

Necessity has always been the mother – and motherboard – of invention.

In the mid-1990s, Chris Graves would sit at his computer with a wide range of ideas about ways he could use this new thing called the Internet. There was a new advent of websites and online magazines for everything and nothing and Graves was ready to boot his childhood passion for computers into a new and exciting frontier.

His only problem was on his desk and staring him in the face.

“I was a Mac user,” Graves said.

At the time, navigating the Web with an Apple was a like fumbling through a foreign country alone with the wrong language dictionary.

“I was having trouble finding help on how to do anything,” Graves said. “They had horrible information out there and it didn’t even seem like they understood what I was talking about. In some cases, you couldn’t even get your Mac online.”

Having toyed with computers since age 9, Graves knew there had to be a better way, and he was determined to find it and hang onto his faithful Mac – even if he had to take matters into his own hands.

“I figured if I could get this server thing figured out, I could start a company and make it work for me,” he said, “I knew there were probably other Mac users who have the same problem and I can make it work for them too.”

Such became the genesis of the MacHighway business model, a company where Mac lovers solved problems and passed the solutions on to their customers.

Today, the wind-powered MacHighway is a leading one-stop website-building and Web-hosting service – but one designed specifically for Mac customers who want to drive traffic home without trading in their Apple for a lemon.

“The Mac works. It just works,” Graves said, summing up what every Mac user knows intrinsically. “There’s a different expectation for the design and how elegant it’s supposed to be.”

Although Graves would almost immediately find profit in his large Mac-using clients – from JVC to CaseLogic, each with the need for specialized service – he knew he would need help if he was going to take MacHighway to the next onramp.

Enter Tyler Jacobson, who would bring his tech-savvy and customer-service know-how from Athens, Ga. to MacHighway’s home base in Denver. He would become the firm’s manager of technical support, a crucial job as customer service had already been hardwired into MacHighway’s stock and trade.

“Not only do we give them the tools to create the site, we give them the tools to promote it. We try to make it as easy as possible for them to succeed,” Jacobson said of MacHighway’s clients. “This is where our 50-plus years of technical-support experience between our top-level team comes into play.”

Whether a customer needs a website for a large or small business or just a place to post political musings and wedding photos, the company has an affordable price point for every level of customer – as well as tech support for every level of computer literacy.

And unlike much of its Mac-based competition, MacHighway has strived to keep its prices competitive. Even the firm’s most basic service level includes 10 GB of hosting space, unlimited bandwidth, up to 20 site-connected email addresses, two websites and the search-engine optimization that will help people find them.

“You can pick a template. You can drag and drop. You can add your own content. You push a button and there’s your website,” Graves said.

You want a shopping cart? Add it to ... well, the shopping cart.

“For \$2.95 a month, you can create a store and you can sell worldwide and do it without having to hire a Web designer,” Jacobson said.

If that virtual shopkeeper on the MacHighway needs roadside assistance, the company has several ways to provide it, including a comprehensive knowledge base culled from decades of research, wide-ranging user forums and email help.

If worse comes to worse, customers can pick up the phone and talk to a live Mac user – who assuredly won’t say, “Oh, you’re using a Mac? *That’s* your problem.”

The simple notion of unbridled Mac-friendly customer service – coupled with that apparently rare skill of translating computer-speak into English – is key. It is why MacHighway survived the deadly dot-com bust, boasts clients on five continents and maintains a place in the top 1 percent of hosting companies worldwide.

“Our pricing and features are on par with the largest hosting companies in the world,” Graves added. “But our technical support is geared toward Mac users because we’ve come across the problem ourselves, so we are going to find a solution.”

In other words, what MacHighway has learned as an online business, it has effectively passed on to its online clients.

“Every challenge a customer is facing, we’re facing,” Jacobson said. “Everything they want to achieve, we want to achieve.”