of them. But it really does show how immature the business still is.

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Here's a challenge to the software vendors — especially those with too much money and a very large share of the market. Why not prove that all your weasel words about listening to the customer and wanting to give us the best are more than just the standard publicity hype. Feel free to keep on piling in the features — but how about some real customer service too? Here's a suggestion: how about free email support and free telephone support? For life. Just like many hardware vendors manage to give us while still making a tidy profit. That way, maybe we'll even grow to love you. After all, bear in mind that no market can remain immature forever, and however big your market share now, there will eventually be serious competition. You'd better start grasping the basics of customer service, before you discover the hard way that it can make a big difference.

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