

HOW TO LEAVE A PROFESSIONAL PHONE MESSAGE

by Tracy Peterson Turner

Trying to reach a person who isn't immediately available can be pretty frustrating at times, but take heart! A well planned message could be a fine opportunity to enhance your reputation and even help build relationships.

The telephone can be an effective instrument for building relationships and allowing people to hear the sound of our voices even when all we do is leave a message.

Sometimes leaving a verbal phone message is preferable to reaching the actual person. For instance, voice mail:

- Avoids interrupting the person.
- Conveys a message using voice, so tone comes through clearly.
- Can be left after-hours and listened to at the caller's convenience.
- Is effective for conveying information that might be too complex when put in writing.

When we intentionally reach voice mail by calling someone after hours, being prepared with the content of the message helps to ensure that the message is clear and accurate. This, in turn, will ensure that the recipient grasps the content swiftly and accurately and is not forced to play the message more than once.

What happens, though, when you really want to talk to someone personally but can't reach the person by phone? Then you're forced to leave messages.

Irritating phone messages are those that are fumbling and hesitating, those where the caller doesn't plan ahead, speaks too quickly, sounds bored, and is rambling.

Don't be caught off guard!

The better way to handle this is to consider each call you make as one where you'll have to leave a message. This helps to prepare in the event you do need to leave a message and helps keep you from being caught off guard.

Here are some pointers to help you prepare:

- Know before you call the reason for the call.
- Start by saying your full name and company or department connection.
- State the reason for the call.
- State clearly what you want (a call back, a message left for you, to have them send you an email, etc.).
- Leave your phone number clearly and slowly.

Transmitting phone numbers

A simple strategy for leaving your phone number is to write it while you speak it.

Consider those messages you've had to listen to three or four times just to get the phone number. I make a habit of pausing for a breath between each set of numbers.

For instance, I say: "My number is ...775...544...84...79." I say the last four numbers in pairs. Grouping the numbers in pairs helps the person writing the number do it faster and more accurately.

Another simple strategy is to give your number, in the same fashion, twice. First when you state your name; second when you ask them to call. This again helps prevent the person from having to re-listen to the message.

Establish your credibility in a snippet

While on the topic of phone messages, another thing to consider is yours - the one you have on your voice mail right now.

I become very irritated when I have to listen to lengthy, nearly minutes-long phone messages just to leave my own message. If their phone rolls to voice mail, it is obvious to me that they are "either away from [their] desks or on another call."

Callers prefer to hear brief messages that identify you and what information you need in order to get back to them. For example, your phone message can be as simple as this: "Hi, This is Tracy Turner. Please leave your name and phone number, and I'll return your call within 24 hours."

Anything longer than that (leaving website addresses, personal philosophies of life, bits of wisdom for the day, etc.) is irritating and time consuming.

By the way, it's always appropriate to give a time frame for returning the call. In my message, I say I return all calls within 24 hours.

It's a matter of courtesy and respect to return phone calls-all that request and require it-and to return those calls in a timely manner. Never make callers wait more than 24 hours for your call back.

Use voice mail to get what you need

When I leave messages, whether I initiate the call or am responding to someone else's, I always leave a time when I can be reached.

We waste too much time playing telephone tag with others. To solve this problem, I leave a window of time when I know I'll be by my phone ("I'm in the office today from 11:30 a.m. till 2 p.m. You can reach me then.")

If I have to leave a message, I ask those I call to leave me a message telling me a good time to reach them. That helps eliminate playing telephone tag and its accompanying frustration. Leaving a time frame is especially important if the matter needs attention right away. Most people give up calling after three or four unsuccessful attempts to reach a person. If the topic of the conversation needs to be dealt with in a timely manner, we don't want to run the risk of the caller giving up.

Start leaving impressions today

Protecting and projecting your credibility and professionalism with every opportunity you have to communicate, helps present you in the best possible light. Paying attention to something as simple as your phone message strategies can be a vehicle for projecting the professional image you want your coworkers, clients, and supervisors to see.