



Upgrade Your Voice Mail Message

© Gloria Thomas, president Wizard Workforce Development Inc. All rights reserved.

Have you listened to your voice mail message recently? Your customers, clients and co-workers have. When your voice mail message stands in for you, what do they hear?

Almost every client I work with, large or small, needs to make changes in their voice mail messages. Part of my job is to help them to develop messages that line up with their goals.

You don't need to be a skilled writer to create an effective outgoing message. In my **Positive Power**[™] Telephone Tools workshop, rewriting voice mail messages is the most popular exercise.

Here are five tips to help you create a more effective message:

1. Start with the premise that when someone reaches your voice mail, it's just as though they've reached you. The only missing element will be the immediate feedback you could have given. For most organizations and individuals, the return call should happen within about 24 hours. Some messages don't even require a return call. Understand what callers want. They want to know: **When can I get the answers I need or get my needs met—and how?** Keep your message focused on that.

2. Listen carefully and critically to your message. Consider getting others to share their honest impressions. Ask yourself:

Is my message lively?

Is it as concise as possible? How long do callers have to wait between **Hello** and the beep?

Is my tone of voice varied, or is it flat and monotone?

Are my grammar and enunciation correct?

Does my voice sound professional and sure, or is it hesitant and tentative?

3. Cut the phrase **I'm away from my desk right now**. Think about the picture that paints in a caller's mind. They see you goofing off or chatting with a co-worker. If someone reaches your voice mail, they should feel as though they've reached you, because they have! Instead, consider saying: **Hello, this is Jim Johns**.

Another questionable approach is saying **I'm on the other line**. They know you're not there or not answering for a reason. The caller just wants to get to the point where they can leave you a message.

4. Remove any apologetic language such as: **I'm sorry I'm not here to take your call**. A related negative is trying to leave your entire schedule on your voice mail message, as though you need to explain why you're not there for them. This is only necessary in special situations, because callers rarely care what you're doing.

They just want to know you'll get back to them. Another problem with recording your schedule for the day is that it doesn't allow you any flexibility. Things can change—meetings run over—and the caller gets your message a second time. This makes it seem as though you're tardy and the caller must listen to your long, detailed message all over again before they can leave their message.

Unleashing the Communication Potential of Individuals and Organizations.[™]

5. Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases, such as: ***You've reached the voice mail box of Jim Johns.*** They know it's voice mail. Callers are only surprised when they reach you!

Instead, simply say: ***This is Jim Johns*** or ***You've reached Jim Johns*** or ***Thank you for calling Jim Johns.*** Also, there is rarely any reason to say: ***This is Wednesday, September 17th.*** For most callers, ***Have a nice day!*** at the end of your message won't generate the warm feeling you hoped for, especially after callers have heard it more than once.

Now that you've pared down your voice mail message, critiqued it and adopted a new way of thinking that says, *If you reach my voice mail, you've reached me!* what do you want to INCLUDE in your voice mail message, to make it work better for you?

It might be that the basic: *Hello, this is Tammy with Friendly Company. Please leave your message after the tone,* will be all you need. Some experts now advise cutting out ***after the tone,*** since most everyone got that down a few years back. Your organization will want to decide whether or not you'll benefit from giving callers more details and asking them to leave specific information.

Here are five more tips to help you make the most of voice mail:

1. Accept that voice mail is a powerful tool (not a *problem*) even for small businesses. Today's telephone technology allows every organization an opportunity to set up an effective voice mail system. What can it do for you? It can **sell** callers on the fact that you give good service; it can educate callers on the services you offer; it can inform callers, giving them vital information and it can help you avoid costly miscommunication by anticipating problems, such as callers not leaving both their first and last names.
2. Tell your callers what they need to know—and no more than that. Give necessary information. Retail stores should always give their hours, if possible in a second voice mailbox (*press 4 for store hours and directions*). It's frustrating to callers when they are told to call back and don't have the opportunity to leave a message, so most businesses should allow messages any time, day or night.
3. Ask for the information you need. This will vary, depending on your work and the needs of your callers. If you've found callers leave only their first names, ask for a first and last name. If you consistently have difficulty reaching callers, ask for them to say when they'll be available.
4. At the end of your message, keep it simple, saying: *Please leave a message and I'll get back to you.* Not: *Have a nice day.* That phrase, while friendly when said in person, in a genuine way, just doesn't come off the same when it's recorded and when your regular callers hear it repeatedly. Be careful when using any of the seemingly friendly closing phrases. When callers know they're near the end of your message, they're eager to finish.
5. When you record your new message: Stand up. This will make your voice sound better. Relax your neck, throat, and shoulders. Breathe deeply. Speak in lower vocal ranges and vary your tone and pace.

Put yourself in your callers' shoes and take a moment to listen to your own message. Small business owners and their employees should never frustrate callers with poorly constructed voice mail messages and systems. Even large organizations can develop systems that are user-friendly and deliver welcoming messages. One of my favorites begins: ***Thank you for calling Day-Timers, where it's all about you!***

Gloria Thomas is the president of Wizard Workforce Development Inc., a Richmond, Virginia based training and consulting firm. Visit the Wizard Inc. website www.wizardinc.com or call 804.674.6111 for more information.

Unleashing the Communication Potential of Individuals and Organizations.™