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## Microsoft tech support

**Microsoft Technical Support vs. The Psychic Friends Network: Which Provides Better Support for Microsoft Products?**



by Michael Patrick Ellard and Daniel Albert Wright From BMUG newsletter, without permission.

In the course of a recent Microsoft Access programming project, we had three difficult technical problems where we decided to call a support hotline for advice. This article compares the two support numbers we tried.

As a result of this research, we have come to the following conclusions:

1. That Microsoft Technical Support and the Psychic Friends Network are about equal in their ability to provide technical assistance for Microsoft products over the phone;
2. That the Psychic Friends Network has a distinct edge over Microsoft in the areas of courtesy, response time, and cost of support; but
3. That Microsoft has a better refund policy if they fail to solve your problem.

In the paragraphs that follow, we will detail the support calls we made and the responses we received from each support provider. We will follow this with a discussion of the features provided by each support provider so that readers can do their own rankings of the two services.

Our research began when we called Microsoft regarding a bug that we had detected when executing queries which pulled data from a Sybase Server into Microsoft Access. If we used the same Access database to query two databases on the same server, we found that all of the queries aimed at the second database that we queried were sent to the first database that we had queried.

This problem existed no matter which database we queried first. Dan called Microsoft's Technical Solutions Line, gave them \$55, and was connected with an official Microsoft Access technical support person. As Dan began to explain the problem, the support person interrupted him, and told him that since it was clear that it was not just a problem with Access but with the two programs together, Microsoft would not try to help us.

They did, however, have a consultant referral service with which he would be glad to connect us. Dan then asked if we could have our \$55 refunded, since Microsoft was not going to try to answer to our question. The tech support person responded by forwarding Dan to the person in charge of giving refunds.

The person officially in charge of giving refunds took Dan's credit card info again, after which Dan asked about the referral service. It was too late, however - the refund folks could not reconnect Dan with the tech support guy he'd been talking with, nor could he put Dan in touch with the referral service hotline.

Our second call came when Dan was creating some line graphs in Microsoft Access. Microsoft Access actually uses a program called Microsoft Graph to create its graphs, and this program has a "feature" that makes the automatic axis scale always start the scale at zero. If all of your data are between 9,800 and 10,000 and you get a scale of 0 to 10,000, your data will appear as a flat line at the top of your graph-not a very interesting chart.

Since Dan was writing Visual Basic code to create the graphs, he wanted to be able to use Visual Basic code to change the graph scaling, but he could not find anything in the help files that would tell him how to do this. After working with Microsoft Graph for a while, Dan concluded that it probably didn't have the capability that he needed, but he decided to call Microsoft just to make sure.

Dan described his problem to the technical support person, whom we'll call Microsoft Bob. Microsoft Bob said he'd never gotten a call about Microsoft Graph before. He then left Dan on hold while he went to ask another support person how to use Microsoft Graph. Microsoft Bob came back with the suggestion that Dan use the online help. Dan, however, had already used the online help, and didn't feel that this was an appropriate answer for a \$55 support call.

Microsoft Bob didn't give up, though. He consulted the help files and learned to change the graph scale by hand and then began looking for a way to do this via code. After Microsoft Bob had spent about an hour on the phone with Dan learning how to use Microsoft Graph, Dan asked for a refund since he had no more time to spend on the problem.

Microsoft Bob refused the refund, however. He said he wouldn't give up, and told Dan that he would call back the next week. Microsoft Bob did call back the following week to admit failure. He could not help us. However, he couldn't give us a refund either. Microsoft Bob's supervisor confirmed Microsoft Bob's position.

While Microsoft Technical Support hadn't solved our problem, they felt that a refund was inappropriate since Microsoft Technical Support had spent a lot of time not solving our problem. Dan persisted, however, explaining that if Microsoft Bob actually knew the program, he would have been able to give Dan a response much sooner.

The supervisor made no guarantees, but he instructed Dan to check his credit card bill at the end of the month. The supervisor explained that if Dan saw that the charge was still there at the end of the month, then he would know that he hadn't gotten a refund. Our third call to Microsoft involved using the standard file save dialog from within Microsoft Access to get a file name and directory string from a user in order to save an exported file.

The documentation didn't make it clear how to do this using Visual Basic code within Microsoft Access, and Dan decided to call Microsoft to ask if and how a programmer could do this. The technical support person he reached told him he was asking about a pretty heavy programming task. He cheerily informed Dan that he'd called the wrong number and advised Dan to call help for Visual Basic, not Access (\$195 instead of \$ 55). This technical support person was extraordinarily helpful in getting Dan his refund.

Stymied by our responses from Microsoft, we decided to try another service provider, the Psychic Friends Network. There are several noticeable differences between Microsoft and the Psychic Friends Network. Microsoft charges a flat rate per "solution," which is a single problem and can be handled in multiple phone calls.

As described above, Microsoft may or may not issue a refund of their fee if they fail to provide a solution for your problem. The Psychic Friends Network charges a per minute fee. They do not offer a refund if they cannot solve your problem. However, unlike Microsoft, they will not charge you extra if they provide more than one solution per call.

We decided to test the Psychic Friends Network by asking them the same questions that we had asked Microsoft Technical Support. We called them and were quickly connected with Ray, who was very courteous and helpful. Like Microsoft Bob, Ray quickly informed us that he wasn't fully up to date on the programs that we were working with, but he was willing to help us anyway.

We started off with our first problem: making a connection from Microsoft Access to two different Sybase Servers. Ray worked hard on this problem for us. He sensed that there was a problem with something connecting, that something wasn't being fulfilled either in a sexual, spiritual or emotional way. Ray also identified that there was some sort of physical failure going on that was causing the problem." Do you mean that there's some sort of bug?" we asked. Ray denied that he knew about any sort of bug in the software. "Are you sure there's not a bug?" we asked. Ray insisted that he did not know of any bug in the software, although he left open the possibility that there could be some bug in the software that he did not know about.

All in all, Ray did not do much to distinguish himself from Microsoft Technical Support. He wasn't able to solve our problem for us, and he wasn't able to confirm or deny that a bug in Microsoft Access was causing the problem. We then asked Ray our question about using Visual Basic to set the axes of a chart. Ray thought hard about this one.

Once again he had the sense that something just wasn't connecting, that there was some sort of physical failure that was causing our problem. "Could it be that it's your computer that's the problem?" he asked. "Is this something that happens just on your computer, or have you had the same problem when you've tried to do the same thing on other computers?"

We assured Ray that we had the same problem on other computers, then asked again, "This physical failure that you're talking about, do you mean that there's some sort of bug?" Once again he assured us that there wasn't a bug, but that he didn't know how to solve our problem.

"I sense there's some sort of sickness here, and you're just going to have to sweat it out. If you'd like, you can call back tomorrow. We have a couple of guys here, Steve and Paul, and they're much better with computer stuff than I am."

To conclude our research, we asked Ray about our problem with the standard file dialog box. "It's the same thing as the last one," he told us. "There's some sort of sickness here, and you're just going to have to sweat it out. There is a solution, though, and you're just going to have to work at it until you get it."

## Conclusions

In terms of technical expertise, we found that a Microsoft technician using Knowledge Base was about as helpful as a Psychic Friends reader using Tarot Cards. All in all, however, the Psychic Friends Net work proved to be a much friendlier organization than Microsoft Technical Support.

While neither group was actually able to answer any of our technical questions, the Psychic Friends Network was much faster than Microsoft and much more courteous. Which organization is more affordable is open to question. If Microsoft does refund all three "solutions" fees, then they will be the far more affordable solution provider, having charged us no money for having given us no assistance.

However, if Microsoft does not refund the fees for our call regarding Microsoft Graph, then they will have charged us more than 120% of what the Psychic Friends charged, but without providing the same fast and courteous service that Psychic Friends provided.

Microsoft Tech Support (800) 939-5700  
The Psychic Friends Network (900)-407-6611