Funny thing about voicemail. We love it when it's our own - we hate it when it belongs to someone else. I don't know about you, but when someone doesn't return my messages, I imagine they are gloating behind my back, laughing demonically as they push the delete button to send me to into oblivion.

Actually, I doubt if most people are this cold. But what's so frustrating about voicemail is it gives the decision-maker the opportunity to reject you before you even get a chance to talk to them! If you're starting to feel like a failure because people won't return your messages, here's what to do.

I believe most messages do not get returned because people are overwhelmed. Many of us move through our workday in a state that ranges from mild panic to deep despair. To get returned, a message must be so compelling that it wins out over the 23 other urgent things vying for the recipient's attention. Yet, many messages do not even come close to addressing the specific needs, desires, wants, and concerns of the person being called.

There's the sales rep who leaves a message saying she would like to stop by and talk with you about advertising in her paper. Yeah right. Like you've got nothing better to do. The copier company calling to sell you toner. Toner? There are six boxes stacked in the closet. Or the person you've never heard of asking you to call him back. You don't mean to be rude but apparently these people assume you're just sitting around with nothing else to do! On a busy day, something's got to give and lame, ineffective messages are the first to go.

To help solve this problem, I asked successful friends and sales people to share their best voice-mail techniques. I cannot guarantee that any of these methods will give you a 100% call back ratio, but they will definitely help improve your odds. Test them out and you'll quickly discover the ones that work best for you.

1. Leave 'em guessing
Try leaving messages with nothing more than your name and number. Do not say why you are calling. Curiosity is a powerful motivator. My sales staff found that this one simple technique increased their call back ratio by 40%! Busy people calling in for messages from the road will also appreciate the fact that your message is brief.

2. The "pains" technique
This is an excellent technique to use as a follow up to a sales presentation. In your initial meeting with the prospect ask probing questions to determine where it "hurts". Make a list of these "pains" and how your product or service can provide specific relief for each concern. Each time you leave a follow up message, mention one of your prospect's "pains" and hint at how you can provide relief. Refer to a different problem each time you call. For example:
- **Message #1:** "Ms. Jones, this is Susan Berkley from Berkley Productions at 201-541-8595. I’m calling to offer some solutions as to how our voice recording services can give you a more professional sounding voice mail system and get rid of that annoying recorded voice that was bothering the company president. My number again is 201-541-8595."

- **Message #2:** "Ms. Jones, this is Susan Berkley from Berkley Productions at 201-541-8595. I’m calling with a few solutions to help you reduce those customer complaints about getting lost in your voice mail system that you spoke about in our last meeting. My number again is 201-541-8595."

- **Message #3:** "Ms. Jones, this is Susan Berkley from Berkley Productions at 201-541-8595. I’m calling with an easy, cost effective way to help you provide information to your Spanish and Vietnamese speaking customers. You seemed concerned about this in our last meeting and I wanted to discuss some of the ways we help our customers meet this challenge. My number again is 201-541-8595."

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3. **Tell them you are calling from corporate headquarters**

It adds credibility, especially if you are a small or home based business!

"Hello, this is Susan Berkley with Berkley Productions corporate headquarters. The reason for the call is..."

4. **Leave your first and last name**

Using only your first name creates confusion- "Steve who? I know five guys named Steve!" It also brings to mind service and repair people, delivery drivers, and heavy breathing obscene phone callers.

5. **Eliminate the word "just" or other minimizers from your speech.**

Examples:

- "I'm just calling to follow up on yesterday's meeting."
- "Nothing important. Just a follow up call to yesterday's meeting."
- "Just a little reminder about how our widget can help build your business."

6. **Don't sell anything in the message**

Because we are constantly bombarded with advertising, most people have developed a strong sales resistance. The people you are calling will reject you unless you happen to catch them at a moment when they have a passionate desire or need for your product.

7. **Make the benefits contingent on speaking with you**

"This is Susan Berkley from XYZ distributors. We have just purchased a number of widgets from a company that went out of business and have priced the stock at a deep discount for fast liquidation. To determine if they are the right size and color for your needs, we need to talk. Call me at 201-541-8595."

8. **Speak more slowly and clearly than normal**

Don't slur or run your words together. The person you are calling is not as familiar with the material as you are and will quickly become annoyed if you make them replay the message because they did not understand it.

9. **Spell your name if it is difficult, unusual or of foreign origin**

Sometimes unusual names are easier to remember than names that are more common. The listener has to work harder to understand it and is more likely to remember you because he made that extra effort.

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Reinforce this phenomenon by saying your name clearly and spelling it slowly when you leave your first message. An unusual name can make you stand out from the crowd and invites ice-breaking chit chat about the name's origin.

10. Sound like a winner by speaking with energy, enthusiasm and confidence
Sit up straight or stand when you leave the message. Smile as you speak. Visualize yourself as confident and strong. Use hand gestures and powerful body language. If possible, check your energy level by listening back to your message before sending it.

11. Leave your phone number twice: once at the beginning of your message and once at the end
If the person you are calling missed your number at the beginning they will not have to listen through to the entire message again to get it.

12. Call again and offer some useful information:
"I've been thinking about your situation and have a solution that might work. I'd like to share it with you. Please call me at ..."
Do not leave the solution in the message. Use it as bait to get them to call you back.
Caution: do not use this technique unless you actually have something useful to share with the prospect when they call!

13. Fax your prospect a giant message slip
Take a standard "While you were out" phone message slip, fill it out with your message, enlarge it on the copier and fax it to your prospect.
"While You Were Out ... Melissa Smith called Re: A few ideas to help you save big on your taxes."

14. When all else fails, politely threaten to "close their file"
Making sure there is nothing hostile or impatient in your tone of voice, leave a polite message that goes something like this:
"Mr. Smith, I've been attempting to reach you for several weeks now regarding the proposal you asked us to send on January 24th, but I have not received a call back. I don't want to bug you or clog your voice mail with unwanted messages, so would you please call me back and let me know if you would like me to close your file?".

It is almost humorous how quickly this message has gotten people to call us back. People like to leave their options open and nobody likes to be "terminated".

15. Make sure YOUR outgoing voicemail message sounds as professional as possible
When people call your voicemail do you sound welcoming, honest, energetic and sincere or do you sound angry, bored or half asleep? Here are several steps to follow to put your "best voice" forward.

- **Script your message.** Writing it out will help you say exactly what you need to say: nothing more, nothing less. You'll also be less likely to flub when reading from a script. And you'll find it easier to control your pacing and tone when you've got something written to practice.

- **Practice your message before you record it.** Say it over and over again out loud to make yourself familiar with the words.

- **Stand while recording your message.** This will add energy and vitality to your voice.

- **Smile while recording your message.** A smile makes your voice sound warm and friendly.
● **Get feedback from at least 3 friends or colleagues.** Does your message sound as good as it could? If not, re-record!

● **Don't leave flubs on your outgoing message.** I am amazed at how many people leave flubs and stumbles on their outgoing message, especially when re-recording is so easy to do!

● **Customize your message daily.** If possible, let people know if you are in or out of the office and when you will be likely to call them back.

● **Include your USP in your message.** Your USP is your unique selling proposition, a phrase that articulates a key benefit to your customer. Boil it down to a brief phrase and use it in your outgoing message. For example: "Thank you for calling XYZ language school. We guarantee that you'll start speaking the language of your choice in 30 days or less or your money back. Leave your name and number at the tone and we'll get back to you as soon as we get your message."

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Fax 201.541.8608
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(formerly Berkley Productions)
110 Charlotte Place
Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632
info@greatvoice.com