

**Q:** I am inserting a question I have covered previously, but perhaps upon which I have been a bit too vague (or maybe I missed the mark entirely), as I have been asked this one question dozens of times over the past six months more than any other topic I can remember. It is “What can I do other than upgrade in order to keep my system (PBX or Voice Mail) as it is and still get support for it? The OEM is saying it needs to be upgraded to a Version 9 in order for them to continue maintaining it.

**A:** It’s the same answer I used to urge to my coach in Little League (yes, we had baseball back then!) when things weren’t going as he would have them; “Ooo, Ooo, send me in, coach!”. There is an acute lack of understanding in the world of telecommunications today, and it’s due in part to the poor job of the interconnect companies to explain their abilities satisfactorily to the end-user community, and also due to the perception of and the OEM’s professional ability to sell themselves as being what they used to be, not as they are. Back in the days of “wooden telephone-poles and iron telephone men”, the best property of the old regulated-monopoly system was the perception of the OEM as to what “service” was. It could operate very well behind the word “service”, because it could be a very profitable situation when a regulated monopoly could convince it’s regulators that costs needed to be recovered for certain “service enhancements”, and could then increase tariffs plus a “reasonable” profit. In that case, the OEM was determined by all alike to be the definitive meaning of the word “service”. It was a system that worked well but allowed no competition, and thus offered slow technical advancement. Those days are gone. However, somehow the perception of the OEM being the definitive example of “service” seems to linger on for what I perceive as two reasons: 1.) The OEM heavily promotes it (and why shouldn’t they), and, in their lack of understanding of the real world of telecommunications in a competitive environment, actually believes it, and 2.) They have an excellent marketing strategy that includes subtleties perpetuating that myth in every contact they have with the end users, including the InDUG (which is a closed forum to any telephone companies other than the OEM..... figure that one out). Primarily, there’s the “Gray Market” scare to discourage the usage of secondary-market equipment by end-users. IF THERE WAS NO SECONDARY MARKET, DO YOU THINK THERE WOULD BE ANY RESIDUAL VALUE TO THE HARDWARE YOU BUY FROM THE OEM ONCE YOU BOUGHT IT? Certainly not! And, it also seems to be lost on them that if that were the case, they wouldn’t be able to charge what they do for the new systems. The secondary-market value is what buoys the price of their new systems, but they have cleverly convinced a majority of end-users to not consider using it because of those unscrupulous “Gray Market Dealers”, which they carefully don’t seem to want to define. Is a Gray Market Dealer one who buys the equipment the OEM provides to other markets such as Europe or South America at cheaper prices than they do to the American market and ships it back to the United States and sells it to you cheaper than the OEM does, and still makes a profit? If the hardware is manufactured by the OEM, and not altered in any way either in software or hardware, why wouldn’t you want to use it if it were the exact piece of equipment you needed and was offered at a better cost? Why do you care if it traveled two-thirds around the world and back again before you got it? And why aren’t you more angry at the OEM for this situation than many of you are at the supposed Gray Market Dealer? The fact that many of you *are* is reflective of the phenomenal marketing strengths of the OEM. Are you looking for good marketing or good service? How about both? To further distance the end-user from a more cost effective solution for their hardware, the OEM has even instituted a clearing method for their dealers to make sure that a piece of hardware that is intended for the foreign market doesn’t make it through them to be sold as “certified” equipment. I can’t see any reason to block such a sale if the equipment is manufactured by them and is identical in every way except for the fact they sold it to someone cheaper than they will to the U.S. end-user and wants to make sure that it doesn’t make it’s way back through a third party and thereby undersells their higher price for this market. How is it that it can be shipped and sold to a foreign end-user, resold to a “Gray Marketeer”, shipped back to the U.S. and then sold to you cheaper than you can buy it in this market? If it can be done cost-effectively, there is something called capitalism that makes that “Gray Market” type of sale a natural progression of doing business. Capitalism also allows the OEM to try to discourage that sale. An informed and intelligent end-user base is one that understands what is happening here. In my opinion, what has been fostered upon the end-user in this situation usually is preceded by at least a dinner and a movie. In plain English, **NO, you don’t have to upgrade** to the latest, greatest software to receive top quality, knowledgeable, and in many cases, enhanced, support and maintenance. “Ooo, Ooo..... send me in, coach!”, or any one of scores or more of my contemporaries in the “Definitely Not an Avaya Dealer” category with the technical ability and more hardware availability than the OEM has in stock!