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## Geek Support

*Techies make house calls like old-time docs*

By HILARY POTKEWITZ

LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

Forget about being put on hold for an hour to reach an unhelpful voice in tech support. These days, there is no shortage of "geeks" waiting to visit your home and give your system a hands-on look.

For a price, of course.

Geeks On Call, 1-800-Geeks-On-Time, Best Buy Co.'s Geek Squad and Geek Mercenaries for Hire are just a few of the companies that have come to the rescue as home technology becomes more complex.

These traveling fix-it men are competing against each other – along and with countless mom-and-pop players – in a market that is becoming increasingly crowded and competitive. A few companies have mutated into national chains, capitalizing on the marketability of the computer geek image.

"People turn to their neighbors' kids," observed Frank Dean, the first Geeks On Call franchise owner in L.A. "Either he's able to fix it, breaks it more, or half-fixes it but leaves it hanging. That happens with everybody."

These days, the gadget could be anything from cable TV to a laptop to a video game console. Or it could be part of an array of newer services coming into the home – wireless ports, networking devices, voice over IP, to name a few.

For now, there seems to be plenty of business to go around. The services with branded cars say they only pass each other on the roads occasionally, and Los Angeles is so spread out that territories do not appear to be colliding.

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Norfolk, Va.-based Geeks On Call expanded into California this year, with four franchises launching in L.A. since February. 1-800-Geeks-On-Time, based in Lynden, Wash., has been in Los Angeles since 2000 and boasts more than 700 technicians nationwide. Tempe, Ariz.-based Data Doctors, another chain, has 40 stores in nine states. Founder Ken Colburn plans to open stores in Southern California by year's end.

Electronics giant Best Buy Inc. joined the market in 2002 when it acquired the Minneapolis-based Geek Squad, rolling out the service in its stores last year.

Technicians are called "Counter Intelligence Agents," and "Double Agents" make house calls. Agents wear Dragnet-type uniforms, carry badges and drive black and white-branded Volkswagen Beetles.

Richard Cole, chief executive of Geeks On Call, estimates that the computer repair, networking and maintenance market to be about \$90 billion. "There's plenty of room in this industry for more than one service provider," he said.

That doesn't stop him from bashing the Geek Squad: "It's completely company-owned," he said. "They're more interested in selling you Best Buy products than they are in fixing your computer."

Geek Squad representatives dispute this, although they admit agents do sell Best Buy equipment. "The objective for Geek Squad agents is to be excellent customer service providers, not to be top-notch salespeople," said Kevin Cockett, Geek Squad spokesman and "minister of propaganda."

Los Angeles is hardly the only area with mobile tech squads. Computer Geeks serve North Carolina, British Columbia has Geeks 2 Go and Rent-A-Nerd, while Portland is served by Control Freaks. Geek Housecalls Inc. blanket eastern Massachusetts.

San Diego-based Geek Mercenaries for Hire makes house calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from Mexicali as far north as L.A. – with offices in downtown San Diego, Point Loma, Claremont and Kearny Mesa, according to founder Mario Guerrero.

So what's the difference between a geek, a nerd and a techie?

Geeks on Call has 330 franchises in 20 states, and company revenues were \$25 million for 2004, according to Cole. He expects to reach \$50 million by next year. Franchises cost about \$60,000, which includes a \$25,000 fee, advertising, supplies, and the purchase or lease of a PT Cruiser.

Dean's franchise has been serving L.A., Orange County and Riverside since February.

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Charges start at a \$99 flat fee for a home visit, and if the problem can be handled quickly, that's the end of it. The fee can increase to \$165 or more per hour for more complex jobs. Dean said he and his partner were able to cover the franchise fee in the first four months.

1-800-Geeks-On-Time boasts a 24-hour call center and around-the-clock service. Michael Lewis, director of national services said he's sent technicians out on Christmas and New Year's.

Summer is an especially busy season, thanks to home networks and a proliferation of kids at home with iPods. But the most common calls are for spyware and virus removal, followed closely in Los Angeles by the late-night Internet crises. "A lot of CEOs prefer working at night," Lewis said, "and their IT department doesn't come to their home."

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