Perplexed consumers dial up tech 'geeks'

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"Help! Send a geek!"

That's the growing cry of technology shoppers across the USA as they grapple with increasingly complex computers and other consumer electronics.

Best Buy last week said it hired 1,500 more employees for its "Geek Squad," a team of for-hire tech-support staffers. The retail giant now has about 8,000 staffers taking phone calls, fixing electronics brought to stores, and traveling to homes and offices to solve problems. Best Buy hopes to have 12,000 next year.
Rivals are growing, too:

? Independent tech-support firm Geeks on Call in the past 12 months more than doubled its franchises, to 332. Revenue also doubled.

? Retailer CompUSA has overhauled its 12,000-member tech-support team in the past nine months. The team is now more efficient and offers more next-day appointments, and its pricing is more clear, CompUSA says.

The reason for the new focus: Consumers are relying more on tech even as it gets more complicated, says CompUSA Vice President George Coll.

Consumer electronics were once relatively simple. Installing a TV required little more than plugging it into the wall and cable box. Now electronics are going digital, which means they're built with the same tech as computers. That can make them as tricky to use and install as a PC. Many high-tech flat-panel televisions require professional installation, for example, says tech analyst Stephen Baker at researcher NPD Group.

Plus, it often takes a network to get the most from digital devices. A network links computers, electronics and peripherals such as printers so information can be shared among them. It can be wired or wireless. Either way, it requires some tech know-how to set up.

Ninety percent of home-network users surveyed by Forrester Research last year said they set up themselves or had friends help. But more than half think they'll need professional help in the future, creating a market opportunity for tech-support firms. Most offer home-network-installation packages, which generally range from $99 to $200.

Profit margins often top 30%, Baker says. Hundreds of little companies have noticed and are offering services in their local areas, in addition to the rapidly expanding national chains, Baker adds.

Competition could be good for consumers because it keeps prices in check. Even so, consumers may stop buying if tech products are seen as too complicated. Still, tech-support companies say they expect the market to keep soaring.

"More and more people are saying, 'Do it for me,' " says Robert Stephens, head of Best Buy's Geek Squad.

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