



Avoiding Voice Message Hell

How to handle voice messaging systems when prospecting

Today more than ever it's really tough getting through to the person you're trying to reach on the phone. It used to be that the gatekeeper screened your call and kept you from reaching the very person you were trying to meet with or sell to. Now there's technology getting in your way. Prospecting and cold calling are hard enough, but when you are confronted with voice messaging systems, it adds to the challenge.

When you actually do speak with a prospect for the very first time during a so-called cold call, you need a short, concise, attention-grabbing statement that will get his attention and make him want to hear more. That's not always easy, even when talking live. With voice messages you not only have to leave a message that achieves this same goal, but also does it indirectly via an electronic recording, making it even more important to say the right thing. People tend to get nervous or confused leaving voice messages; hence the message itself may sound like a jumble of unrelated phrases. More than once I've had voice messages from callers that sounded like really good Porky Pig imitations. Also, this impersonal communications vehicle makes it too easy for your prospect to delete your seemingly unimportant message and go on with his day without fear of an uncomfortable or embarrassing situation.

It's very important to leave voice messages that catch your listener's attention, compels him to listen to the entire dialogue, and gets him to actually return your call. There are several techniques you can use that will increase your effectiveness and chances of getting a returned call. The following seven tips should help you with this modern-day Hell.

1. Curious George. Be sure to hit my hot buttons with your message so as to spur my curiosity. Specify clear benefits as to why I should return your call. The last thing I want to hear is "yet another sales slug trying to sell me something." Do a little research on me or my business before calling so you can relate your message to my interests and let me know that you might have something of interest for me. Try something like, "Mr. Lombardo, this is Fred Johnson with XYZ Inc. I see that you have expanded your operations to accommodate an increase in business. I know from my other clients that have experienced similar growth that they encountered challenges with finding quality people to fill the positions needed for this growth. We help companies find the right people so that you can spend your valuable time working with your business instead of working on your business. I'd like to speak with you to learn more about your operations and challenges to see if we might be able to help. You can reach me at..." If this is truly a concern of mine, you can be sure I'll call you back. Likewise, if this is not a concern or problem, then I won't call you back. But isn't that a great way to qualify your prospects anyway?

2. Short & Sweet. Don't leave long messages. I don't have the time or patience to hear someone go on and on about what they do, how they do it or how they think they can help me without even asking me what my pains are. The example in tip #1 is short enough yet informative enough to get to the point without boring me. You also don't want to leave too many details that would allow me to pre-judge you or make false assumptions about you or your offerings.

3. Don't Hang Up. Always leave a message. Some people say that if you get a voice message, hang up and try again later until someone live picks up. I don't recommend this at all because I can see from the caller ID that you called. And if I keep seeing that you called, I will, a) get annoyed that you are not willing or able to leave me a message, b) assume you're a telemarketer, or c) fear you are stalking me. Busy business people frequently don't answer their phone directly (I always try to, but that's just me) and let it go to voice mail so they can go through all their calls and return them at a specific time of day or week. You have to respect that and not expect that you'll actually get me live. So don't try playing this game of cat and mouse thinking you'll fool me one day by getting me to pick up on your call. I once read in a book on cold calling that you should call a prospect late at night when you know they are not there and listen to their voice message, but do not leave a message. It recommended that you should do this several times to study their voice and intonation in order to learn about their personality type. I think this is the dumbest idea I've heard in a long time. Not only will you not learn much about their personality type just from their voice message, but if the prospect happens to check his caller ID, he'll see that some nut has been calling him and hanging up at 10:00pm at night. Then when you do call during the day to reach him, he already knows you're mad and will ignore your call. So be careful of calling and hanging up without leaving a message for any reason.

4. Compliment My Business. This tip doesn't mean you should send me a compliment ("Hey Russ, nice voice message."). It means that you should try to find a topic that is complimentary to my business. Perhaps you have a product or service that works well with what I offer and we can work together. Possibly we have something in common like another client or colleague. Maybe you want to purchase my product and say so in your message. However, if you do say that, be sure that this is genuine or else you are being unethical or just plain lying. Once I call you back, be sure to discuss this complimentary topic first, and then you can segue into how you might be able to help me with your offerings.

5. Make Me An Offer. Try offering me something for free such as a free consultation or site-survey. This doesn't have to cost you much or even anything at all. This could be something that you do anyway as part of finding new business. It will get my interest when I hear I could get something for free to help my business. However, make sure you don't sound like a timeshare company offering a free trip (and all you have to do is sit through a 90-minute presentation...). If you would normally do a sales call where you'd ask a lot of questions about my operations and such and then present your findings to me, then this can be presented as a Needs Analysis that you are offering me for free. It's all about presenting value to me and getting me to want to return your call.

6. Be Prepared. Don't even pick up the phone unless you are first prepared to, a) reach a live person (the prospect himself or his gatekeeper), or b) get a voice messaging system. Some sales people are good on the phone when they reach a live person, but as soon as the "machine" picks up, they fall apart ("Um, yeah, uh, Hi. Uh, this is George from uh...uh...I mean George Carlson from uh..."). Be prepared in advance with your script for handling any situation. The script should be used as a guideline for you to follow and stay on track, but under NO circumstance should you ever read from a script.

7. Don't Give Up. On average, it takes up to six to seven times to get through to people these days, especially in business. The average sales person gives up after two or three tries – not even half-way there. So be persistent and patient and keep trying. Do not say that you already left me several messages and sound like you are getting frustrated. You can say that you understand that I am busy and haven't had a chance to return your calls. By saying that, you are respecting me and my time. You can also mix it up by sending me emails between calls, if you have my email address of course, because I may find it more efficient to respond to you via email than by phone. I may even respond to you via email while I'm on the phone with someone else. So be creative and persevere and do not give up too quickly. And, on your final message, don't sound frustrated or negative by saying something like you're giving up or can't seem to get me to call you back. Always sound positive and professional. I myself have left final messages that said something like, "I apologize that it might appear that I'm stalking you, so I won't leave any more messages and will wait till you find the time to call me back." This pokes a little fun at me while respecting the prospect's valuable time. Funny, I get returned calls after leaving that message.

Use these tips to help avoid Voice Message Hell and to increase your chances of getting returned calls from your prospects.

Good luck and good selling!

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