

## **STRATEGIES AND TACTICS TO TACKLE VOICE MAIL: TEN VOICE MAIL BLUNDERS**

*By Jim Domanski*

It is not surprising that so many salespeople complain about not having their voice mail messages returned. Judging by the dozen and half voice mails I have received from sales people over the past couple of weeks the reason is obvious: they're lousy.

You have about 5-8 seconds to catch your listener's attention and keeping it is even tougher. Understand this: about 15% of your message is communicated by the actual words you use i.e., the message you leave. The remaining 85% of the message is communicated by the tone of your voice. This is vital! If you sound lifeless, unsure and hesitant or if you speak too fast or too slow, or if you are too loud or too soft: you will lose the prospect's interest.

Salespeople complain about the impact of voice mail on their selling success but often they are their own worst enemies. If you are interested in improving your success when calling your clients or prospects, here is a list of common voice mail blunders and how you can manage them.

### **Blunder #1: Leaving a VM too soon**

The first tip in managing voice mail is NOT to leave a voice mail message.

The trick is to get a live prospect and that often means trying different times. Prospects aren't typically sitting at their desks hoping that a vendor will call to sell them something. They are often in meetings, or traveling or simply getting a cup of coffee. Think of your own day. Are you riveted to the desk or are you up and about from time to time?

Your objective is to get a live prospect. Here's how you do it. First, prepare a "Master List" of at least thirty or so prospects. Put them on a spread sheet or a legal pad with their phone

numbers. Next, come into the office early and start by calling them right away. You may typically work 9 to 5 but many of your prospects (especially directors, executives and owners) don't. They get in early before the day starts on fire. Start your dialing at 7:00 or 7:30 a.m. Begin at the top of the list and start dialing. Third, if you get voice mail hang up. Don't leave a message. Move on to the next number on your list, then the next, and so on. If you complete the list without an answer start at the top and work your way through it again. Finally, continue to cycle the list for the next hour or two.

Try following this process every day for about two weeks. You'll discover that you will reach one or two or three decision makers during this time. And because the day hasn't heated up, you will also discover that they have more time and more patience. In a similar manner, you can try the same experiment later in the day, from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Decision makers often stay late and are not expecting salespeople to call after normal hours so they tend to answer their phone if they are there.

### **Blunder # 2: Not Understanding the Impact of Call Display**

Sometimes the real culprit is not voice mail but rather voice display. Voice display is a phone feature whereby your number and often your name (or company name) is displayed on the prospect's telephone set. In other words, the prospect can see who is calling and simply choose not to pick up the phone and let voice mail do the rest.

You will never know for sure if the prospect has call display but chances are they do and that's why you need a few little tips.

One of the best ways to deal with call display is to call the extensions numbers on either side of your prospects number. For instance, if your prospect is at extension 208 try calling 209 or 207. If the extensions are sequential, chances are the offices are next or near to one another. When you call an alternate extension, be candid. Simply ask, "Oh yes, I am trying to get a hold of Krista. Do you know if she is around?" People at neighboring extensions will often stand up and look around for you. In effect, they act as your eyes and let you know if they are in. Now here's the neat thing: when they transfer the call, the call display will often show "internal transfer" or will show the name and extension number of their neighbor and NOT your number. (This is not always true. Sometimes your name and number will follow you around but it is worth a shot).

Another technique is to call another department such as sales or customer service or better yet, the executive office. When a call is transferred from these departments people tend to take notice.

From time to time, I will use my cell phone or my home phone to make calls to prospects if I suspect that the prospect is dodging my call. Perhaps one of the best tactics is to make a call from a pay phone. This is not always convenient but when your prospect sees "pay phone" on the call display, they will invariably answer it.

Don't be shy about using these techniques. You are, in effect, fighting fire with fire or in this case, technology with technology.

### **Blunder #3: Not Listening**

When you do encounter voice mail LISTEN to what the prospect has to say. Some have bland generic messages ("I'm not in. Leave a message") but others might give you some clues about how to approach them. For instance, suppose the message says this:

*"Hi this is Peter Backus. Today is Monday, May 16<sup>th</sup> and I will be out of the office until*

*Thursday May, 18<sup>th</sup>. If you'd like to leave your name, number and a detailed message I will get back to you as soon as I can."*

Note that Peter provided the date. It implies he interacts with voice mail so that when you do leave a message the chances are pretty good that he will listen to it. Because the message is detailed, one also gets the impression that Peter is a detail person. This suggests you might want to be equally detailed in your live approach (when you reach him) or in your voice mail when you leave a message.

But more significantly, Mr. Backus is out until Wednesday. There is no point in leaving a message at this stage because there are probably thirty other messages waiting for him. Even if you leave a good message there is a pretty good chance that it will be lost in the chaos of catching up. Be smart. Don't get lost in the clutter.

Finally, and this is so critical, don't call Peter on Thursday! His day will be hectic after having been gone for three days. Think about it. Call on Friday when things have calmed down. If you have to leave a message, do so but again at least you increase your chances of it being heard. So learn to listen for clues about the prospect and when you should time your call.

### **Blunder #4: Failure to Research**

Over the last month or so, I have received voice messages from salespeople who assumed I was a long distance company, a service bureau, a telephone manufacturer, and a high tech firm. Simply clicking onto my web site will tell you what I do...and it's none of the above.

The salespeople wasted my time and theirs. But the sad thing is they are probably leaving dozens of other similar messages to the wrong targets. Of course, when they do not get a reply they get discouraged. They become victims of their poor preparation.

Learn a little about your prospect. It does not have to be a lot but enough to craft a message

that is relevant. In fact, too much research can be a waste of time. Apart from visiting the prospect's web site, here is a fast and highly effective approach to gathering information. Instead of calling and speaking to a receptionist and secretary (who will probably give you very little information anyway) call the *sales department* of your prospect. You will ALWAYS get someone to answer the phone in a sales department because they are looking for the low hanging fruit (the prospect who wants to buy). And you will ALWAYS get them to talk.

Explain to their salesperson that you a salesperson and that you are trying to get an opening into their company. The vast majority of salespeople you speak with will understand your plight and sympathize. They've been there and done that. So they tend to help. Ask about the decision maker: who it is, what the company does, and anything else that might help you out. But above all ask for the prospect's extension number, their e-mail AND the best time to reach him/her. Again, the idea here is get the prospect live and avoid voice mail. However, if you cannot reach the decision maker, at least you will be armed with information that might make your voice mail more effective.

#### **Blunder #5: Providing Infomercials**

One of the greatest voice mail tragedies is leaving an infomercial i.e., a grotesquely long, delirious message that tells the prospect everything and anything. In effect, it's like a radio commercial over voice mail.

Think about this for a moment from the prospect's perspective: they are inundated with voice mails all day long. The last thing they need is your product diatribe. I assure you that the prospect will tire by the third line and quickly erase your message. So, while you may have gathered information by calling the sales department, don't use that information to lather the client with a voice mail speech. It's a complete and utter waste of everyone's time.

#### **Blunder #6: Poor Delivery**

As if infomercials were not bad enough, some salespeople compound the problem with poor delivery. I am talking about the "... aahhhs....ummmms...errr... duhs..." that are liberally peppered throughout the message. And I am especially talking about monotone deliveries that put the prospect to sleep and about messages that are delivered at machine gun like speed.

So here's what you need to do: Jot down what you want to say. Write it in sentences or point form; whatever works for you. Then practice delivering it a few times before dialing. The message should flow trippingly and convincingly from you lips. There is no excuse for a poorly delivered message.

What's important to remember here is that your prospect has probably received half dozen messages already from other salespeople who drone on and on. Your prospect is already jaded. Don't give him an opportunity to hang up simply because you were not prepared and did not deliver your message well.

#### **Blunder #7: Insipid Messages**

Customers are floored by the messages that are left on their voice mail. These messages leave them stunned, shocked or dismayed. Sometimes they are amusing but rarely are they impressed much less interested.

What causes this reaction? The messages don't grab them by the collar and say "Listen." Instead, they are drab and lifeless recitals about their product or their company. Borrrriinnng! .

A good voice mail message has four fundamental components:

- your name,
- your company,
- a message that must intrigue and entice
- a call to action

Here is just one example of an intriguing message:

*Mr. Wallace, this is Vic Basehart calling from Altace Inc. Mr. Wallace, I have a question on extended learning programs that I am told only you can answer. Could you please give me a call at \_\_\_\_?*

This is a very powerful voice message. Note how the rep uses the prospect's name a couple of times. Using the name gets the prospect to listen more carefully to the words. Next, the salesperson creates intrigue and mystery with his message about being the only person who can answer the question. This flatters the prospect at some level and creates curiosity. It is one of the better messages for getting your calls returned. Of course, you MUST have a question prepared that only the prospect can answer.

Referrals can also be used to develop an intriguing message. For instance:

*"Kathy, this is Sara Price calling from CSI Inc. in Las Vegas. I was speaking with Horatio Caine and he suggested that I give you a call with regard to some ideas we have on reducing costs on production sites. Please give me a call at ..."*

The referral creates curiosity and credibility. Also note that the salesperson did not get into details about her product or service. Instead a reference is made to the reduction of costs; a benefit. Referrals work well. Use them when you can.

Here is message that's a little different and because it is different it tends to get heard:

*"Most consultants are not using the internet effectively to market their product and services ...and are consequently losing clients and prospects.*

*(Pause)*

*Ms. Van Buren, my name is Jack McCoy and I am with L&O Consulting. I have some ideas I would like to share with you that can help you get and keep more clients. Please give me a call at...*

This voice mail template begins with a statement of a problem. It is unusual because it does not start with the rep's name and company like you would normally hear. This is bound to catch the attention of the prospect. The message goes on to suggest that the salesperson, McCoy, has a solution to help. It might be intriguing enough for the prospect to pick up the phone and call back.

### **Blunder #8: Not Integrating Other Mediums**

If there is more than one way to skin a cat, there is more than one way to leave a message. Make your voice mail part of an overall contact strategy.

Voice mail should be just one of the tactics you use to garner interest and stand out from the crowd. Supplement your voice message with an old fashioned letter. Consider sending a fax. If you have the e-mail address of your prospect, send a brief message. (Remember, you can often get an e-mail address by calling your prospect's sales department).

Use these mediums in combination. For example, you might leave a message telling the prospect to expect a "package" in the mail. This alerts her to keep his eye out for "something" which, in itself, is intriguing. Perhaps you could use a fax as a follow up message to the package rather than another voice mail.

The point is you have to be creative. Some prospects respond better to e-mail than voice mail, others to fax versus mail.

### **Blunder 9: Lack of Persistence**

Simply put, one of the BIGGEST blunders is a simple lack of persistence. Of the all the voice mails I received over the last two weeks not one salesperson...not a single, solitary salesperson... has called and left another message!

Statistically, about 87% of salespeople give up after a single half hearted attempt. About 95% give up after a second message. Personally, I rarely listen to voice mails from salespeople

because I figure if it is important enough they will call back. They rarely ever do. That tells the whole story.

The real problem is that most salespeople don't have a process or a system for follow up. I recommend that salespeople leave four voice mail messages spaced three business days apart. I call it the 4/3 strategy and it is a process; something that can be repeated over and over again without much effort and time. This makes you more effective.

Four messages might seem like a lot but when you do the math you will discover that this incorporates about two calendar week's worth of follow up. Spacing the messages three days apart politely gives the prospect enough time to get back to you but it also allows a comfortable cushion for you to make your follow up call without the appearance of stalking. (See Blunder #10)

Here's how the 4/3 works. Your first message can stem from one of the templates listed above. Your second message is virtually the same as the first. You simply add the words, "I am following up on my message from a few days ago regarding increasing traffic at your restaurant." But it's the third message that's key. When you get to the third message here is a trigger phrase that can sometimes get your call returned:

*"Mr. Batali, it's Bobby Flay calling from Chefcom Inc. I have left you a couple of message on how we might increase traffic at your restaurant but as of yet we haven't been able to connect. Please give me a call..."*

The operative phrase is "...but as of yet we haven't been able to connect." This little phrase is absolutely marvelous because it gives the prospect a way to call you back without feeling awkward. I call it "grace." Believe it or not, many prospects feel embarrassed that they did not take the time to return your call. It's almost as though they feel they were being discourteous. If we know this, then we can make it easier for the prospect to call you back because it implies

that the prospect may have tried to return the call but simply didn't leave a message.

The last message is the "drop dead message." It goes like this:

*"Mr. Batali, it's Bobby Flay calling from Chefcom in New York. I have left you a few messages but we have been unable to connect however, it would seem to me that now is not the time to discuss how we could increase traffic at your restaurant. If things should change please give me a call at \_\_\_\_\_. In the meantime, I will schedule you for a call next quarter. Again, this is Bob Flay and my number is..."*

Flay is telling the prospect that this is the last message and he is doing so graciously. But Flay has also left the door open for contact later on. In the short term, if Batali has any interest at all in the benefit stated by Flay, he knows that he must call now otherwise the opportunity is lost. Sometimes, it works.

### **Blunder #10: Stalking**

The last blunder is not nearly as common as a lack of persistence but it does exist and it is sinister and frightening in nature. It occurs when salespeople call and leave a voice mail message (or messages) every day for days on end. Not long ago at a training seminar a salesperson bragged that he left 38 (yes, thirty eight) messages to a prospect.

That is not persistence, it's stalking. It's obsessive. It's a waste of the salesperson's time and energy ...and you can bet it was not endearing to the poor prospect. (I'd be calling the police).

### **Summary**

Voice mail is part of the business landscape today. Well over 70% of dials end up in a voice mail box. If you do not have a strategy to deal with voice mail, your career in selling is going to be long and uneventful. Set yourself apart from most salespeople by avoiding these blunders. Do your homework by gathering information

and listening to your prospect's voice mail. See what, if anything, you can gather. Next, try calling at different times and bear in mind that the real problem might not be voice mail but call display. If you have to leave a voice mail message, make it short and intriguing. Avoid the infomercial. Be persistent by having a strategy for follow up. This tactic alone will set you apart from your competitors.

In conclusion, the harsh reality is this: leaving messages does not have a high return on investment. However, by being more effective in your approach to voice mail it will give you an edge and sometimes an edge is the difference between failure and success.

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