

Conquering the Information Deluge -- Handling Phone Messaging

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We are now capable of being in constant contact with others around the world. Office phones, cell phones, and pagers can be blessings and curses. Technology can affect our lives -- it can be relentless in its intrusion, as well as allow us to easily talk with anyone, anytime around the world.

Phone messaging is one of the areas that have had a major technological boost in recent years. Call waiting, multiple lines, call forwarding, voice mail, cell- and combo-phones with PDAs are a few of the advances in recent years. Rarely do you find a live person answering your call, or an operator on the other end, when calling a business. Telephone bingo is the norm: "Press 1 for sales, 2 for marketing, 3 to be put on endless hold..."

Many people are using email instead of phone calling. However, the etiquette for the two is quite different -- and email is **not** a substitute for phoning in many instances.

This article discusses the etiquette of phone messaging. You'll also get some tips on how to deal with:

- creating and leaving effective phone messages,
- dealing with call waiting and multiple lines,
- handling voice mail,
- using cell phones appropriately

Some Phone Etiquette

- The etiquette around returning phone messages is to try and respond within a few hours. For a quick response, phone mail is a better choice than email. The expected turnaround for email is 24 hours. If the person you are trying to contact is traveling, he/she can more easily pick up phone messages than email.
- If you are going to be unavailable for a day or more, leave a voice mail greeting indicating when you will be returning calls, and contact information for someone else who might be able to help the caller.
- Pick up by the second ring. Set your voice mail kick-in for after the third ring.
- If you only need to pass along information to another person, try phoning when you believe they will be out of the office or away from home. This will avoid any unnecessary conversation.
- Messages should be short, concise, and clear. When leaving phone numbers or email addresses, speak very slowly -- remember, someone will be trying to write this down.
- Don't use cutesy greetings on a business phone -- personalize it. Also, tell the caller how to reach the operator.

- If you are using "Handsfree," mute the phone when you are not speaking.
- Don't put a conference call on hold to pick up another line. Everyone will get to listen in on the hold music/commercials, etc.

Creating and Leaving Effective Phone Messages

To save your time and that of the person you are calling, plan out what information you need to convey:

- Your contact information (name, phone number, best time to return call, alternatives such as another phone number or your email address) -- spell your name if the person doesn't know you
- When did you call?
- What are you calling about?
- What is the information you need to pass along?
- What are the actions that need to be done by the receiver?
- What are you going to do?
- When do they need to respond by?

Cold callers would never think of phoning without having their message fully scripted.

Do the same for those you are trying to contact:

- Make the message quick -- 60 seconds or less
- Don't leave confidential information in a voice mail message. Similar to email, voice mail can (and is) forwarded to others. Leave confidential information for speaking directly to a live person
- If the person who picks up is the operator or assistant to the person to whom you wish to speak:
 - Be courteous -- you want to be forwarded or at least have your message forwarded
 - Indicate who you are, including your organization, if this is a business call
 - Ask for Mr. or Ms. Last-name and his/her extension; if they are unavailable, ask to be directed to their voice mail.
- Speak slowly and clearly

Call Waiting, Multiple Lines, and Conferencing

- Remember, if you have call waiting or multiple lines, the person to whom you are currently speaking has priority -- unless, of course, you have indicated you are expecting an urgent, important phone call any minute.
- Let the first person know you have another call and to please hold for a moment. Tell the second caller you are on another line, and let them know when you can get back to them.
- Don't keep interrupting your first caller by answering more than one other call. Let your phone mail pick up.

- If you are having a conference call with 2 to 4 people, learn how to use the conference call feature of your phone system. If you'll be speaking to more than that number of people, set up a conference call number with a conferencing organization.

Handling Voice Mail

- Schedule regular points during the day to process voice mails. Block this time off your appointment calendar.
- Note down information gathered from the voice mail. Use this to create appointments and tasks in your online system or in your paper planner.
- Forward voice mail messages that should be handled by someone else. Get back to the caller and let them know you have directed their information/request to person X.
- If you are in another organization's voice mail system, listen for the key to get a live operator, or try pressing 0.

Cell Phone Etiquette

- When you are in meetings, the theater, a restaurant, a train, or airplane, turn off your cell phone, or use the vibrate or other non-intrusive ring setting. Don't answer until you are in a place where you can converse.
- Have your phone handy to answer important phone calls. Have your regular phone forwarded to your cell phone when out of the office.
- Use hands-free if you are driving. Better yet, wait until you have stopped the car.
- If you are with someone else (unless you are expecting an urgent/important call), let the voice mail pick up the call.
- Have folks send you text messages instead of voice.
- Talk in a regular tone -- don't yell into the phone. No one else wants to hear your conversation.
- Always remember to err on the side of empathy towards others. Use your and their time wisely and you will reap the rewards of phone messaging.

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