

Tech Support: Tackling Customers' Challenges

By Amy Petré Hill

The Technical Support Department holds a position of unique importance in any software company. Existing somewhere between engineering and sales, the department's technical support analysts are renaissance software professionals. On one hand, they must think like engineers to juggle technical data and dig through product specifications to find answers to customer questions. On the other, they must be good communicators, occasionally calming frayed nerves and swapping a few jokes with their clients as they pass along solutions.



Here at BASIS, the responsibilities of the Technical Support Department go far beyond the typical support job of correctly answering questions. Even though most customers only know the technical support analysts in their roles as problem solvers, these analysts--Nick Decker, Janet Sheldon, Jennifer Mills, Jennifer Weakland, and Amer Child--also serve as educators and customer advocates. Working together, they help customers solve short-term problems while helping BASIS create products that provide long-term benefits to the Business Basic community.

At BASIS, You Never Have To Explain The 'Any' Key

Step inside the technical support area at BASIS and you'll find a fun group of people wearing phone headsets and sitting at desks covered with a variety of toys and gadgets (yo-yos are the latest craze) and bottomless dishes of candy. But look past the casual atmosphere and you'll find this crew is anything but casual about solving some mind-bending software challenges.

"Here at BASIS, we don't get the thousands of calls per day you might get at a company that handles consumer-oriented software, like AOL or Intuit," says Nick, BASIS' Technical Support supervisor. "We may only answer 10 to 20 calls per day. But because the people who call us are experienced software developers, the questions they give us are complex. So we have to spend more time on each call. We often try to duplicate a problem here on one of our machines or work with a customer's sample code in order to find a solution for a specific application on a specific operating system." As a result, BASIS' support analysts must possess a high level of technical competence, spend a significant amount of time mastering BASIS' software, and have a real passion for solving incredibly intricate problems.

One of the benefits of having software developers as primary customers is that the team is not plagued by a daily barrage of silly questions. According to Janet, BASIS technical analysts "never have to answer the dreaded 'where's-the-any-key?' question." But the level of technical expertise present in BASIS' customer base also leads to greater challenges. Because BASIS supports four products that run on 25 different operating system flavors, an

analyst needs to gather a number of important facts from the customer before he or she can work on a problem. "Many customers leave voice messages or send email, but they don't give us the specific information we can use to start working on their problem," Jennifer explains. "We want to get our customers answers as soon as possible, and they can help speed that process along by giving us the serial number of their product, the operating system it runs on, any error messages they are getting, and the basic problem in their first message to our department. Once we have that information, we can start looking for the answers."

BASIS Offers Do-It-Yourself Support With Online Knowledge Base

This year, in addition to responding directly to customers over the phone and through email, the Technical Support Department started an online technical support program. This program gives everyone 24-hour answers to the most commonly asked questions and helps customers access the latest Business Basic programming tricks. Known as the Technical Support Online Knowledge Base, this new web library of technical information allows customers to solve problems themselves--an important tool for a company with customers in every time zone around the world. Located at www.basis.com/support/kb, this collection of over 300 articles has become one of the most frequently visited pages on the BASIS website.


Although the new Online Knowledge Base has not significantly decreased the number of technical support calls BASIS receives each week, the technical support department deems it a success because more information is getting out to more customers. "When we launched the Online Knowledge Base, we expected the number of phone calls to drop because customers would be able to find answers to many of their questions in the articles. But that didn't happen," Nick says. "At first, we couldn't quite figure out what was going on, but now we believe that the Knowledge Base is being used by international customers and end users who hadn't usually contacted our department. We're very pleased that these people are now able to get the technical support they need regardless of where they are or when they need the information."

Technical Support: Watching Out For You

Amidst the constant flow of customer questions and continuing development of the Online Knowledge Base, BASIS' analysts also find time to act as customer advocates within the company. As they take calls during the week, the support team tracks trends in customer questions and sounds a warning cry when certain issues begin to appear more frequently. "We don't get huge numbers of calls per week, but when we do get two or three calls on the same topic, a big red flag goes up and we know that there's a problem we need to look at more closely," Nick says.

In addition to watching out for potential bugs, the department works with BASIS' Documentation and Quality Assurance teams to ensure that both the product and its support materials work well before they are shipped to customers. As experts on how customers use the specific features in a product, the support analysts often offer suggestions on what information to add or clarify. They also help develop and perform quality assurance tests.

The Future Of BASIS Technical Support

With the 2.1 versions of Visual PRO/5®, PRO/5® and PRO/5 Data Server® due out early in 1999 and the next generation of BASIS products coming out later in 1999, the Technical Support department has a busy year ahead. To get ready, the entire department is putting new systems and information in place. Over the next few months, the department plans to set up a new call-logging system that will be tightly integrated with the quality assurance database, making it easier to track specific customer questions, see trends in support calls, and provide information to the engineers working on product improvements. "The new system will automate much of the work we do now, so we'll have more time to work directly with customers," Nick explains. "It's a part of our commitment to constantly improve the services we provide. I think 1999 is going to be a very exciting year with lots of new products, and we're going to be here to help our customers make the most of this new technology." 

Amy Petré Hill is a consultant to BASIS and president of The Big Picture Marketing Communications, a firm that provides marketing communications and public relations to high-technology companies. She can be reached online at bigpicture@swcp.com or by phone at 505.822.1741.