

Geeks to go

Calgary companies are capitalizing on the need for home service

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It's late at night -- only hours before a critical business meeting -- and the unthinkable happens. **CREDIT: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald**

An ill-timed computer crash erases three weeks work.

One option is to toss the misbehaving hardware out the window. Or a high-tech SWAT team could arrive on your doorstep.

For befuddled home users with busted CD-ROM loading trays and bug-ridden software -- or small firms without IT support staff -- the concept of an emergency computer house call is gathering steam.

It offers an alternative to traditional repair shops, where a modest fix-it job can often take days -- or weeks -- to complete.

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By his estimate, it is more economical to hire an outside technical expert than staff an internal computer specialist.

"It's our job to keep up on the latest technology so our clients don't have to send their own people out for training,"

There is growing demand for in-house repairs because it offers an alternative to traditional computer retail and repair stores, said John Leishman, owner of The Geek Patrol, a Calgary-based company that also makes emergency house calls to repair hard drives and software.

"It's strictly a convenience issue. Our customers are busy people, and they don't have the time to unplug wires and drive their computer into a shop, where it could take anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of weeks to have it repaired," Leishman said.

Although most Canadians have at least one computer in their home, few understand how the machines actually work, said Denis Gadbois, an expert in environmental and industrial design at the University of Calgary.

"In the short term, it's easy to keep a computer in shape. After about two years, something is likely to go wrong. That's when people feel they are losing control," he said.

Psychologists say computer rage -- the kind that has people throwing their laptops against the wall -- has risen alarmingly over the past few years, prompting the diagnosis of such modern ailments as "digital depression."

Increasingly, computer users -- especially at home -- feel powerless to keep up with the pace of technological change, and experience skyrocketing stress levels as a result, said U of C professor Lorne Sulsky.

"We live in a wired society, which means we're at the mercy of our cellphones, pagers and fax machines.

"When things break down, it's frustrating and difficult to cope," he said.

The result is not only higher stress levels, but decreased productivity, Sulsky noted.

"Technology has made it easier to work out of the home. So not only do we have the frustration of relying on equipment that may or may not work properly, but we're not working as interactively as we used to. The isolation can be very stressful," he said.

That's why technicians working for companies like Nerds On Site and The Geek Patrol take a lighthearted approach to the otherwise nasty business of salvaging data and fighting viruses, hoping to ease the technology-related anxieties of its customers.

On its Web site, The Geek Patrol pledges to dispatch "only the skinniest geeks" capable of squeezing into tight spots and rummaging under desks.

The company is only half-joking with its offer to shovel icy sidewalks, jump-start vehicles and rescue wayward cats from trees.

"We like to differentiate ourselves with humour," said Leishman. "Why would you want a normal person to fix your computer? You'd rather have a geek do it, because they know what they're doing."

On a typical day, the Geek Patrol will fix misbehaving hardware, recover lost data and install new software. Some house calls, however, are more memorable.

"It's hard to forget the time someone's three-year-old grandchild poured a glass of 7Up into the computer keyboard. When we popped open the CD-ROM drive, a peanut-butter sandwich was stuffed inside," said Leishman.