



Six Tips to Help You with Voicemail Efficiency

By Kurt von Schleicher

Do you remember a time when a real person would actually answer the phone at every company that you called... a time when there were no "phone trees," beeps, auto hang-ups, and no push-button menus? I still get lost in those things. I remember when people actually used the telephone to talk to each other. Today it's like we spend tons of time speaking to machines and cyber-based voicemail than to real people. I do love how my privacy is protected when I need family time – voicemail is like a necessary evil. Some days we rock on through making a phone message and give little thought to what we are even leaving on these machines for potentially many to hear. If you think the voicemail messages you deposit on friends or workers don't matter much, think again. They can help or hinder you big time.

According to Renee Grant-Williams, author of *Voice Power: Using Your Voice to Captivate, Persuade and Command Attention* to a topic, (AMACOM, New York), voicemail is an important first impression of your professionalism. It's also something that leaves many of us trembling. "Voicemail is something that will always be on our permanent record," she says. "Once you leave that message, you can't take it back."

We need to be cautious. (If you are a Christian, wise voice-mailing is part of being a good witness). Prudently putting your thoughts into audio messages to leave others can do wonders for you professionally. Grant-Williams says you should approach voicemail as a golden opportunity. ***"Use this moment of undivided attention to advance your cause,"*** she says. I've found that voicemail can be a great time-saver and a good way to tie up loose ends when leaving town (like I am today). Here are six tips that might help you or your office personnel mail their voice messages:

1. Prepare. Preparation is the key to every professional task. Grant-Williams suggests ***jotting down one line about what you would like to see accomplished with the voicemail message. What is your overall goal? What do you hope to get/give through this call?*** How can you get the most mileage out of this brief moment for the cause? If you are a Christian, pray about what God would have you say or give to them. He might have you plant an evangelistic idea in there as a footnote. He might have you encourage a brother with a verse that fortifies them regarding a weakness (be careful not to embarrass them if there is a chance another family member or a roommate could retrieve or intercept the message. Seek to add practical value. Be respectful to all, especially regarding highly personal info you're privy to. Never chew anyone out or foist uninvited advice onto their back). You might want to leave a short prayer for your prayer-partner-recipient to agree with (Don't give this type of fodder to a mocking non-Christian and his peers).

2. Gather your ammo (so to speak). *Pull together any information you need for the call*

before you dial when doing business. This means getting out your PDA day timer, your itinerary, your schedule, your prioritized to-do-list, your contact information or anything else you might need to rely on while leaving the message. This will save you from fumbling through a stack of papers and stalling with a message full of "ums."

3. Put your cogent message in order. Grant-Williams says you need to *"Organize your message into a well-planned sequence of topics in the order of their importance."* Since you never know how long you will be able to talk, make sure you *know the most important information and present that information first.* For example, it is a good idea to *lead with your name and contact number.* That way, if the voicemail recipient only hears 10 seconds of your message, he or she will at least be able to call you back.

4. Ask for a specific action. It is important that you don't leave the other person scratching his or her head after your call wondering what you wanted. *Make your request specific and clear* to ensure there is no confusion on the other end (We don't want to tax, burden or pressure our friends/non-employee-colleagues to give us service etc, but with your Christian/pre-Christian workers you might say: pray about doing... I hope you can do... We need to have this done by... Please help me with... I try to expect zero emotionally and provisionally from non-business relationships. That way I'm never disappointed). Of course if you're in sales, it's preferable to close a deal in person, but in many aspects of your personal business asking for the order can save lots of time.

5. Plan to call back again. Some people appreciate being reminded. Many workers leave one voicemail message and think that their work is done. This is a mistake. "The reality is that many people don't respond to or even check every message in a timely fashion," says Grant-Williams. *Let the recipients of your messages know that you understand their busy schedules, often mentioning the specifics of their struggle and how you will be praying for them* (if you really will). This builds relationship and rapport – which is more important than most of those results you are trying to attain. For example, try to conclude your message by saying *"I know that you are very busy today with your son's soccer game at Oak Park, so if I don't hear back from you by Wednesday I hope you don't mind if I call you again. Don't sweat your Tuesday meeting with that lawyer, I'll remember to lift it up to Jesus."* This eases the other person's guilt when they are not able to call you back. It tells them you care (and this must never be feigned). It preps them for when they'll hear your voice again; it reminds them about what is important and gives you a comfortable opening for checking back.

6. Come to a conclusion. If there is a way to wrap up your business with a voicemail message, take advantage of it (for unselfish reasons). That way, you and your acquaintance can cut down on the time spent playing "phone tag." Are you calling to set up a meeting? Try this approach: "I will meet you at 3:30 on Thursday at the Nana Café. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that this meeting is confirmed." This approach can save everyone a lot of time.

There are two kinds of voicemail-ers and callers: 1.) those who are on the get and 2.) those who are on the give. Which kind are you? In a good friendship there's give and take but the motive for every bit of your communication should be to give.

Personally, I have to work on clearly announcing and being interesting – I tend to stutter; sound tired and swallow my words when I speak. **Responding to a voicemail message the very same day if possible is very important!** There are times, when I am having trouble reaching a friend after multiple call attempts. That's when I will intentionally just ramble on in a monolog chat for the purpose to update the friend and to maintain the closeness but I never want to leave a voicemail like that on their work line. Too many people abuse this type of rambling during business hours – they are on their boss's clock. And this is when most people want

short, concise, cut to the chase, get to the point messages! They might have to listen to thirty messages in a row and you are bogging things down.

Remember, your humble attitude, gracious tone, casual tempo, clear timber¹ are all important when leaving a message. I believe we all should live in such a way so to be missed when we are gone. Try to be such a blessing or benefit that they will miss your calls and messages. Try to leave people actually wishing for another call from you... or at least (if they are your employee) not minding a call from you. Be very considerate. If you are conducting business, make sure your voice conveys the right image as you loyally represent your company well. I don't really like that word "image," because it so often has to do with putting on an act. But smile when you are talking, stand up, do anything else you can to put yourself in the proper frame of mind. I know businessmen who literally get dressed up, out of their hotel robe before they make "that call." Whatever it takes... doing so might make you feel more confident and it might increase your overall voicemail efficiency.

My Voicemail Proverbs from the Message:

12:23 "Talkative fools broadcast their silliness."

15:4 "Kind words heal and help; cutting words wound and maim."

18:5-7 "The words of a fool start fights; do him a favor and gag him. Fools are undone by their big mouths."

18:21 "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose."

19:11-12 Smart people know how to hold their tongue; their grandeur is to forgive and forget. Mean-tempered leaders are like mad dogs."

19:16 "Careless living kills."

21:23 "Watch your words and hold your tongue; you'll save yourself a lot of grief."

22:1 "A gracious spirit is better than money in the bank."

26:4-5 "Don't respond to the stupidity of a fool; you'll only look foolish yourself. Answer a fool in simple terms"

¹ Here's the word "Timber" defined: the distinctive property of a complex sound (a voice or noise or musical sound); "the timbre of her soprano was rich and lovely"; "the muffled tones of the broken bell summoned them to meet."