

Repair Or Replace?



For the unaware consumer (which is me) repairs to electronic equipment are among the least favorite things to deal with. Horror stories abound! Wouldn't it be easier to just throw it away? I know I have a warranty, if I can find it. I know I have the box I must send it all back in, as they have asked—but where is it? Is it still in good mailing condition after sitting in my garage for a year? I also have an extended warranty, which means I still have to shell out the money first and then I have to deal not only with the "authorized dealer" but with corporations that really do not want to pay me back. And I'm afraid that somehow, this particular repair, won't be covered. That I didn't read the small print. Who can read the small print? Who wants to? It's gobbledy-gook anyway. Designed and written to be as obfuscating, unclear, and confusing as possible. And the person who sold you this warranty isn't the person you end up dealing with down the road. And, they're often in a completely different city.

And with all these new computer controlled electronics-it just gets worse. You can't even open the back of the box anymore,

under penalty of canceled warranty! So, what do you do if your machine makes funny noises? If the picture dims and blinks? If your speakers sound hollow? Well, the short answer is—you get it repaired. If you're lucky.

I had a boom box, not exactly home theater equipment, but a relevant experience nonetheless. I loved that boom box—it had auto reverse, my very favorite feature. And auto reverse stopped. It wouldn't work. I blew compressed air into all the openings I could find—I mean, I live in the desert, maybe it was dusty. Let's be honest, I knew it was dusty. I took Q-tips and dipped them in alcohol and cleaned the heads and the stuff they show you to clean that's obvious to me. Nothing. It still didn't work. So, I called around and eventually took it to an "authorized dealer." This boom box cost me about \$100, so the idea that I could replace this for \$100 wasn't appealing to me. I didn't have an extra \$100 right then. So, I thought I would get it repaired for somewhere in the vicinity of \$30. Ha ha!

I took it in, they told me it would cost me \$45 for them to estimate what it would cost to repair my boom box. That the \$45 would be applied to any repairs, but that was the minimum, non-refundable charge. \$45? Whoa! That's almost half what I'd paid originally. But, I wouldn't have the hassle of shopping, and I loved this particular boom box. So, I said okay. They repaired the boom box for \$73.00. It worked for one week, and then it stopped. I took it back, they said they were sorry, they had done all they could, they couldn't fix it again, and they had no policy about guaranteeing the results of their work. They also had



kept it for 10 days. I was then out \$73 and still had to go buy another boom box.

This is a minor glitch in the saga of electronics repairs. There are worse stories. Many many worse stories. Companies like Sears and J.C. Penney are getting into the warranty business in a big way. They advertise service contracts on all your existing equipment. Of any age. Sounds like a good deal doesn't it? Well, I suppose it is and it isn't. It's kind of like car insurance and health insurance. It frightens me to be without it, but I'm afraid to make any claims because I'm sure they're going to raise my premiums or cancel my policy altogether. A friend of mine has bought several of these service con-

tracts for the various appliances and equipment in her home. And ultimately she thinks they are a good deal. But, her husband was having a problem with the large-screen TV set. He knew there was something wrong with the picture. They were five months into a service contract. The service company kept the TV for two weeks and said they couldn't fix it—there were no parts available for the one that was broken. So, they got into a discussion about what the service company owed him—a replacement? No. Sending it out to someone else? No. That's not allowed. What about the time they kept it? No satisfactory answers were forthcoming. So, my friend took it to a local repair shop and they fixed it within a few days. Okay. Back to the service company. Well, you broke the contract, they said. You aren't supposed to take it to any other repair place. But, you said it couldn't be fixed. Yes, well...

House Calls

Another time, another friend called a repair shop that advertised mobile service and free estimates. Again, this was a relatively new TV, and again there was something wrong with the picture. The repair guy came in, attached alligator clamps to the power source, shorted it out, turned on the set and blew the power components to bits.

My friend said, "Why are you doing that? You're working with the power source and I know there's a problem with the picture. Won't that damage the power source?"

"I know what I'm doing," the repairman said, "and this set needs to be taken to the shop and major, major work is needed." What's scary about this story is that I wouldn't know the power source from the video source looking into the TV's inner works.

So, what do we do with all our expensive, complicated home theater equipment when something goes wrong—which it will? Do I just hold my nose and jump in the deep end of the repair saga?



To a degree, the answer is “Yes.” You owe it to yourself to search out the reputable dealers in your area. Via the Better Business Bureau, via quality custom installers, via friends you know are knowledgeable about this kind of thing.

I spoke with Jeff Benavidez, Service Manager for Video Audio Services, Inc. in Albuquerque, New Mexico. They have a fine reputation—as evidenced by recommendations from a quality installer and from two other friends.



Benavidez believes they must charge a minimum service fee, even for doing estimates because there is considerable time involved in diagnosing the problem. It's not like looking into a fuse box and replacing the burned out fuse. They must use sophisticated equipment to find out where the problem is. Also, before they instituted this policy, they found a significant number of people would bring in equipment they found at the dump, ask for the free estimate and leave the equipment when they found out what it would cost to repair it. Their minimum, non-refundable fees are at market rate for the quality of their service—\$27.50 for audio and \$67.50 for a car CD player, with a minimum charge of \$45. If the item can't be repaired, cleaning is included in the \$45 charge.

“The average consumer will be taken in by scammers over and over,” said Benavidez. “They want convenience, they want to push two buttons and everything works—and they want it cheap. So, they get taken advantage of again and again.”

“We give lengthy explanations [about the repairs] and most people don't care. They just want it to work. “ I know this is

true for me. I just want it to work.

Benavidez added, “We offer to return the “used or damaged” parts. If a company does this, they tend to be reputable.”

Your Job...

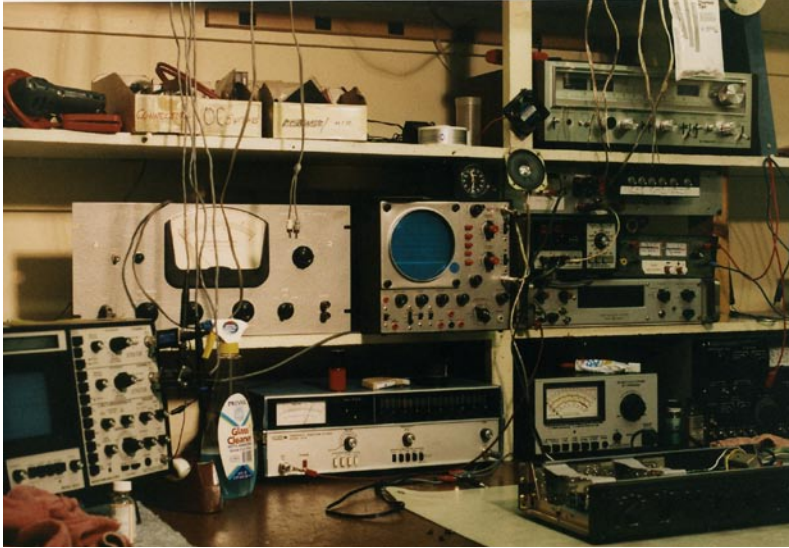
It takes education, learning how to deal with a service center. It takes research and reading, and shopping around. Check for:

- Average prices.
- Who has minimums
- Is the minimum applied to the repair bill if the estimate is accepted?
- Is the minimum not refundable?
- Are the technicians trained or not?

Some companies bait and switch. The minimum is indeed applied to the repair, but if the customer doesn't okay the repair, the company applies a re-assessment, so the minimum is actually higher than

stated.

Many of the shops using low-skilled technicians do the small, easy tasks like cleaning, but they can't handle larger, more complex problems. Benavidez said the repairs that come to their shop are more complex and harder to make money on. And because of these "low-end" shops people expect inexpensive repairs. Training of technicians is critical, according to Benavidez. The manufacturers keep us educated. Each technician goes to seminars two to three times a year.



The service companies today deal less and less with manufacturers. They get their parts from consolidated suppliers. The good ones are timely and follow through, and good cooperation has developed between these suppliers and the service companies, which means when something goes wrong, calling the manufacturer directly—like

we did years ago—isn't necessarily the most helpful procedure.

Benavidez has a horror story of his own—actually it was his sister's: "She had a 12-month parts and labor extended warranty. Something went wrong 11 months into the contract. There were calls back and forth. The company was refusing to do anything. It turns out they made a mistake on the paper work—they had typed the wrong model number." So, guess who was left holding the bag?

When asked what consumers should not do, Benavidez advised:

- Don't get angry. These items are luxuries, conveniences. Resentment gets you nowhere.
- Keep a cool head.
- Use a credit card - let them help you negotiate through problems. Use mediation if necessary.
- Don't work on your own equipment. It's not like in the days of tube TVs, it's not necessarily obvious which "tube" to replace. Modern electronics are complex.
- One part affects another and highly specialized equipment is needed to re-adjust the interconnected parts.

"So," I said, if I do all this, I won't be taken advantage of, right?" Benavidez hesitated and then responded "You'll never know for sure..."

Okay, then when should you throw it away?

"How good was it to begin with?" Benavidez asked. "Some people like the older, simpler, analog equipment. And don't want to get new, digital, more complex electronics. If that's the case, repair it. We have a



large number of customers therefore who want to repair their old equipment rather than buy new.”

I asked about the most common problems. His reply was immediate—VCRs. “The older products had more rubber in the mechanics and therefore cleaning and rubber maintenance were the major repairs, especially in dry climates. They get gummy, smear and dry up. Newer VCRs have more parts, like levers, made of plastic. The plastic is more flexible than metal, which was more common in the past—and more durable. The plastic bends, twists, and warps easier from stress and heat.

“When buying new, buy those brands with the best reputation for reliability (fewest repairs),” said Benavidez. “The quality of electronics trend is not toward greater dependability. And that’s sad.”

“Home theater customers are fairly well educated consumers,” acknowledged Benavidez. “They’re smart and can test their equipment. Often the installer is the one to diagnose the problem with the system and if he does, he should provide a diagram. Then the service person deals with each piece of equipment. And with the plan, the blueprint, a knowledgeable service person can track through.”



It’s better for the installer to send the sales person—often the technicians have a difficult time interfacing with customers. Technical people tend to be eccentric—most want to work with the machines, not the public. Loren Bishop, of Sound Ideas in Albuquerque, agrees with this procedure. Let the installer diagnose the problem. It’s a primary reason he describes his connections to his customers as long-term relationships.

Benavidez believes states should regulate the service business—California does, but not all do. “What states need is a regulatory board/commission/licensing board and some educational requirements for each technician. They should have inspections and tests several times a years and should revoke licenses after three failures.”

Benavidez had some other advice as well:

- Trust your instincts.
- Read the contract. You need to know if what is promised on page one is taken away on page three. If a salesman promises you the world, have him write it down and sign it.

“I can’t think of any way to give you an easy way in and out in the service business. The only easy way is to throw it away when it breaks... but that’s not good for my business,” adds Benavidez.

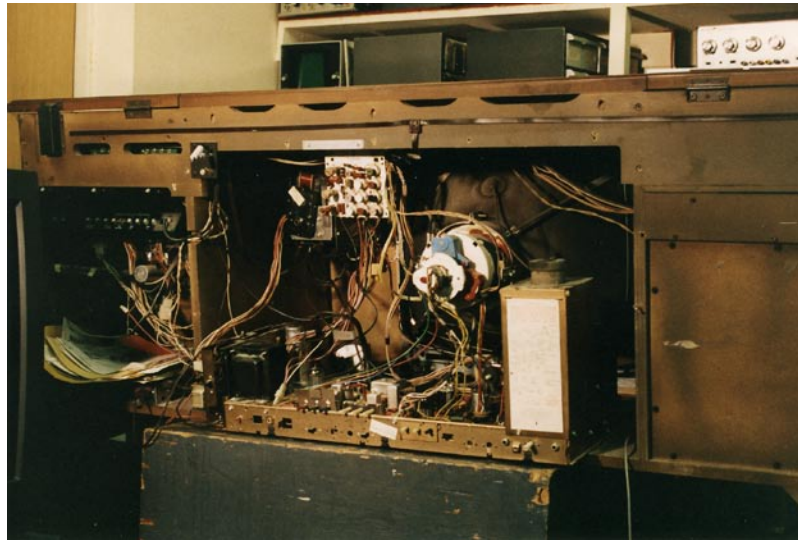
So, now we know it’s a jungle out there. I wouldn’t go camping in the Amazon without doing careful research, being fully prepared, and finding a trustworthy guide. It’s the same in the world of electronic repairs.

DOs

- Have home theater system installed by dealer who will provide follow-through—who will be available for questions and diagnostics down the road.
- Do your research and your leg work. Find out who's good.
- Let the experts do the work.
- Ask for the broken parts back.
- Be realistic about keeping or throwing out your old equipment.
- Use a credit card to pay for repairs, as the credit card company can help if a dispute arises.

DON'Ts

- Don't expect something for nothing.
- Don't assume you know more than the skilled technician.
- Don't sign a contract without reading the small print.



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