

Five Ways to Get the Most from Your Computer Consultant

By Tim Shoemaker
Synectics, Inc.

1. Choose your computer consultant wisely.

There are quite a few people out there who claim to be computer (IT) consultants. Some are out of work technicians; some are hobbyists looking to make a few quick bucks on the side. And almost everyone has a friend or relative that “works on computers”. Sure, you can hire these people on the cheap. But there’s a reason they work so cheap. Most of these people will disappear like smoke when the problems get too big for them, which happens all too often. Competent computer consultants charge more because they have the experience and resources to do the work correctly. The best reference is from *satisfied long term clients*. Just like in your business, reputation means everything. Real computer consultants have a real business address, have the appropriate degrees and credentials, charge a fair fee, and can provide testimonials and references from satisfied clients.

2. Think in terms of value, not just cost.

No one likes writing the check. But, would you go to the cheapest doctor in town? Have the cheapest lawyer defend you in court? No? Why not? Because the cheapest service provider is seldom the best value. Because real consultants are not just technicians, but business computing specialists, they look at the bigger picture. They look at your business computing needs, not just your hardware. Look for the best value in both service and equipment. Listen to your trusted IT consultant and take their advice on equipment purchases. They are out there helping other clients daily and they know what works and what doesn’t. It’s all about keeping your system running smoothly.

3. Think of your consultant as a trusted business partner.

Often, clients tend to be guarded with consultants. They would do better to be more open. They need to explain their problems as fully as they can. The more information you can give your consultant about the problems you are having, the faster they can get you going again. Let the consultant see the whole picture, the entire series of events. Just like working with a doctor or lawyer, the more information you give your consultant up front, the better they can understand your needs. When your consultant is forced to guess, it can cost you money. The best client/consultant relationships are partnerships. Both parties bring significant expertise, skills, and knowledge to the process. By providing the consultant with as much information as you can about your situation and business goals, you have made it easier for the consultant to provide meaningful help, and you will know exactly what help he/she can provide.

4. Take their advice on maintenance.

Do you have the oil changed on your car? How about that periodic tune-up? Do you go to the doctor for a checkup each year? Computers are far more complex than any car. And most people don’t even realize that the most expensive and critical component of their computer system is NOT the hardware or the software. It’s your data. You can easily replace equipment. But if you lose your critical data, your business can quickly grind to a halt. *Data is often worth 10 to 50 times the cost of the equipment*. Client data, financial data, payroll, receivables, and payables all are critical to running your business. A well thought out and implemented periodic maintenance program will actually save you money over the life of the equipment. A maintenance contract locks in costs and ensures that proper maintenance is performed. This will head off many problems before they even start. And the cheapest problem to have is having NO problem at all.

5. Be in it for the long run.

Forming a long-term relationship with your computer consultant has the same benefits as with any other professional. The better that they know you and understand your needs, the better they can serve you. Reputable consultants build their business on satisfied client testimonials. Choose them wisely, use them wisely, and treat them as partners. Then you can sleep better knowing that your business data is secure.