

“iTunes is currently unavailable. Try again later.”
So for the tenth time or so of trying, my Apple TV refused to load my latest iTunes movie purchase. I had intended to spend the evening watching a film that I’d missed when it was showing at my nearest multiplex. The kids were asleep, my wife was out for dinner with a friend and I had a good stash of chocolate by my side. I was all set, but the last piece of the puzzle refused to play ball. Apple had let me down.

Having tried the usual fixes myself (resets, restores, cables swapped, router resets, cursing under my breath, and so on) and failed to achieve anything beyond giving myself a tiny cut to the little finger on my left hand and causing myself an unhealthy level of stress and anger in the process, I checked online at the official Apple System Status for anything affecting the iTunes service.

Green boxes were neatly positioned next to anything related to iTunes or iCloud. All was as it should be.

“ Consumers actively search for advice from other consumers all the time ”

Next, I checked in on Twitter to gauge whether there was any widespread social media chatter about the problem. Nothing. Just a whole lot of general moans about losing the teeny Apple TV remote. Finally, after a few days of my Apple TV failing to play any purchased iTunes content, I went to the one, obvious place any Apple user heads for in a crisis: Apple Support Communities.

Community Action

For those who don’t know, Apple Support Communities is the company’s own online support forum, bringing together Apple users from all over the world – usually to have a good old moan.

I quickly found a very small thread or two with a few posts of people with similar problems to mine, but I felt that they didn’t fully address the issue in hand. And so I started a new thread, detailing my problem and asking – nay pleading – for help from any willing community members. “Any help/advice would be hugely appreciated. Right now, iTunes Match and Apple TV aren’t doing the job I paid for.”

Too needy? Possibly, but I was desperate for a solution – being desperate after just a few days is symptomatic of the instant gratification culture we now live in (or else symptomatic of my own impatience).

A week later, and the thread had amassed over 18,000 views and nearly 250 replies. My issue, clearly, was not an isolated case.

I’m happy to report that the problem has also been resolved now (it lasted around a week until the fault, which apparently lay with Apple’s authentication servers, was fixed), and I’m relatively impartial about the whole thing. Technology, as we all know, isn’t perfect 100% of the time. Errors will happen, and fixes can take a while to come. As it happens, I found a workaround for my problem after the event, and I have enough content options in my abode to keep me occupied while my iTunes content was unavailable. The aforementioned chocolate helped calm me down on the day in question too.

How Do Online Platforms Rate On Technical Support?

Social media messaging: Twitter, Facebook etc.

Pros: Instant posts; instant feedback (sometimes); a warm, fuzzy feeling that you’re engaging with the modern world.

Cons: Instant abuse; no feedback (often); sickly feeling as you realise than the modern world isn’t actually all it’s cracked up to be; responses are quick fixes rather than comprehensive answers; any interactions will typically end up with you having to contact support via email/phone/direct message anyway.

Reddit

Pros: people are nice and willing to help; lengthier posts allowed; similar problems likely posted elsewhere (possibly with answers to your questions) warm community feeling.

Cons: people can also be really horrible; among the genuinely useful responses will be a bunch of probably useless, possibly offensive posts that don’t help in the slightest; sometimes, communities should just be left in peace; your post may never be answered.

User Groups

Pros: genuinely knowledgeable members, genuinely keen to promote and develop the topic of the user group; you will likely get an accurate answer to a problem.

Cons: a slight inferiority complex for new members; a possibly sniffy approach to anyone showing a lack of sufficient knowledge in the chosen field.

Official Company Websites: Standard How-tos and Q&A sections.

Pros: information is clear, concise and to the point; easy to search for answers to your problem; official support; trustworthy, believable solutions.

Cons: lack of any real detail beyond the questions answered; no interactivity; “I know all this already!”; “I’ve tried that and it didn’t work!”

What struck me about the experience once it ended, however, was that my first ports of call for advice and help, beyond my own knowledge of routers, hardware, software and cables, were online communities and social media. I didn’t contact Apple itself via its live chat system or request a callback for issues relating to my online ID. Instead I searched for advice among the community itself, and it strikes me that this has increasingly become the go-to solution for consumers in these enlightened and well-connected times.

In It Together

Consumers actively search for advice from other consumers all the time, of course. We do it in the workplace and in our personal lives. Is this CD worth buying? Should I upgrade to Windows 7? Does my bum look big in this? So many of our purchasing decisions are if not based on then at least affected by the opinions of others. We do it to reduce risk, the risk of wasting our money, the risk of making the wrong decision



and breaking a motherboard. I remember when I built my first PC, I headed for online forums for a bit of advice, as I was worried that I was making all the wrong moves. The community was helpful and the build successful. I could have solved my own problem by reading a book or two on the matter or by contacting technical support of some of the manufacturers of the components I was using, but I went online because I wanted to interact with others just like me.

These interactions feel more real, less stuffy. You feel like you can bare your soul more, and that sounding like a noob isn't such a big thing.

Apple's community is an interesting case, because it's an owned online community. Unlike online communities via social media or via generic forums debating Apple issues, Apple's own community is relatively firmly constructed to allow for tighter, less sprawling discussions. With topics and suggested questions the norm, this is – in theory – a polite form of debate.

The most interesting side of what Apple's community achieves (and I'm only using Apple as an example based on my experiences; other online communities are available) is that it provides the company with a means of providing its customers with technical support, without actually having to get involved. During the 16 pages of replies to my original post, several questioned whether or not "Apple actually read these forums?", to which the obvious response is, "No. No it doesn't." In running such a community, but leaving it up to its devoted

followers to manage and respond to problems at will, Apple and companies like it give themselves a platform for handling complaints and for offering customers a basic 24/7 support mechanism but one that, crucially, absolves these firms from direct recourse from said customers.

Why have these online communities become so important? Perhaps it's down to the quality (or lack of) of official technical support.

They Said What?

Type 'poor technical support' into your web browser, and you'll be met with a variety of responses from consumers unhappy at the level of technical expertise that some of our very tech-y companies exude. There's a well-worn joke, of course, so wonderfully employed by TV show *The IT Crowd*, regarding the best advice for any computer users when it comes to any form of computer problem. While the 'turn it on and off again' comment is a somewhat stereotypical view, it is one that is sadly borne out of a very real problem apparent across some firms.

That's not to say that it's a particularly widespread problem. Indeed, I've had several experiences with router companies, ISPs and component manufacturers that have set me straight. However, I've similarly had experiences that, were I not (relatively) knowledgeable in my field, would have left me completely lost. In these instances, the jargon-heavy, piecemeal

advice was all too confusing and in some cases just plain confused.

Going back to my Apple TV for a moment, a few months ago I had a problem with the installed Netflix app refusing to acknowledge me as a user. I could play content via my PC and various mobile devices but not via my Apple TV. And so I headed for the Support Communities again, only this time there was very little chatter on the issue.

I chose the next best option, in theory: Apple phone call support. Having raised the issue as a problem using my Apple ID, an American voice was on the end of the phone within minutes to help me out. Minutes later, and with the problem unresolved, I placed down the handset receiver. What had panned out over those few minutes was a very untechnical support call, ironically. Guess what the advice was. Restart. Reset. Sign out. Sign in. Use a different monitor. Choose a different cable. All scripted options, all things anyone with a rudimentary understanding of technology would have already tried.

“ Type ‘poor technical support’ into your web browser, and you’ll be met with a variety of responses from consumers ”

A live chat support interaction with Netflix was no better. Exactly the same advice, the scripted responses bore no relation to any of the questions or issues I was writing down. Despite the American-ised “Well, how are you today?” tone of the support, I just left frustrated and no better off for going through the official support platforms.

In the end, it was the Support Communities that identified the fault as being with Apple: after a few weeks, someone noted a call with Apple and informed anyone reading that the problem did indeed lie with the company, something I subsequently confirmed with Netflix.

With the online community coming up with the answers that the company itself can’t (or in some cases the company acknowledges a problem weeks after the online communities have raised it), Apple is a prime example of how an organisation can utilise its loyal followers to provide an overall better service.

Taking Advantage Or Just Good Business

Returning to that question for a moment, of whether Apple reads the forum posts, under the Terms of the Use Agreement, “Apple may respond to questions but does not formally provide technical support on the Site. Any information that is provided by Apple or Apple employees is offered on an ‘AS IS’ basis without warranties of any kind.” The same terms also note that Apple does not screen submissions, nor does it endorse any views expressed on the site.

Apple, then, is effectively using its name alone in the running and upkeep of the site, leaving it up to the community to look after itself. Interestingly, the following line would seem to suggest that some of the most active respondents are perhaps paid for their work: “Apple may offer you benefits and award privileges for your participation in the Site. The benefits and privileges provided do not create an employee,

Should You Ever Pay For Technical Support?

With online forums and communities so prevalent, is it ever worth paying for technical support? Retailers and big brands will offer technical support, sometimes paid-for, sometimes under a catch-all annual policy.

I’ve paid for similar policies in the past for white goods, completely by accident as I was young and befuddled by what I was signing. I’ve never once taken advantage of such a policy, but that’s not to say that you haven’t. Maybe you’ve breathed a sigh of relief as a costly phone call or annual policy has saved some important work or saved you from having to replace expensive technology.

So when is it worth it? If you have access to friends, family or a neighbour with any technical knowledge at all, I’m not convinced that it ever is, really. Certainly, these are the primary options to consider before going down the paid-for route. It also very much depends on your problem. For example, paying money for a phone call on how to set up a computer or other hardware seems a bit silly when these days they typically come with very simple, clear instructions and are largely preconfigurable or plug-and-play anyway. You’d often be better off buying a Guide for Dummies or just getting on the internet. The information is out there for free.

There are caveats to all this, which is to say that if you’ve ever been better off because of a tech support plan, you’ll appreciate their value. If you’re someone who has taken advantage of a tech support plan many times over the course of a year, then there is an argument for it. It’s also something that a company has to at least offer to be taken seriously. I’m also not railing against the independent computer repair companies up and down the country that do some cracking work in fixing systems up. These companies, of course, have actual knowledge beyond the ‘reset and restore’ line, and if you have to go down that road, you’ll hopefully be in good hands.

I’m just saying that people should always be aware of what they’re paying for. Not all technical support is created equal.

agency or independent contractor relationship between you and Apple, and you may not present yourself as a spokesperson for Apple.”

I do believe that these communities would benefit from input from representatives from the company itself. This would create a stronger bond between user and company as disgruntled users would feel that they were being listened to.

I’m all for online communities in the provision of much-needed support. They’re generally friendly spaces with a wealth of information, and if you can’t find what you need on one of them, you’ll more than likely find it elsewhere on the web. Have they grown at the expense of traditional technical support? To an extent, yes, and the internet has helped to fuel that growth, but technical support in some shape or form will continue to exist.

It’s just that with online communities and forums so readily available, they’re always going to be the first port of call. [mm](#)

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