

Voice mail 101

**“I’m not here right now.
Please leave a message.”**
<beep>

Like so many nascent technologies in their early stages of adoption, voice mail was despised by most of us when it was first widely implemented in the early 1980s. Why? It just didn’t work properly. Messages were garbled, lines got dropped, and you often ended up in the dreaded voice-mail jail – an endless loop of messages that left you with no way to a live person.

But jump ahead 25 years and voice mail has become an essential part of our everyday lives. I’m willing to bet that just about all readers of this column use it in their offices (and quite likely at home, too). If used properly, voice mail can help you work more efficiently, improve your client service and communications, and most importantly, help you avoid a malpractice claim. So, how well are you using voice mail? Can you make better use of it? Let’s review

Handling incoming calls

Ask yourself this question: “Have any of my clients ever felt frustrated when they tried to contact me by phone?” To avoid aggravating clients, consider the following pointers for handling incoming calls.

If your firm’s incoming calls go through a receptionist, be sure you know how callers to your office are greeted, and what options they are given for leaving a message. Even if you think you know, call your office to find out for sure. You might be surprised by what you hear.

Consider setting a policy to give callers the option of either leaving a voice mail for you or leaving a traditional message with the receptionist. This will prevent someone who is uncomfortable with using voice mail from being forced to do so – yes, there are still some holdouts out there who really don’t like it.

Also, are callers to your office asked to identify themselves? You need to tread carefully with call screening. If you don’t take a call after a client has been asked to identify herself, you are likely leaving the impression you are avoiding the call. Oops!

To avoid that gaffe, set up this protocol with your receptionist: If you don’t want to be disturbed, put your phone on hold so the receptionist knows you are not available. Then when a call comes in, it can go directly to your assistant or to your voice mail. No need for the receptionist to ask for the caller’s name.

And if you really want to think outside the box, ask yourself whether your calls really even need to go through a receptionist. Most clients will feel better served if they have your direct line.

Now, some of you are going to say, “I don’t want the interruptions.” Perhaps, but consider if call display would help. Many lawyers who have call display report that they initially thought they would use it to avoid calls. In fact, they tend to find they actually take more calls because knowing the caller’s identity allows them to understand how much time will be involved before they pick up the phone – and that four seconds between when the name pops up and you take the call magically seems to get you in the right frame of mind. When you really don’t want interruptions, you just put your phone on call forward.

Setting up great greetings

Your voice mail greeting speaks to your clients when you can’t, so you need to make sure it says everything it should. To be of maximum assistance to callers, your voice mail message should do the following:

- Open with your name and title so that callers are sure they have reached the correct voice mail box.



- Be updated on a daily basis, including details of your schedule (but not your life story) if you expect to be unavailable for part of the day (e.g., “I am in meetings all morning”). If you’re going to be out of the office, indicate whether you’ll be checking voice mail or e-mail while away, as well as when you expect to be back (especially if you’re away for an extended period).
- Always give callers an option to transfer to a live person, either your assistant or the receptionist. This is important if they need immediate assistance. Remember to adjust messages if both you and your assistant will be out of the office at the same time.
- Encourage the caller to leave a detailed message. This will help pry out a few more facts from those who are reluctant to say much, and will help you learn exactly what the caller wanted before having to phone back.
- Lastly, state your policy with respect to how quickly voice mail messages will be returned (e.g., “I return calls within 24 hours,” “... by the end of the next business day,” or the like). Set a time frame that fits you, your practice and your clientele – and make it clearly known to clients at the time of the retainer so that you set and control their expectations.

Leaving messages

When you leave a message in someone else’s voice mail box, make the most of it by (1) stating the date and time of your call; (2) leaving a detailed message giving the information you want to pass on, or asking the questions you need answered; and (3)

indicating if there are specific times when you'll be available for a return call.

Doing these three things will help the person understand why you called and, depending on the circumstances, enable him to get back to you with the information you require, even if he must leave a detailed message in your voice mail. If used properly, voice mail is an excellent

way to eliminate the time-waster of phone tag.

And, to those of you who restrict people to leaving 60-second messages: Please do us a favour and configure your voice mail so that we can leave you a longer and more detailed message.

Now, for the most important part of the entire column: Clearly and slowly state your phone number. Most people say their

number at speeds approaching Warp 5, with the result that it is unintelligible. Slow down and take a deep breath between each digit. Okay, maybe not quite that slow, but you get the point.

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