;login:

inside:

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Is That Your Final Answer?

We bought a brand-new refrigerator-freezer last month. We plugged it in, hooked up the water, installed the shelves, put the food in, and shut the doors. We thought we were done. To our surprise, once it got cold (the manual said it takes about 12 hours to do so after it is first turned on), the freezer section began to accumulate frost. A little at first, then more as time went on. At first we thought it was part of the "bootstrap" process and once the unit reached its steady-state temperature, it would go away; but it didn't. Finally, one morning I went to open the freezer and the door was frozen shut. I called the service department.

by Tina Darmohray

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The customer service representative I reached was nice enough, and he seemed capable of doing most of his job, but he failed miserably in the "troubleshooting" department. He started out by asking the necessary questions: when did you buy it? where did you buy it? what is the model number? That all went well enough. Then came the troubleshooting questions: what seems to be the problem? when did it start? That's when things started going south. I described the frost on the inside of the freezer section. I said, "It looks like the kind of ice that you see build up in a manual-defrost freezer. You know, they all used to be that way before there was the frost-free kind?" The representative proceeded with what was obviously a series of standard "freezer has frost in it" questions and comments: how thick is the frost? defrosting the freezer is recommended whenever the ice reaches 1/4-inch thickness . . . "Wait a minute!" I interrupted. "We're talking about frost buildup in a frost-*free* freezer. Right?" "I'm just going through these questions," came the reply. "Well, don't just go through the questions. I gave you the model number; check and make sure it's a frost-free freezer. If it is, then we don't need to waste any time on how to manually defrost it; we'll agree that it's broken and we need to have a repairman out to look at it." Surprisingly, it took me quite a while to convince him that we should really ask some of our own questions to help us get to an appropriate answer as quickly and efficiently as possible. I finally prevailed, but it wasn't as obvious to him as it was to me.

I found myself thinking more about the conversation I had had with the customer service representative and how he didn't seem to see the forest for the trees. It reminded me that knowing the right answer is only half the battle; knowing the right questions to ask is almost more important. For system administrators this is particularly the case. We have users of software packages, operating systems, hardware, and networks who probably don't realize that it takes all of those layers working together to deliver the service that they're inquiring about. It's complicated at best. Being able to ask the right questions is essential in our line of work. Getting the key information from our users can make all the difference in our ability to troubleshoot the problem rapidly. The call I had with the appliance service representative reinforced this for me. Don't underestimate the importance of asking the right questions.