

To The Rescue

Can't afford an in-house tech expert? A computer reseller may offer all the help you need.

technology

FOR MOST small businesses, having the luxury of a full-time MIS expert on staff is nothing but a pipe dream. Despite the fact that countless small-business owners and their employees rely heavily on computer systems, few have extensive tech support staffs. Usually, they get by with part-time help from the techie around the office and a combination of their own research, on-the-job training, and trial and error.

This remains true even while high-tech equipment spending by small companies is on the rise. According to *Computer Reseller News*, small companies spent an average of \$5,800 during the month of October 1997, nearly double the October 1996 level of \$3,000. Add that to the fact that a fair number of companies are implementing advanced technologies like computer networks, Web sites and company-wide Internet access, and it's obvious that many small businesses are in need of assistance. For some, the best solution has been to develop a solid, long-term relationship with a computer reseller.

ADDING VALUE

Nationwide, there are thousands of computer resellers (also known as value-added resellers), many of which are small businesses just like yours. Most specialize in such areas as networking, troubleshooting, computer upgrades, PC installation, or computer hardware and software support. Some develop solutions for certain industries, such as computerized accounting systems

or specialized software for real estate companies.

Computer resellers have long had a reputation for catering to large companies with deep pockets; however, experts say this is changing. Computer resellers increasingly view small businesses as an emerging market opportunity and have begun to focus on developing better ways to serve this group. Here are a few services resellers can offer your small business:

◆ *Computer resellers serve as a knowledgeable information technology*

firm in Framingham, Massachusetts. Resellers are more accessible when you have questions about specific products, want advice on adopting a new technology or need tech support—right away.

◆ *Resellers can build customized products for your business.* For example, if you want a computer with extra memory for advanced desktop publishing or specialized software applications for your particular industry, resellers can find the best solutions and create systems tailored to your business's exact needs.



Knight in shining armor: Computer reseller John Nickel (r.) helped William Weiner create the Web site of his dreams.

resource that's close to home. Unlike large technology companies, which don't typically develop relationships with small companies that use their products, a computer reseller is local, says Janet Waxman, research manager for server and workstation distribution at International Data Corp., a high-tech market research

◆ *Resellers can fix your nagging PC headaches.* If there's trouble with your file server, they're there to help, often even on weekends or after hours. "Because we have the professional experience, many companies offload many of their MIS functions and the daily grind of PC support into our court," says Gary Foote, vice presi-

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"RESELLERS ACT LIKE A VALUABLE information services department for the small businesses that develop a relationship with them." —Janet Waxman, International Data Corp.

dent of Harry's Business Machines, a computer reseller in Reno, Nevada.

Resellers provide a host of other services as well. These may include preventive maintenance, such as inspecting systems for computer viruses; support services, such as configuration and installation of PCs and peripherals; software training; hardware repair and more.

Simply put, utilizing a computer reseller adds value to your company by helping your business use computer resources more efficiently. If you're comfortable purchasing, installing and maintaining PC hardware and software yourself, then you probably don't need one. Resellers become useful when your business could benefit from having someone help your company acquire the appropriate technology, offer useful advice and provide guidance through the rough spots.

"Resellers act like a valuable information services department for the small businesses that develop a relationship with them," Waxman says. "There's an interdependence that develops over time."

Foote agrees. "We try to get to the point where we have a commitment to each other," he explains. "For small businesses, the most value comes from having a relationship with us and knowing that we know their system. If there's a question, problem or concern, we can address it."

CASE IN POINT

William J. Weiner, president of Precision Auto Designs, a Campbell, California, mail order company specializing in high-end automobile accessories and parts, wanted to sell his wares on the Web in order to expand into new markets, cut catalog production costs and keep up with his competitors. Originally, he had a friend with graphics experience take on the project, but the

initial results were not what he'd envisioned. So Weiner turned to Thresher Communications & Productivity, a networking consulting firm and computer reseller in San Jose, California, to get the job done.

"For a small company, this is a big-company kind of offering," says Weiner, 52. "This time around, we wanted to try it with the best team."

Turning to a computer reseller was a smart decision in Weiner's case because his needs were relatively complex. More than just creating a site that takes orders electronically, Weiner also wanted to host the Web site in-house. This would allow him to retain more control and give him the flexibility to test-market products and post weekly newsletters, he says.

To accomplish Weiner's goals, Thresher Communications' owner, John Nickel, first helped him choose the appropriate technology from Cisco Systems Inc.'s Networked Office product line, including a 1605-R Dual Ethernet router, a Micro Web server 200 and a 1500 series Micro Hub (10baseT), so his staff could access the Web server and log on to the Internet. Then Nickel helped him choose an ISP and eventually installed the equipment.

"I wouldn't have gotten this far [without a reseller]," says Weiner. "A lot of small companies [like mine] don't understand the intricacies of hosting a Web site. And if they don't have someone they can count on, they won't succeed."

Of course, all this service comes with a price. "It's expensive," admits Weiner. "But, as a small-business owner, I need to take that risk because it's still affordable and the return should be the best."

MAKING A MATCH

In most areas, there are multitudes of qualified resellers to choose from. The hardest part is finding

one that meets your needs, as well as one you're comfortable developing a long-term relationship with.

Don't choose the first reseller you come across in the Yellow Pages. The best sources for computer resellers are referrals from friends, colleagues and business professionals such as your accountant, Waxman says. Weiner chose Thresher Communications after several respected colleagues praised the company's work.

If you prefer particular computer brands, you can also choose a reseller that way. Contact computer manufacturers for a list of local resellers in your area that are familiar with the products you use. Some companies, such as Hewlett-Packard, provide online information that's useful in locating local resellers. Hewlett-Packard's Small-Business Web resource center (www.hp.com/sbso/home.html), click on the "Where to Buy" icon to find the reseller nearest you.

You should also look for certifications the resellers may have earned, Waxman says. Resellers will advertise if they're a certified Novell, Microsoft or Cisco reseller, for example. That way, you'll know they've received training in certain products or specialties.

Once you've chosen a reseller, take the proper steps to build a solid relationship. Be open and clear about why you're using their services and what you'd like to achieve. It's also a good idea to designate one person in the office to work closely with the reseller, preferably someone who's tech-savvy. This ensures there's one knowledgeable, reliable contact for the reseller to discuss issues with and offer advice to. Expect competitive pricing, personalized service and a high level of expertise from your reseller.

Turning to a computer reseller for expertise is just like using any other business expert. No doubt you have relationships with accountants, lawyers, marketing specialists and countless other business professionals. In the end, a computer reseller is just one more resource in your toolbox.