

**Internet Help Desks:
They may offer too much help**

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This week, I contacted a company that offers technical assistance for Internet users. These organizations can provide a valuable service, even for seasoned communications network professionals. After all, even a network pro cannot know the ins-and-outs of the operations of thousands of Internet products.

Many of these help-desk establishments are staffed with personnel who offer different specialties. They can be brought online spontaneously by the company, depending on the customer problem.

I have an annual contract with a help desk (trouble shooting) company. I recently left one enterprise for another for reasons not germane to this article. My first session a few months ago with the new help desk was fruitful. The problem was found and corrected in a few minutes. I decided to sign an annual contract, one in which I could ask for assistance as many times as I needed---all for a flat charge (you should make certain this setup is part of your agreement with a help desk organization).

The original fee quoted by the company was \$300. I informed them my previous provider charged \$149. The price was immediately dropped to \$149. I congratulated myself on my superior negotiating skills.

For this week, my PC needed a tune-up; not an arduous task, but one that involved some operations I had not mastered. Plus, Photoshop was freezing up. I logged on to my trouble shooting vendor. He took over my machine, and we exchanged text about what was going on.

He introduced himself as a level 3 specialist which meant he was an authority on Internet addresses. Internet addresses (more commonly called IP addresses) are those strange looking numbers we sometimes see on our screens, such as 78.125.0.209. Think of them as postal addresses, as they perform the same function.

Almost immediately, he sent me a text (I paraphrase our exchanges, although I copied parts of them or saved some screens of the dialogue):

Help desk, "I see you are not protected from the possible identity theft of your IP address."

I was surprised by this statement because I did not understand the relevance of his question. It was akin to my protecting the identity of my postal address. ...Good luck with that. I responded, "What's the problem?"

The help desk technician explained my computer did not have the software to guard against someone stealing my identity (my IP address) and using it to get into my banking accounts and other sensitive online files. He then offered, "I would like to install this software now."

I responded, "How much does it cost?"

He answered, "Only \$899." (I will not bother with exclamation points.)

I countered, "Look, I grow weary of calling help desks seeking help when the main focus of these desks is to sell me software."

Help desk, "You can have this package and your trouble shooting contract **FOR TWO YEARS, AND WE WILL NOT ASK FOR ANY MORE PURCHASES.**" (His capitalization.)

Growing weary, I put on my geek hat, “First, my IP address is publically known, as it must be used to communicate in the Internet. Second, I do not own my IP address, Google and other Internet companies do. Third, they manage it. I do not. Fourth, my identity is not going to be stolen through an IP address. It is going to be stolen because (a) I am careless with my user names and passwords, (b) I have no firewalls, and (c) I have no security software.

Sorry, I have been a bit technical to make the point that I was being sold Internet snake oil. Sure, an IP address can, under rare conditions, be used as an aid (but only an aid) to expose an identity threat. But not by itself and not with precautions that can easily be taken without forking down \$899.

Be leery of help desks that want to sell or rent you software beyond the troubles shooting product itself. Do not purchase it on the spur of the moment. Do not succumb to the pressure of the Internet snake oil salesman.

For Window users, I recommend Microsoft’s trouble shooting service, with these two caveats: Inform the technicians not to change your default search engine to Bing (it belongs to Microsoft), and tell them not to go through marketing machinations to change your current version of Windows, if you do not want it changed.

For Apple users, the Apple help desk is top notch. For person-to-person service, Best Buy’s Geek Desk is first rate.

All charge a fee for their trouble shooting support. Fair enough, we all have to make a living. And in many situations, even those well-versed in Internet products need consultation services. Just avoid getting too much help.

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Accompanying bio:

As part of his career, Uyless Black founded or co-founded three computer network companies dealing with Internet, IBM, and Apple networks. During this time, he lectured on data networks in 15 countries. He wrote 33 books on these subjects. He resides in Hayden with his wife, Holly, and one of his best friends: his dog, Milli.