

Repairs? You Need Repairs??

Inside the lives of service technicians

By The Tell-All Tech

Some would say we're taken for granted. Others might say we're misunderstood. Still others occasionally say "thank you."

Who are we? Your humble servants, equipment service technicians – or "service techs" for short.

Is it true that we stick pins in power amp dolls while dancing naked under the full moon with bones through our noses in order to get your gear repaired to working order? Or

how about the rumor that we collect large bags of cash for a seemingly small amount of work and then laugh all the way to the bank?

Yeah, right – and Elvis dates my sister, both escorted to a private movie theater by little green men!

The reality is that service techs are an "inconvenient but necessary" evil of the pro audio industry. And truth be told, we sometimes get a complex about what we perceive as the vast under-appreciation of the masses.

We're also called a "strange breed," but the bottom line is that service techs strive for the same common fundamentals as the majority of folks in this industry: personal satisfaction, which for us means seeing gear come back to life under our care, with the ability to make a living doing this.

So let's try and dispel some of the common rumors and misconceptions about what goes on "in the room behind the back room," shall we?

HARD KNOCKS

Fixing gear – properly – is not easy. It takes a very long time to learn how to do it.

Often, folks want to know what school we might have attended to learn our trade. Generally, the correct response is the "University of Hard Knocks" – and it sure as heck is not MIT.

A degree in engineering might qualify someone to design equipment, but this is hardly realistic preparation for what is found on the repair bench. Our skills are acquired



Who are these guys? No names provided to protect the innocent. But we can tell you they know to grab the correct end of a soldering iron.

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in real time on a day-to-day basis. A reasonable education in the basics of electronics and pro audio gear operation is essential.

Our apprenticeship in the school of hard knocks is the best, albeit most time-consuming, way to learn. Those who learn from real-life failures become better techs when all is said and done. It comes with the territory.

Anyone traveling this road must get used to the smell of burning components and gets a rote memory for picking up the soldering iron by the end with the cord attached. Burnt components smell bad, burnt flesh worse!

So often we get pieces in to fix where “a friend of mine” with “an EE degree” or “who knows electronics” has “looked at it.” Without getting into the gory details, suffice to say that these well-meaning friends usually end up costing the customer even more money.

We have no idea what was tried, and the quality of workmanship is less than stellar. Further, it can lead us down the wrong troubleshooting road. The end result is more TIME spent making the repair, which costs more MONEY. (In the world of service techs, the phrase “time is money” definitely applies.)

On the surface, service tech labor rates appear astronomical, sometimes reaching \$100-plus per hour. Complaints are especially prevalent in large metropolitan areas (also known as “music hubs”), and perhaps is a reason that many believe service techs are smoking Cuban cigars while driving around in Porsches with our supermodel girlfriends.

NO MORE OR LESS

O.K. – it’s not minimum wage. The fact is that our labor requires skill, and as such commands a commensurate rate of pay. But at the end of the day, service techs make no more or less than most of our customers, unless they happen to be of the “better-heeled” variety.

“Labor rates” for product service are administered on an hourly basis to provide livable salaries while keeping the doors open. (No one is in business to lose money unless

working a tax scam.)

Broken down further, labor rates also cover commercial floor space, business expenses and supplies (insurance, phones, electricity, water, computers, Post-It notes, etc.), taxes, marketing, blah blah, ad infinitum.

After those costs are covered, there isn’t much left over, so we must make up the difference in parts, right? Well, not exactly.

A properly run service department must invest heavily in test equipment, tools, chemicals and documentation along with adequate floor and shelf space to store all of this stuff, and in an organized manner.

These items don’t order (and re-order) or inventory themselves. Someone must put TIME (there’s that word again) into doing it. Further, replacement parts (and the fees to ship them) aren’t free either.

Somewhere along the line, these “hidden” expenses have to be recovered. As an example, my organization stocks more than 7,000 individual parts valued collectively at \$100,000. And we still don’t have it.

A computer (and operator) keeps track of it all. Further, service documents (schematics) are also considered “parts,” and we have another few thousand of those too, individually paid for, shipped, received, filed and stored. The result is dozens of filing cabinets and shelves chock-full of the stuff.

It would be easier (and way more profitable) to just mark all parts up based upon a flat scale, but we don’t do that. Parts are marked up on a sliding scale, depending on what it costs for each individual component to come through our door.

If, by chance, we don’t have the part it takes to properly service the gear you needed yesterday, guess what happens? The freight company (not us) reaps the financial bonanza, and thus the price skyrockets. (It’s what “next-day shipping” is all about!)

Back-ordered parts can also be an issue. (For older gear, the term “obsolete” is very popular.) In these cases, we can’t possibly know what the cost, availability and timeframe for an obscure part will be – until we ask the

supplier. Yet we take the heat, because by the time we’re told we CAN’T have it yesterday, it’s too late for the customer.

TAKING THE HEAT

Believe it or not, some manufacturers don’t completely have their acts together. Welcome to the human condition, aided and abetted by the ubiquitous “computer error.”

Everything’s together on our end, but between that phone call and the heaps of silicon and magnetic storage media, something goes wrong. The customer is disappointed, while the sender won’t take back the wrong part (often paid for up front by us) without a “restocking charge” – even if it was their mistake!

Profoundly frustrating, to say the least. But who takes the heat? Your humble service tech, naturally. Rubbing salt in the wound is the fact that correcting all of this takes even more time and money (there’s that phrase again) on everyone’s part. We share the Catch-22, and cue the big “sucking” sound.

There’s much more to address with this issue, such as back orders, wrong parts, incorrect billing/shipping, hidden software/firmware/hardware updates, web site accessibility, CD-ROM formatted service info, warranty service... But I believe the point has been made.

Perhaps some this will be perceived as bitter complaining, but it’s vital to understand what it takes to run a quality service/repair operation; in our case, for the past 25 years from the same location.

The best way to learn, often, is by seeing things first hand. Our arms are open – stop by and visit the “room behind the back room,” have a look around. Then you’ll be able to accurately answer the question: Am I exaggerating?

Until the next time, I remain,
The Tell-All Tech

Inspired in part by the honest discussion recently put forth in Live Sound by The Rogue Rep, our intrepid author seeks to promote further understanding and dialog about the trials and tribulations of pro audio service techs. Send your comments to him via Editor Keith Clark at kclark@livesoundint.com.