

Customer Service Is Key

“Every day we respond to phone calls and emails from customers and dealers facing challenges that range from the very simple to the extremely complex,” explains professional services representative Angie Todd. “Many times it’s as simple as providing a manual or some software documentation via email. That may seem trivial, but to the customer it can mean the difference between shutting a job down or completing it on schedule.”

Todd is one of three professional service representatives working fulltime out of Topcon’s Columbus, Ohio support center. On any given day more than 100 customers contact this support center for instruction and assistance. Todd’s area of specialization is the use of Topcon equipment in construction and agriculture.

The support staff also includes several other professional service representatives in field locations, from California to New Jersey, Michigan, and even Australia. In addition, the customer support center can call on the company’s engineers who designed and developed the systems for assistance in resolving complex technical issues.

“Obviously, there’s a lot more involved in an operation like this than just a few people with telephones and PCs,” says professional services manager Jim Hinson. “The whole system is extensively networked and managed by sophisticated software; even the phones are using VoIP to leverage the technology’s capabilities.

“Our mission is to provide product support to dealers, end users, and internal Topcon customers. That last category includes other Columbus staff members, regional sales managers, our service department, various corporate engineering teams, product managers, and senior executives.

“Actually, one of our more important functions is acting as an early warning system for product management and engineering. Our database and tracking systems can identify trends very quickly, and that gives engineering a head-start on dealing with them before they become widespread,” he says.

“Product managers and senior executives are also on the information distribution network. In fact, the web-based software we use enables virtually anyone in management to observe and investigate problems in the field in near real-time. They can just click on a category and see what people are having trouble with.

“In the end, though, our real focus is on resolving issues for all of our dealers and customers in that order,” Hinson says. “Dealers are on the front line, and our goal is to help them become the ultimate resource for their customers.

“Ideally, a customer should only call us directly when their dealer can’t resolve an issue. But, realistically, some dealers are better at that than others, and some users simply prefer to talk



▲ (from left to right) Topcon support personnel: Angie Todd, Mike Strutt, Bryan Given, Dan Radcliffe, Cory Mason

to the manufacturer. So, we handle both with the same level of professionalism.”

Access to the support network is almost 100 percent via direct telephone calls or emails. In either case, the technical support desktop software creates an incident ticket for each inquiry that is used both to track resolution of the problem and to add the inquiry to the center’s database once it is resolved.

Field representatives use a similar procedure, recording the caller’s name, contact information, and inquiry details that are then emailed to Columbus for resolution. Upon receipt, an incident ticket is generated, and an acknowledgement is emailed back to the representative along with the tracking number.

Callers are handled by an automated system that begins the process of categorizing and directing the inquiry by offering six choices: service and repair, precision agricultural products, GPS, survey, machine control, and laser.

Each support representative is assigned a skill level in each category, and the software automatically directs the call to the individual with the highest rating in the area selected. If that person is not available, the call is directed to the next highest rated person who either will resolve the issue, if possible, or record the information and direct it to the appropriate person.

The software guides the interaction with the customers using pop-up scripts, checklists, and other aids. Many times the solution is as simple as asking “Is the unit turned on?” or “Are you using the right software?” But, where that is not the case, more sophisticated tools are available.

Bryan Given recalls a dealer inquiry with a simple solution that took a long time to discover. “A Canadian dealer had been struggling all morning trying to load new radio firmware into an important customer’s HiPer+ units. The HiPer+ requires a certain procedure to load radio firmware that includes sending script files to daisy chain to the radio board to connect to PDL Config software.

“The dealer was able to send the script files, but kept getting errors when trying to connect to PDL Config. He had made

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several unsuccessful attempts, and by the time he called us he was getting desperate.

"I had him try several procedures but it still wasn't working. So I contacted engineering to get more suggestions to try, but those didn't work either.

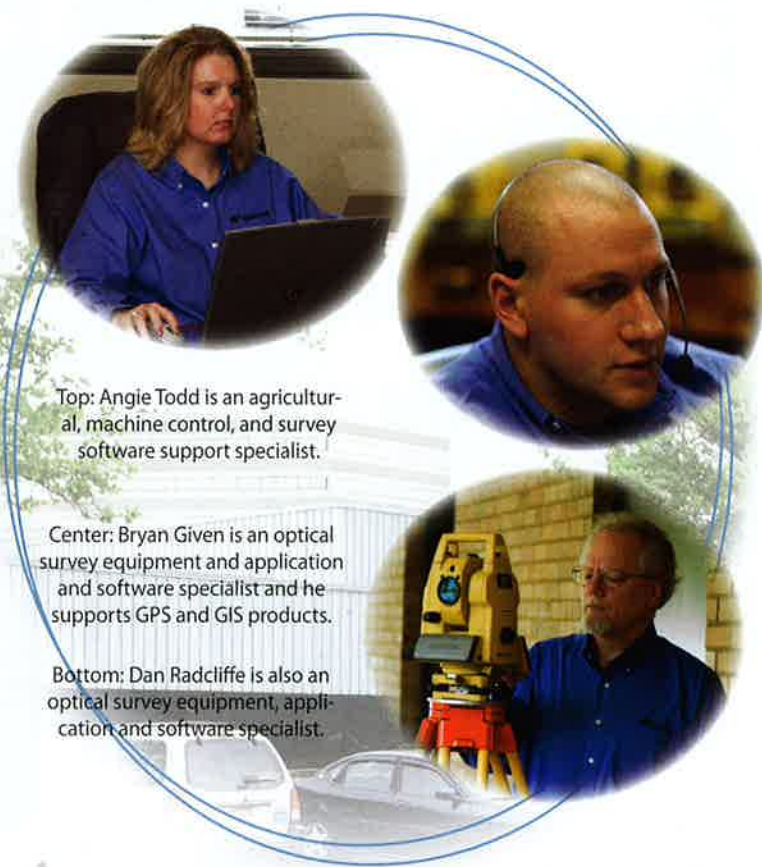
"Finally, we just started the whole procedure from scratch and discovered that the initial connected baud rate was incorrect. That one simple error was the reason why he couldn't load the firmware. Once he reset the baud rate correctly, everything worked the first time the way it was supposed to.

"He was so appreciative. He said if he was in the states he would take me out for a beer."

While this issue was successfully resolved with a lengthy phone conversation, sometimes the solutions require even more extensive efforts. Paul Naylor recently took control of a customer's system via the internet to resolve a particularly complex issue.

"The customer called because he could not get his MapRT GIS receiver to receive OmniSTAR correction. He was able to connect to Beacon and WASS so he was sure that the receiver was processing information. It had to be a setting or setup error.

"He had recently loaded new firmware onto his receiver, and as I talked with him it became apparent that he may have loaded the incorrect version. The only way that you can tell that the incorrect firmware had been loaded is to go into the GPS receiver utility and configuration software (PCCDU) and look at the option for OmniSTAR.



Top: Angie Todd is an agricultural, machine control, and survey software support specialist.

Center: Bryan Given is an optical survey equipment and application and software specialist and he supports GPS and GIS products.

Bottom: Dan Radcliffe is also an optical survey equipment, application and software specialist.

"This customer, while very knowledgeable, had never used PCCDU and had only used Floader, a firmware/driver download utility software, once. Because of this we decided that having a live online meeting using our GoToMeeting software would be the best way to fix his unit. He connected his unit to his computer and signed into the meeting, then let us have control of his computer.

"We walked step by step through how to check his unit and fix it. During this time he wrote down what we were doing so if he ever had this trouble again he would be able to fix it himself."

The average duration of calls to the Columbus professional service group support center is five minutes or so, but many require much more extensive efforts. All, however, receive whatever effort is required to reach a successful resolution.

"The explosive growth of GPS technology has brought a lot of new people into the user community," Hinson said. "The 'early adopters' tended to be a lot more technically oriented than today's new user, and that has changed the nature of the questions we field here.

"The best advice I can give our customers is simply to read the manual. But, when that's not enough they're welcome to call, and we will do what's necessary to get them up and running as quickly as possible.

"We're here to 'Get Them Working,' and that's what we do—all day, every day." ↓

DOUG DRUMMOND is a writer for National Editorial Services in Northport, MI.

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