

## Voicemail Assignment

*By John “Andy” Wood*

This article describes an exercise using the voice mail feature of a telephone. The exercise is designed to introduce the student to appropriate voice messaging etiquette while helping overcome millennials’ resistance to using the telephone as a voice messaging device. Empirical results indicate one repeated iteration of the exercise will improve outcomes. Possible additional variations of the exercise are described.

Professional sales and undergraduate courses in professional sales presume a personal interaction based on some level of verbal communications. Those voice communications may start and continue for some time with telephone conversations. However, many students as part of the millennial generation do not want to use their phones as voice communication devices (Emmet 2017, Levi 2017). Some students argue that a telephone call is intrusive and even presumptuous in that the caller presumes their time is more valuable than the receiver’s time (Howe 2015, Jenkins 2017). In some recent qualitative surveys, some millennials’ comment about ‘wanting to avoid reading emotions’ or of having ‘no motivation to engage in nuanced small talk’ and so they rely on text-based messaging (Howe 2015, Emmet 2017). This lack of a desire for emotional engagement on the part of millennials would not bode well for those millennials in sales careers. Avoiding emotions runs contrary to the evidence of the importance of emotional intelligence in professional sales (McFarland, Challagalia et al. 2006). Sales managers and sales instructors can no longer rely on personal experience in telephone conversations to inform this generations behaviors. It appears that developing skill in telephone communications is essential in all sales curriculum and especially in the growing area of inside sales which is predicated on telephone conversations (Manna and Smith 2004).

Given this reluctance to use the voice feature of the telephone, students have little experience using the telephone as a voice communication device. This unfamiliarity mirrors some of the others skills students

need in professional sales. Often these shortfalls are addressed through sales roleplays in today’s collegiate sales curriculum (Mantel, Pullins et al. 2002). The following exercise is a start in developing familiarity with the telephone and telephone etiquette in a roleplay context. We suggest this as a first step in developing inside sales competency. The overarching goal of this exercise is to overcome resistance to using the telephone for business focused voice communications. The other goals are to reinforce crafting messages for customers that address the customer’s needs, creating concise messages, and properly using the messaging to avoid distortion and interference. The overall goal and the secondary goals are accomplished by assigning the students to roleplay leaving a voice message to a prospective client.

The origins of this assignment began with the World Collegiate Sales Competition. In the first part of that competition, students would leave a voicemail and then a follow up voicemail based on a roleplay scenario. Each university was allowed 10 competitors in this initial round. Recruiting competitors was difficult. At the authors’ university students were recruited from three sections of professional sales with a total of seventy two students. These recruiting efforts yielded six possible participants of which three followed through and competed. Discussion and observation of students’ involvement revealed that unfamiliarity with voicemails and concerns about the voice messaging task were the most cited reasons that students articulated for self-selecting out of the competition. These reasons mirrored the evidence of dislike for telephone voice communication by millennials cited previously (Jenkins 2017, Levi 2017) Alleviating student anxiety about leaving voicemails was the original goal for this exercise but that quickly changed to making this an assignment for all students in the professional sales class.

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## THE ASSIGNMENT

As can be seen below, the original assignment built upon the World Collegiate Sales Competition scenario:

You are leaving a voicemail to me about setting an appointment to discuss you representing Anonymous University at the World Collegiate Sales Open. You can find all the information you need about the World Collegiate Sales Open on their website. What you need to know are my needs and desires of the students that represent our University. So here is some background.

I have been a judge of these presentations in the past. I think that our students should do better than most of the students I have judged in the past. But we have never had a student enter this competition so I really don't know. Most of the other judges and the professors that have students entering the contest are friends of mine that I see 2 or 3 times a year. We kid each other a great deal. A common topic is about which of us is the best professor and teacher of sales. This means, for me to have students that enter this contest and not do well will open me up to some jokes. While a little kidding will not kill me, I would like to see our brand and our students do very well.

So in your message to me you need to create a value proposition that indicates how you might meet my needs. Look over the tip section and look for ideas to include in your value proposition. And remember you are trying to be concise and just get an appointment to expand on why you should represent our University. We need a two way conversation not just you talking on the phone. Do not try to convince me on the phone!

### Tips

- Typical voicemails are set to record for one minute or maybe even less
- Listen to voicemail greeting to gather inferences about targets personality
- Introduce yourself and purpose
- Say and spell your name if difficult
- Repeat your name and contact information at least twice
- Set a time line for action and when you will follow up

The assignment expanded from the World Collegiate Sales Competition scenario presented above to include a business to business scenario. In addition, research led to a variety of perspectives on the best approaches about leaving messages on voicemails. In the current iteration of the assignment, students are tasked with reading the blog and commentary posts in the LinkedIn group Sales Management Executives about "Prospect Voicemail Messages - Waste of Time or Lost Sales Opportunity?" (Salz 2011). Students are still instructed to leave the voice message on the professor's office phone. However, they are told to do this after work hours to avoid the professor picking up and answering. Students sometimes missed this part of the instructions.

As with the scenario, the grading rubric also evolved. Many of the items in the rubric incorporated best practices found in the current sales literature. This rubric was shared with the students beforehand. The items and scale are shown below. Total possible points are 30.

Concise (within time limit)	(0-3)
Compelling, Created Interest	(0-2)
Clearly Articulated (name and phone number)	(0-1)
Confident Attitude	(0-2)
Creative and Enthusiastic	(0-2)
Proper articulation (posture) and phone (not walking, wind noise, or other voices)	(0-2)
Complete Introduction	(0-2)
Value Proposition Included	(0-7)
Customer Focused	(0-3)
Demonstrated Competence	(0-3)
Let Customer Know They Will Follow-up	(0-1)
Pacing, Tone Matched Voicemail Greeting Message (hello versus hi)	(0-2)

## THE OUTCOMES

This assignment has some interesting outcomes. First, the ability to concentrate on the details of the delivery as opposed to ‘sound’ of their own voice created a new level of engagement. This shift in the student’s focus onto the delivery changed perspectives and increased repeated playbacks. Thus, when students hear the playback, they can focus on very specific elements for improvement. An example of these elements of the rubric is the item on improper posture that can inhibit projection and make the overall ‘voice’ quality inferior (Klatt 1990). They can also hear the background noise (wind sounds are particularly noticeable as they attempted to make the call while walking outside). The students begin to understand the importance of place. Additionally, the students begin to grasp the necessity of planning and practice so that all elements of the voicemail are accomplished. They realize achieving clear communications within the constrained timeframe does not happen by chance.

Finally, after reviewing the elements of the exercise, the students can then assess usefulness of the message. The students learn how difficult it is for them to provide value from the customer’s perspective. The discussion around inside sales and the use of voice as the persuasion tool is quite helpful to students at all levels. For undergraduate students, they begin to understand inside sales and telephone communications. On a personal practical level, the exercise helps the students improve how they approach and execute interviews for careers in professional sales. For all marketing students including those in graduate programs, the discussions around the exercise can be expanded to include discussions about flexible and adaptive messaging that matches the target audience. This type of discussion has the benefit of not only helping the student develop pragmatic skills in positioning basics but reinforces the essential marketing tool of segmentation. Overall, the assignment provides a useful starting point for the subsequent role plays and face to face communications.

On a more practical level, the exercise can be modified to allow students to complete the assignment more than once. As a test of the efficacy of the pedagogical approach, two sections of the undergraduate introductory professional sales class were given that

opportunity. Students in these sections completed the assignment and were graded using the above rubric. The average score of the first iteration was 73.3 percent with a standard deviation of 16.2 percent. The sample was comprised of forty-two students.

The students then completed the assignment with a different scenario two weeks later. The students had an opportunity to receive their first assignment grade and were given a recording of their first voicemail message. They crafted a new voice message specific to the second case, called the professor’s voicemail, and were graded using the same rubric. The average score of this assignment was 83.9 percent with a standard deviation of 9.8 percent. The difference in the mean scores was statistically significantly different with  $t = 2.60$  and  $p < .009$ .

## CONCLUSIONS

There are several key benefits of this exercise. It appears that marketing students at all levels can benefit from the use of a voicemail exercise. We suggest this because the process of preparing and executing the voicemail helps students focus on message execution. While many marketing communications can be developed (i.e. advertisements, press releases, or even social media messaging in the classroom environment), the development of the voicemail message enables the student to craft and deliver the message along with providing a feedback loop. Adding an iteration of the exercise allows the student to revise their execution.

While the interval between assignments was constrained by the time limits of a college semester, the results do seem to indicate leaving voicemail messages is teachable. As with other sales activities, it appears a first iteration is needed in helping the students in ‘getting ready’. The role play activity or in this case, the voice messaging, must be recorded and returned to the student along with the feedback. The evidence suggests this iteration leads to an improvement in outcomes. As noted, this particular skill of voice messaging over the telephone is essential to the growing sector of inside sales.

The exercise has the added benefit of creating an opportunity to teach students flexibility in messaging. For example, the last item on the rubric is matching

the voicemail greeting provided by the receiver. The variance of 'hello' versus 'hi' or full name versus first name gives the instructor concrete examples of variance in target audience and communication styles. Responsiveness to these styles helps explain adaptation as well as being flexible in communications (Manna and Smith 2004).

Finally, the voicemail exercise can create additional learning opportunities. If an instructor in an advanced course or graduate level course wanted to move students through the sales cycle, this could be the first step in a series of sales encounters. Students would first prospect and create an opportunity for a face to face sales meeting. Based on the value proposition in the voice message, the next recorded roleplay exercise could be face-to-face with the buyer building either positive or negative commentary on the voicemail. The last exercise could be an alternation of the voicemail exercise. In this version the scenario would be the follow-up messaging left after the face-to-face sales meeting. Variations of these three steps could be suggested. The simplicity of the execution seems to allow for many combinations.

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