



## Making the Most of Voice Mail

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Do some people still hate voice mail? I think it's one of the greatest innovations ever.

It has virtually eliminated busy signals and allows you to leave information for others when they are not available at the time you call. Of course, I've been frustrated when a big company expects me to somehow get an answer through their voice mail system that the system is not equipped to handle. But voice mail itself is not to blame. Voice mail's effectiveness depends on how it's used.

Leaving a detailed message was both risky and time-consuming 25 years ago. Switchboard operators and secretaries had to listen carefully and write down information, which they would pass on for someone else to read. There were many ways mistakes could occur.

According to research, only one out of three words would, on average, be captured from each phone call. Voice mail saves every word in a repeatable format. Studies show that at least 70 percent of phone calls contain one-way information. When this information doesn't involve numerous details, voice mail is a perfect tool for handling it smoothly, promptly and accurately.

Here are ten tips on leaving a message that will work both for you AND the receiver of the call:

1. Assume you'll get voice mail. For many years now, statistics have shown that only 25 percent of business calls reach their targeted party on the first attempt. Most people would swear that the percentage is much lower. Prepare for voice mail and, if you happen to reach the person you're calling or their assistant, you'll be ready to deliver a clear, concise, professional sounding message.
2. Smile when leaving your message. This isn't silly (giggling however, would be silly). The telephone can make your voice sound harsh and cold. Smiling simply makes your voice sound more lively and engaging. The person you're leaving a message for may retrieve 15 or even 50 messages in addition to yours. You don't want that individual to hesitate to call you back or move your message to the bottom of the list.
3. Keep your business-related messages short. If a message will be more than a minute long, you should send the information via fax or email.
4. Don't make your message TOO short or your call will seem pointless. For example, have you ever gotten a message like this: *Hi, This is Sam. Give me a call at .....* Even if you know Sam's last name, you're thinking 'Call about what? When will Sam be available?' Since you don't have a clue as to what he's calling about and you don't want to start the voice mail version of Duck-Duck-Goose, you end up deciding: 'Why should I bother calling back?'
5. Unless you're calling a friend you speak to frequently, leave your first and last name. Enunciate clearly and speak slightly louder and slower than usual. Remember that the message retriever might be in a car, on a street or in a noisy restaurant or airport.

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6. Knowing that the person you called could be retrieving your message from ANYWHERE, always leave your phone number. Even if you believe the information you're giving them is essentially "one-way," they may think of a detail you've overlooked.

7. Be specific with all details of your message and make the pertinent details easy for the listener to write down. Numbers, dollar amounts and addresses should be read slowly. Names should be spelled, if accuracy is vital. Consider repeating the information, if you think the party you're calling might have difficulty getting it all down on paper.

8. Always state your phone number at the end of the message. Pause just before saying it *You can reach me at (pause) 8-0-4-6-7-4-6-1-1-1*. We're so familiar with our own phone numbers, we have a tendency to rattle off the numbers far too quickly.

To slow yourself down as you're stating the numbers, you can pause between each number. Or pretend that you're writing each number in sand with your big toe—and proceed at that pace. In addition to giving your toes a nice stretch, this will keep you from frustrating the listener as they repeatedly play your message, trying to get your number right.

If you simply cannot slow down, repeat your number, very clearly, twice in a row.

9. When requesting a return call, say when you'll be available. This is a simple, but often overlooked courtesy.

10. If you're having trouble getting a call returned, try this: *I called on April 7th and 10th and I have not yet heard back from you. I would appreciate the courtesy of a return call regarding .....* I have had good results using this **Positive Power**™ Line.

Another idea, useful in certain situations is to say, *I need your help with .... Please return my call*. Most people respond to requests for help, especially if they have contributed to the problem you're calling about.

A strategy I've heard suggested, but haven't tried: Make an enlarged copy of a phone message slip, fill it out with your call information and fax it to the individual who hasn't returned your call.

Making friends with voice mail can make your work easier by saving you both frustration and time. You just need to use it carefully, and for what it does best.

Years ago, soon after they became widely available, I bought an answering machine. I needed it to stay in close touch with customers and the sales team I led. My parents and in-laws truly hated it. At first they would hang up. Then, the next time I'd talk to them, they'd proudly tell me that THEY were the ones who hung up when they got **that stupid machine**.

Years later they began leaving tentative messages. My mother-in-law's were the best. You could tell she was holding the phone about a foot from her, as though the machine might attack her through the line. Speaking in a loud, but trembling voice, she would leave the shortest message ever: **Gloria....call me**.

Yes, she eventually got her own answering machine.

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