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Two Dell Myths: Low Cost and Good Service

Recently, I have done some marketing research for a couple of vendors, competitors of Dell in the volume server market segment, and yes I was paid for the work. In each case I did a comparison of their 1U and 2U servers with comparably configured products from Dell and in one case with other competitors in addition to Dell. I used the pricing that I get from vendors' web sites with all the special deals included and I used comparable configurations. The cost of warranties was also included in the pricing.

In both of these projects, the competition was either less expensive than Dell with its PowerEdge 1750 and PowerEdge 2650 servers or about the same. In a study that Illuminata recently completed with Dell, HP, IBM, and Sun around 1U servers comparable to Dell's PowerEdge 1750, Sun was the least expensive with one of its entry level, Intel-based Sun Fire servers, and Dell was the most expensive. Illuminata went to great lengths to ensure that the configurations were comparable and the pricing accurate.

I have a first hand story that I can use to relate to Dell's service for small businesses. I own a digital photography business (www.newriverphotography.com) and teach digital workshops around the U. S. As some of you probably know, digital images are approaching 10MB when shot in raw mode with the high-end digital SLRs. PhotoShop CS brings most Pentium 4 machines to their knees for images this large and larger.

So, I bought a new Dell Inspiron 5150 notebook with a 3GHz Pentium 4 processor and 512MB memory (which is not enough). The first 5150 was dead on arrival. I was shipped a new one within a day or two. Dell also sent me a box to return the dead one. Actually Dell's customer service sent me two boxes on the same day — one with Airborne and one with Fed Exp. Airborne won. I spent about 2.5 hours on the phone with Dell getting the return setup.

I used the second 5150 for a while and then decided to burn some digital images on a CD. The CD drive would read but not burn CDs. I spent about 6 hours on the phone one Sunday afternoon with a person from Dell Tech Support running all sorts of tests, and he finally decided that I needed a new CD drive. I received a new CD drive in the mail on the following Tuesday. I installed it. It would actually burn CDs. But on some occasions when I would insert a CD, my 5150 would automatically reboot. On other

occasions, I would receive an error message, and then I would have to reboot it to be able to continue.

While all of this was going on, I was able to burn some CDs and get my images off the hard drive. Then I began to talk to Dell Tech Support. During the remainder of the week, I spent about 10-12 more hours on the phone with Dell Tech Support, running tests, explaining to each new young person that I was shifted to my problem. Finally, I latched on to someone who suggested that we reboot XP Professional. We did that over a three-hour period and then began re-installing drivers, etc., over the next two hours.

I rebooted about 11:30PM and the 5150 was burning CDs with no automatic rebooting, etc. I slept well; my ordeal with Dell Tech Support was finally over. I booted the 5150 the next morning, and I was automatically rebooted when I inserted my first CD. I tried again, and I got the error message that required me to reboot to continue.

Then the real work began. I decided that I either wanted my money back or a new machine. I went through a series of calls to Dell trying to get something done. Finally one woman in Tech Support decided, after we had spent several hours testing, that I should return the 5150 and have it repaired. So later that Wednesday afternoon, Airborne came by with a box, but no packing slip. The guy from Airborne said that they would have the address at his office. So the 5150 was gone. The following Friday, I received another box from Dell via Airborne to ship my 5150 back and there was a packing slip with it. Airborne told me to keep the box; my 5150 had shipped two days earlier anyway.

I waited a week before calling about the status of my 5150. Once I started talking to Dell, I got replies that ranged from: they had no record of my machine being repaired to we have ordered a new motherboard and it is being installed to your replacement machine was a refurbished machine (even though I had only had the original one a single day) to the machine was shipped to the wrong address at Dell to they were giving me a full or partial refund. And during the replacement of the first 5150 with the second 5150, Dell had reduced my three-year warranty to a one-year warranty.

I paid just over \$2100 for this machine, and by now a partial refund was sounding good. Finally, I found a young woman in Customer Service (or Care), who told me that Dell was giving me a full refund on the 5150. Last week she called me and said that the crediting of my account had cleared Dell and should appear on my credit card in a couple of days. The credit worked and I got a full refund from Dell.

In total, I spent at least 25 – 30 hours on the phone with Dell Tech Support and Customer Service. I found that Dell is very disorganized — they sent me two boxes on two different occasions by mail carriers to return the two 5150s. I finally understood the confusion. Dell has an express service tag that is used to identify a computer. I had two — one for the original 5150 and one for the replacement 5150. Some Tech Support folks would have paperwork that related to the original 5150 express service tag and some would have the tag associated with the replacement 5150.

Now I am looking for another high-powered notebook to use in teaching my digital photography workshops. Dell, of course, is not on my list. I have looked at a ThinkPad

G40 with a 3.0GHz Pentium 4 processor, one GB memory, a 60GB hard drive, etc., and a HP zx5000 with a 3.4GHz Pentium 4 processor, one GB memory, 60GB hard drive, etc. The zx5000 is slightly less expensive than the G40, and it is a faster machine (the G40 has a 3.0GHz processor). A comparably configured Inspiron 5150 (with a 3.2GHz processor) is priced within a few dollars of the HP zx5000 (with a 3.4GHz processor), and the ThinkPad G40 is a few dollars more expensive than the 5150.

My suggestion — when looking for good deals and good service for consumer machines or small business machines, look beyond Dell and you will probably find a vendor with comparable or lower prices and better service. I have HP and IBM computers in my lab and have had excellent service on those rare occasions when I needed it.

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