



If the Phone Doesn't Ring... ***Tips to Improve Your Voice Mail***

It's amazing that we live in a technological age and we haven't mastered voice mail. I use the phone extensively in my business and I hear some really poor excuses for voice mail. Don't you wish there were some voicemail "rules" out there, that people had to follow? So I'd like to offer some ideas on how to leave effective messages and avoid wasting the time of the recipient - on both ends. You can share this with the people you interact with frequently, so an informal agreement about the effective use of voicemail can be created. Here are some tips to get your communication techniques into the 21st Century.

On the outgoing end...

1. State what business the person has called in your outgoing message. I know we don't want to give our names in our personal greeting messages, but hey, don't you want to do business with people who call in to your office?
2. If you want to leave a current message that states what day it is and when you will be back, try to get it within a day or two of the correct day. I called a number on January 13th and was told the office was going to be closed for the holiday until November 28 when calls would be returned - BUSTED! If you don't know the date, please don't try to teach it to the rest of us.
3. Be creative - No I don't mean those ridiculous unprofessional song messages, but use your voice mail to tell your customers what you do and what you can do for them. I try to leave an inspiring quote or tip in my standard outgoing message. When I am speaking, I tell callers I am speaking for a group now, but if they leave a message, I will be glad to speak for their group next. Here's a thought for salespeople--you can use your Voice Mail to sell to potential clients when you aren't in.
4. Having said that...Make the message brief. Give options to skip the greeting. If your greeting is rather long, tell callers how to by-pass it at the beginning of the message. "Hi, you've reached Jim Mathis. To by-pass this greeting and leave a message right now, please hit pound." If you must have a long greeting, tell the

caller how to skip it in the future. If it is long and boring people are less likely to leave a message. If you want to give your address, phone number (which the caller obviously already has) and other information, don't make the caller sit through it. Sometimes all people want to do is leave a message and they must wait to find out how.

5. Cut down on the number of times someone has to push a button to get the information they need. Nothing irritates a caller like repeatedly hearing "For this option press 1, for this option press 2...", then getting another set of options several more times. Most people will not wait through more than three lists of options. Always give an "out" to talk to a live person. Hey, that's why we have telephones - so people can communicate. I know the options cut down on confusion on your end and probably saves you money, but if your customers are dissatisfied every time they call in getting money is your biggest problem. Oh yes, a personal peeve of mine...if I had to give you my account number or other information by pressing the buttons, don't ask me what it is again when a live person finally answers.

6. Learn the shortcuts and features of your voice mail system. Find the/a manual for your phone system and learn how to speed up and slow down messages. You can skip right to the end, automatically delete, forward with a comment, or reply automatically without ringing the caller's phone. The time you invest in learning these shortcuts will pay you back many times over.

7. Avoid "Phone tag." Tell listeners when you will return calls and be honest about it. Maybe you might tell when you can best be reached to prevent the frustration of telephone tag.

On the incoming end...

1. Plan your message. Decide what message you will leave in advance in case you get voice mail. Consider the points you want to make and make a few notes. Time Management guru Laura Stack says that if a planned phone call takes you seven minutes, and an unplanned call takes 12 minutes, the five-minute difference, multiplied by 12 calls a day, could represent an hour of wasted time each day. Careful planning will give you more time to do what is necessary.

2. Did you know that with most systems, you can push # (pound sign) after your message and get a list of options that include erasing and recording your message again? I've had times when I started coughing and had to re-record the message several times before I left something I wasn't ashamed of.

3. Begin and end with your phone number. State who you are and your phone number clearly after the beep. "Hi, Sharon, this is Jim Mathis at 888 (pause), 688 (pause), 0220." Your name and number should also be the last thing people hear, so they don't have to rewind if they missed it at the beginning. Repeat the information so the person has the opportunity to write it down.

4. Tell why you called. Take more than 60 seconds and you risk having your message deleted. Remember, the purpose is to leave a message, not give a speech. If your message will be over two minutes, you may want to think about detailing the information in an email instead. Stream-of-consciousness communication doesn't work. Think about your message and begin with your purpose. "The reason I'm calling is..."

5. Watch your tone. Without any other non-verbal cues such as face and body language, your tone is all you have to communicate with. A monotone lacks enthusiasm, so put vitality in your voice. Stand up and smile as you leave your message. Standing increases your energy, and believe it or not, people can hear a smile over the phone. Want proof? Have you ever been to someone's house right after they've had a fight? Their tone gave it away. It works the same way over the telephone.

6. Be creative. Offer them an incentive or information to call you back. Most business people receive 5-10 calls a day when they are out and they have to hear your message along with others they have received. Ask for the information you require. The recipient will be able to look up the answer prior to calling you back. Get to the point and allow them to gather information to call you back with.

7. Avoid "Phone tag." If you continually get someone's voice mail, give options for a phone appointment. Tell the person what time you'll be calling and the purpose of the call, so important information can be gathered ahead of time. Use these tips to transform your business to a new level of professionalism and productivity.

You will be amazed at what some of the slightest changes will do for your image-and your business!

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