

Voice-Mail Primer

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In many industries, contact with the customer is virtual rather than face-to-face. Effective communications via the Internet, e-mail, voice and fax can provide a salient advantage over the competition. Like any communications medium, the choice of voice mail must take into account the audience, available resources for call coverage and message priority, urgency, content, length and confidentiality.

While nothing compares to a live attendant answering the phone, voice mail offers many benefits and is a proven timesaver when used properly. According to Alec MacKenzie, the author of *The Time Trap*, a planned call takes, on the average, seven minutes, versus twelve minutes for an unplanned call. That duration is brought down to less than three minutes with voice mail, according to a recent PDI survey of managers and administrative assistants. With an automatic attendant, you can be out of sight but not out of reach. Anyone can call you any day, any time. Voice mail is also particularly useful when the volume of incoming calls varies or is unpredictable. Voice mail is also imperative if you are on shift work or deal with customers and co-workers while on the move or across different time zones.

Selecting a secure and productive voice mail system to make users more productive or help you sell better is not an easy task. The best voice mail system must be tailored to guide casual or first-time users and also fit the needs of frequent callers. Beginners should hear about the features and options they require. Advanced or frequent callers should be able to skip the details and opt for rapid prompts to expedite call routing and processing.

“As messaging technologies proliferated, developers realized how inconvenient and time-consuming it is to check voice mail for telephone messages, Inboxes for email messages, and the fax machine for faxes. Why not handle all types of messages through a single interface, either on a computer or over the telephone? This type of unified access would be especially helpful to the increasing number of workers at home or at customer sites, hotels, and airports.”¹ Labeled unified messaging (UM) or computer-telephony integration (CTI), current technology provides a visual and personalized way to integrate, cross-index, manage and archive voice mail, e-mail and fax messages. It enables the voice mail system to notify you from anywhere about e-mail and fax messages in waiting as it does with new voice messages. It can forward voice messages, e-mails and faxes to another voice mail user. You can even add comments to an incoming fax or voice message and forward it to others, store incoming e-mail and faxes in your personal mailbox or select a designated printer or fax machine for printing. It uses the caller-id to retrieve contact records, as required in customer relationship management (CRM). The “latest evolution delivers real-time access to voice mail, fax, and email along with the ability to use personal calendars, contact lists, and databases from a single interface.”² In 2001, a study by Frost & Sullivan indicated that “the full cost of ownership for a unified messaging solution is lower than for distinct voice mail, e-mail and fax systems. The UM approach yields cost savings, especially in the form of reduced annual expenditures in areas such as communication, installation, maintenance, administration and training, among others.”³

Currently on the rise, Internet Protocol Telephony (IPT) can either stand alone or be an integral part of a UM solution. It can lower communication costs and improve performance per employee by up to 25 days a year, according to Bruce Gillespie of the Financial Post. "One way IPT increases productivity is by reducing the time it takes to add, change or move telephones on standard digital or analog telephone systems. With IPT, a handset can be moved quickly to a new location by the employee who uses it."⁴

1. Know when voice mail is the best medium.

Besides personal contact and voice mail, there are transactions (like a thank you note) that can best be handled by electronic or regular mail, or instant messaging such as MSN Messenger or IBM Lotus Sametime.

For concise and uncomplicated requests, 24-hour automated hotlines can provide referral, answer procurement questions, confirm hours of operation, price lists, sales specials, catalog info, and shipping schedules. As an illustration, the contractor hotline of the University of California in Irvine answers approximately 50 percent of phone calls received by Design & Construction Services, regarding status information on projects currently in design stage, expected bid dates, contract awards, as well as the location and time of pre-tender meetings. The contractor hotline information is updated on a weekly basis.⁵

For frequently asked questions that require elaborate answers, consider referring the caller to a Web page with a simple and memorable address such as yourdomain.com/rsvp or yourdomain.com/faq. Before using this approach, do a pilot to provide access to information about practices, policies, procedures and self-help bulletins. Besides lowering printed-material costs, it can save everyone time.

Track user feedback. Your voice mail, including automated hotlines and referrals to the Web, should add substantial value to you as a provider, and to a large majority of users. It should not contribute to keep callers being bounced from one source to another.

2. Think Privacy.

Voice mail may not be the right medium when secrecy is a vital issue. Privilege a live conversation or a personal visit when the subject is sensitive.

To retrieve your message, your correspondent may be calling her voice-mail system from a mobile phone that can be intercepted by intruders or from abroad where foreign-intelligence agents monitor international calls.

Your message may be forwarded to other voice mailboxes without your knowledge. Check if your voice-mail system can tag your message and block the recipient's attempt to broadcast or forward it to a third party.

3. Think security.

Set a password you can easily remember but that would be difficult for others to find out. Consider a speed-dial feature to access your voice mailbox. Change your code on a regular basis to minimize the risk of voice mail fraud. Program the system to block access after the three consecutive attempts.

4. Preserve confidentiality.

No one should access your mailbox or voice-mail archives. Arrange for a guest mailbox, if a consultant or a temporary co-worker requires the service.

5. Restrict the number of options in the greeting menu.

Know your audience. Most callers hate to wait and many dislike speaking to automated attendants. They tend to be particularly frustrated by elaborate choice menus. If you require more than three options in the greeting menu, use logical and simple sub-menus. Also, too many impatient callers try

to defeat the voice-mail system by pressing zero before hearing the total menu, particularly when the option to dial the operator is close to the beginning of your greeting. If pushing the option lower on the list does not work, disable the zero for operator and use another key or extension number.

6. Keep your standard greeting brief, professional and friendly in tone.

Focus your greeting on the caller need and avoid digressions and exhortations about the weather.

“This is Gail Ford’s voice mail. Please leave your phone and a detailed message. If urgent, dial zero and ask for Bob Chen. Thanks for calling.”

If the greeting must be long by necessity, script the content carefully. Provide the caller with the key to press and repeat the menu at any time. Start by telling frequent callers how to skip the greeting message:

“Hello, Gail Ford here. I’m teaching today Monday. Dial 1 to skip this message or dial 2 to repeat it at any time. If you wish to register for the Strategic Thinking seminar, dial PDI at 1-800-HARVARD. Otherwise, please leave a message. If your call can’t wait until 9 a.m. EST Tuesday, dial 727. Press star if you need help with the voice-mail menu. Thank you.”

If you cannot accept specific orders or instructions on voice mail, inform all callers by regular mail and repeat the warning at the beginning of the greeting menu.

The co-workers who answer for you should be well trained in using the voice-mail system because the caller may change her mind and request to leave you a voice-mail message after all. Also ensure that they can handle urgent calls and reach you through your mobile phone, a pager or a wireless handheld device, if necessary. The goal is to maintain effective and prompt service.

7. Record conditional greetings, if required.

These greetings should be activated after hours, on holidays or in specific situations.

At least once a week, call your own extension to make sure the greeting of your choice is active at the right time.

8. When absent for a day or more, activate a temporary greeting.

Indicate when you will return calls (daily, weekly or at a specific date). Reactivate your standard greeting upon your return.

Give callers the option to contact someone else or to leave a message. Callers who opt to speak to a person should not be “hit” with a second mailbox. If no one can guarantee live attendance on demand while you are away, consider referring the caller to a team like Customer Service with live attendants. Many firms have a bell on the wall that keeps ringing until someone picks up the call! The respondent should also be able to promptly reconnect the caller to your voice-mail box, if required.

9. Think home risk management.

If no one is home while you are away, be alerted to the possibility of tipping strangers off about your trip. Avoid greetings containing “I will be out of town”. Keep your standard greeting and pick your messages up every day. If you can’t, use the automatic forwarding feature that sends a copy of your messages to the mailbox of your secretary or a trusted co-worker for prompt daily action. Program your system to tag messages to prevent re-forwarding or broadcasting by your addressee. Remember to delete the message routing upon your return.

10. Eliminate “phone tag”.

Remind your frequent callers to leave a detailed message and to indicate, if required, the best time to return their call. Do the same.

Avoid unnecessary call backs. Leaving a message can be intimidating particularly for unprepared users. For users who require neither a call back nor a live real-time conversation, make it easy for them to provide information, instructions or answers to requests.

11. Avoid repeat calls.

If your call is not returned, consider an e-mail before sending a second voice mail.

12. Avoid useless work. Retrieve all messages from the same source before responding.

Scan the caller-ids to pick messages from the same source, before responding. I periodically receive a second call from clients stating: *“Please ignore my previous voice mail. I found an answer to...”*

13. Help your team to work effectively.

If you delegate or forward a message to a third party, let the new recipient know why she should be involved and what action (if any) to take. Indicate if you wish to be kept abreast of progress.

14. Block calls during the quiet hour.

Are you frequently interrupted by calls that can wait while you are trying to focus on important work and deadlines? The quiet hour is a vital part of your solution. Activate your voice-mail system during your quiet hour to work without phone interruptions.

15. Check your messages twice or three times a day.

Do not let your messages pile up. Prioritize, group and return calls once or twice a day. If you can't respond promptly, let the senders know before they start wondering about the reason for the delay.

16. Block unwanted calls.

Use the call-display feature to monitor incoming calls and to block time-wasters.

17. Send the same message to several recipients in one call.

If you plan to broadcast or call the same team, family or client category more than once, group the addressees into a specific contact list. Use this option only when the message is of sufficient value to everyone in the list. Let the recipients know who is receiving the message to avoid redundant communications.

18. Plan your calls to deliver an effective and professional message.

Make brief notes and mentally rehearse your message. Be prepared for both a live and an automated attendant. Jot down the questions you wish to raise and the information you plan to convey to get to the point and create interest quickly. Try to call when you are most comfortable, if feasible.

19. State the topic very clearly in a concise headline.

By stating the subject, you help the listener decide whether to hear your message and act on it immediately, skip it or file it for a later date. Note the difference about the following headlines: “Re: Meeting in Frankfurt” versus “Meeting in Frankfurt cancelled”.

20. Be focused and brief.

Remain specific. Trivial messages waste time and valuable storage space on the voice mail server. Limit your voice mail to a maximum of two subjects in two minutes or less. Make it easier for your correspondent to act or delete message. Use separate voice mails for each issue.

Leave a complete message. Don't just say “please call me”. State the relevant facts. Don't say “urgent”. Indicate if and when a response is required and on what medium (e-mail, fax, voice mail). Specify if the respondent must acknowledge receipt of your message.

Speak up normally and evenly with the phone about three inches from your mouth. Avoid jargon. Pay attention to your choice of words, mood, tone of voice and delivery pace. Recorded messages can seem angrier than intended.

Always start with your name unless it is automatically included in the message header. Slowly spell your name and always repeat your phone number and whatever the recipient must write down. State the headline then address the most important point immediately after introducing yourself.

Do not provide the time and date of your call. All voice mail systems date stamp and record the time of each message.

21. Don't call from noisy places.

Don't call from high traffic areas in airports, highways, sports arenas and other loud meeting places. Avoid background music. Pick a quiet location where you can focus without distractions. Refrain from using mobile phones while driving and in areas subject to noise, bad or unpredictable connections.

22. Use your voice mail for exceptional reminders.

If you are away and forgot your planner, call your own line to leave yourself important messages.

23. Decide cautiously whether you should purge or archive your messages.

Most systems automatically archive your voice mail in a chronological order. You may opt to store your messages by caller or subject. The database can be valuable to analyze incoming traffic or as supporting documentation to address unexpected issues. Note that deleting voice-mail messages does not physically purge them out of the system unless you use special software like Evidence Eliminator.

24. Ask for feedback about the voice mail system.

Report the feedback including all complaints to the telecom team to help it improve the system. Recommend refresher training to keep improving your voice-mail productivity.

25. Consider the following basic features for your voice-mail system

- *Receiver-activated commands*: help (lists receiver commands), save/discard message; increase/reduce volume; pause while listening to a message/resume; increase/reduce playback speed; back up 10 seconds to repeat a message portion; skip message/listen to it again; forward message to other subscribers.
- *Caller-activated commands*: help (list caller commands), repeat/skip personal greeting; listen caller message /erase and re-record; cancel command/back-up to the previous prompt; exit from voice mail

References

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