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Happy New Year!

Beware the Service Contract

By: Rob Lough, General Manager

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Evolving Technology

Keep the internet safe for all ages. Plan ahead to protect your family online, use parental controls, browser security tweaks, and other tools. PC World.com has a great article on current precautions you can take. Web address: http://msn.pcworld.com/howto/article/0_aid,122116,00.asp

Software Review

Which tax prep application is best for you? The technology review and comparison site Cnet.com has a review of the top two home tax preparation applications. Follow this address: http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-6405_7-6417877-1.html?tag=tg.pr

Technology Quote of the Month

"You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can't possibly live long enough to make them all yourself."

-Sam Levenson

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I frequently peruse the websites of IT service providers in an effort to research competitive business practices, consider new ideas, and ponder different perspectives with regard to how we might improve upon the services we provide to our clients. Invariably I encounter the service contract. While there are advantages for client and vendor to service contracts, it seems that most configurations tilt disproportionately in favor of the vendor. Two favored inducements are response time and hourly rate, as if to suggest that good service at a decent price is itself something extra that must be purchased. I have discovered various examples that leave me, if not feeling sorry for the clients, at least amazed at how the vendor summoned the audacity to sell such a thing. Consider the following:

- In exchange for several thousand dollars to be paid up-front and the client's signed commitment for one year, one vendor would assure the client a return phone call within 48-hours of the client's initial call for help. For double the first-level up-front money, the vendor would return the call within 24-hours. For triple the initial up-front sum, a return call could be expected sometime that same day! Without this service contract, the vendor suggested response times up to a week or more. There was actually a client testimonial on the vendor website wherein some poor soul heartily commended the vendor for offering him the option of paying a ton of money up-front and signing a one-year contract for the privilege of obtaining a decent level of service.
- For thousands of dollars in advance and a one-year commitment, one vendor promised a reduced hourly rate. This would presumably mean that clients would receive more hours of service than they otherwise might, for the same amount of money, if only they would pay the vendor for those hours right now. Additionally this vendor has his clients pay enough money in advance that they would be compelled to ignore any competitive offers, if only to "get their money's worth" from the arrangement.
- Another vendor offered a telephone support contract. For \$50, clients would be allowed 400 calls per month. These clients must now pay \$50 per month for a minimum of one-year minimum (\$600 commitment) for the privilege of calling this vendor. Obviously there is little to be solved over the phone, especially for twelve and a-half cents per call, so a technician or engineer would be dispatched forthwith. At regular rates of course. This vendor even goes so far as to suggest how many times you might want to call him every month so that he might send someone out for the one-hour minimum service call.

These are but a few of the many variations of service contracts you might be persuaded to consider when dealing with IT service providers. While service contracts can benefit some clients, ask questions before signing on the dotted line. Determine exactly what you're getting for your money. Do not be compelled to pay extra just to get the quality of service you should expect anyway.

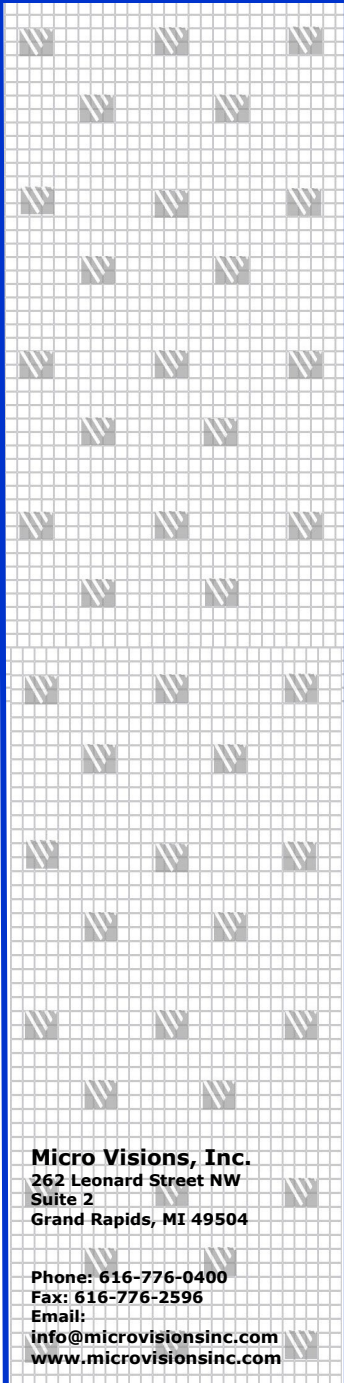
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Beware the Service Contract

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Do not automatically sign a contract merely to obtain a lower hourly rate, as hourly rates are often a false measurement. You might receive greater value from a firm with a higher hourly rate, thereby realizing a net savings. Unfortunately, you may not take advantage of the greater value if you perceive yourself to be locked into a contract from which you must recoup your investment. Another vendor might offer a better solution, but you'll be compelled to ignore it because you're "locked in" to the lower-rate vendor.

Never sign a commitment that appears too good to be true. No business can properly respond to as many as 400 of your phone-calls for \$50, but they might be able to get you to pay \$50 per month and sign a contract only to conduct business with you the same way any other service provider might with no contract or monthly fee. If you have any questions, or if you're simply looking to get your money's worth, call Micro Visions, Inc. at 616-776-0400, or visit us at www.microvisionsinc.com.

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