

# Making the Most of Voice Mail

An increasing number of companies are using voice mail, including over 90% of the nation's largest corporations as well as a great majority of small businesses.

Results from a industry survey show that many callers prefer leaving a voice mail message to leaving a message with a receptionist or operator, and nearly 80% of all voice mail subscribers (or mailbox owners) feel that voice mail improves their productivity on the job.

The survey also points out that the ways in which voice mail systems are implemented affects both subscriber and caller satisfaction. Although these pages are not intended to address all aspects of system implementation, they are designed to help resolve some of the most common problems encountered when using voice mail.

Whether you're a voice mail subscriber, a caller, or someone who manages a voice mail system, these guidelines and tips address some of the ways you can use voice mail to communicate more effectively. Voice mail is, after all, about sharing information...so why not use it to improve how you interact with others?

Having a voice mailbox shouldn't change what your job entails, but it does mean looking at new ways of doing your job. The standard rules of business etiquette haven't changed; you simply need to apply them to how and when you use voice mail.

If you're like most subscribers, you use voice mail to answer your telephone when you are not available. Your most important consideration is to help the people who call you feel comfortable leaving messages. That said, here are a number of suggestions:

## **Update your personal greeting regularly.**

In a recent survey, callers said they feel most comfortable leaving a message when greetings convey the subscriber's status. It's best to record a new greeting on a daily basis, but if you can't do that, record a new greeting every Monday morning, letting callers know your schedule for the week. For example:

*"This is Brad Bagnoll. On Monday, April 19, I will be in meetings from 9 until 1 and will return your call by 5 p.m. If you need to reach someone immediately, dial 0."*



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**In your greeting, let callers know when you'll return their call** - for example, "by 5 p.m. today" or "within 2 hours" - and stick to it! This will enhance your credibility with your callers.

**Include information in your greeting about how callers can reach a co-worker who can help them if you're not available.** This is especially important if you're on vacation or away from the office for an extended period of time.

"...Please call Mary Webber at extension 1234 if you need assistance."

In this case, Mary should be able to answer your caller's questions as well as you can. Typically, she should be a colleague with whom you work closely.

**Tell your callers how they can easily reach someone "live" if their call is urgent,** or if they prefer to leave a message with someone else.

"...if you need to reach someone immediately, dial 0."

**Make sure an operator or receptionist answers the line during standard business hours.** His or her responsibility is to make sure callers get the assistance they need. Callers transfer to your receptionist for a reason - they should not be shunted into a second voice mailbox!

**If you'll be away from the office on business, or on vacation and not checking messages, let callers know and tell them how to reach a colleague who is taking your calls.**

"This is Brad Bagnoll. I will be on vacation from April 19 until April 25 and will not be checking messages. While I'm away, Mary Webber at extension 1234 can help you."

While these things are important to include in your greeting, it is also important to keep your greeting as short and to the point as possible. The last thing most callers want to hear is a long-winded greeting that concludes with "have a nice day."

### **The elements of an effective voice mail greeting are:**

- **Your name** (also the name of your company or department, optional).
- **The day of the week** or period of time for which your greeting is valid.
- **What key(s) callers can press on their telephones for immediate assistance.**
- **When callers can expect a return call** - more specific than "as soon as possible."
- **The name and extension number of a colleague who can provide assistance** if you're out of the office... a must if you're at a sales meeting in Pago Pago for the week.

The following example combines all of these elements:

"This is Brad Bagnoll. For the week of April 19, I will not be available on Monday morning and Thursday afternoon, but will be in my office the remainder of the week. I will return your call within 3 hours. If you need to reach someone immediately, dial 0."

### Other ways to make voice mail work for you:

**Check for voice messages regularly**, especially if you're out of the office and don't have a flashing light or message waiting tone to remind you. This doesn't mean you need to check messages every half hour - every two or three hours is about right, especially if your greeting tells callers that you'll get back to them within a certain timeframe.

**Let callers know about the system** and how they can use it to communicate effectively with you. This is a point many organizations that install voice mail don't think about - and yet they're surprised when callers gripe about the voice mail system the first time they reach it!

Tell your regular callers that your company is installing voice mail so they're prepared to leave a message when they first reach your voice mailbox. Some companies even send out mailings to their customers prior to installing voice mail.

**Answer your telephone when you're at your desk!** Routinely screening calls is never proper business etiquette, and having a voice mailbox doesn't make it acceptable.

**Use the voice mail system to send and respond to messages from others in your organization.** Learn to think of voice mail as an abbreviated form of e-mail or memos - but quicker. If you need last quarter's sales figures for a presentation a week from now, leave a message for the sales administrator requesting the figures, instead of calling his or her telephone directly or going to her office (both of which interrupt work for a non-urgent matter). She can reply when she checks her messages, which she does regularly (see above).

**Learn how to transfer callers into someone else's mailbox, or at minimum, ring their extension.** When you receive a call that's meant for someone else in your company, transfer the call and stay on the line until the phone is answered. If the extension is forwarded to voice mail, ask the caller if he wants to leave a message before you hang up.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, Ron isn't available now. Would you like to leave a voice mail message for him?"



### Leaving Effective Messages

We've covered what to do if you're on the receiving end, but what if you call someone and reach a voice mail system? You can get your message across better and faster using guidelines that apply to everyday telephone etiquette.

**If your call is urgent, or you need assistance immediately, try pressing 0.** This will get you to an operator or receptionist in many cases, or will prompt you on what to do to reach someone. Someone should be available to help you during normal business hours.

**What if you're trapped in "voice mail jail" - a seemingly endless cycle of menus and mailboxes?** Press 0 or the designated keys on your telephone to reach someone who can help. If that doesn't work, hang up, call back, and press the keys that should get you to an operator immediately. Or call the main switchboard, if there is a separate listing.

Still no luck? Send a letter of complaint to the president of the company, along with a printout of this information or reference to TMIA's web site. .

**When you record a message, explain why you're calling, and when you need a response.** Then the person you're calling can provide you with this information in their return call.

"Brad, this is Howard Wombat. I received the information about your wholesale gadget sales plan and have several questions. Specifically, at what level do quantity discount prices kick in, and is there a minimum per-order quantity involved? Please get back to me by 5 today. My phone number is 555-2223. Thanks."

Now Brad can research Mr. Wombat's questions before calling him back, eliminating the possible need to make two return calls.

**Keep your message succinct.** See Howard Wombat's message above. He asks his two questions without any attempt at small talk, and lets Brad know when he needs a response.

**Let the person you've called know when it's convenient to call you back.** If you know you'll be in meetings from one until three, ask for a call between three and five. Also, take different time zones into consideration: if you're calling London from Los Angeles at noon, don't expect your call to be returned until the next day. On the other hand, let the recipient know if it's convenient to respond by leaving a detailed message in your voice mailbox.

**If you are requesting information, leave your name, full address, telephone number or fax number.** You might want to spell out your name. Speak slowly - someone has to transcribe your message.

If you'd rather leave a voice message instead of a message with a third party, but are not offered the option, ask. Most companies have voice mail, and the person who answers your call should be able to transfer you into the system to leave a message.

### Automated attendants and other conundrums...

"Welcome to Boffo Gadget Manufacturing. To reach our sales department, press 1. To reach customer service, press 2. To reach an extension, please enter it now..."

Automated attendants are one of the most misunderstood aspects of voice messaging. Theoretically, they allow people to route their own calls, or get information simply by pressing a few keys on their telephone keypads. But in practice, automated attendants often confuse callers by offering them too many choices and complicated steps.

Automated attendants are not appropriate for every business use. They should never be used for emergency services or hotlines, and are generally not appropriate in business areas that place a premium on personal interaction, such as customer service.

On the other hand, automated attendants are helpful in letting callers route themselves to specific individuals or departments for routine information, such as hours of operation, or directions. You can also use an automated attendant for certain departments or for callers who prefer to route their own calls (in departments like engineering, or as a second line for callers who would rather route their own calls instead of going through a switchboard). In many businesses, however, automated attendants are effectively used for after-hours calls only.



The following tips can help you make the most of an automated attendant:

**Limit the number of choices you offer callers in a single menu.** More than four or five choices will confuse your callers. And don't force them to wade through six menus before they reach the information they need.

**Tell callers how they can easily reach someone "live" if they need assistance -** and make sure that extension is staffed during normal business hours! After hours, change the greeting if no one is available.

**Give callers an option first, followed by instructions on what key to press to take action.** "For information about special gadget promotions, dial 3."

**Let callers know what keys to press to repeat menus or replay information.**

**Automatically transfer callers who don't respond to prompts to the receptionist or operator.** They may have rotary phones, or may not understand the instructions.