

Voice mail etiquette

By Kathleen D. Pagana, PhD, RN



FOR ANY PROFESSIONAL, voice mail (VM) is no longer optional; it's necessary. How you use VM can work for or against you. The tips below can help you avoid common VM blunders, enhance your professional image, and improve your productivity.

Be prepared, brief, and discreet

- When making a phone call, always be prepared to leave a VM message. Avoid getting caught off guard—and having to stammer and stutter out your message—by jotting down key message points before you call.
- Be concise and brief. Don't ramble; the best messages are brief. Show respect for the listener's time.
- State the date, time, and purpose of your call. Especially if you're returning a call, this helps jog the person's memory. Also, if you've recently handled the business you're calling about, the person can delete the message right away.
- Don't say anything confidential in a VM. Respect others' confidentiality, too—but realize that your own messages may be overheard by others or forwarded to anyone.
- Never play your VM messages on a speakerphone. This can bother others nearby and may broadcast information they're not meant to hear.
- Keep your tone and vocabulary business-like. Don't leave an angry message. If your ire is up, wait until you've calmed down before leaving a message. And avoid vulgar or otherwise unprofessional remarks. Remember—the recipient may replay your VM over and over and may forward it to others.

Be clear and convey confidence

- When leaving your message, enunciate clearly and speak slowly. It's frustrating and annoying for the recipient to have to decipher a garbled message. For example, instead of saying “fifty” (which the listener may hear as “fifteen”), say “five zero.”
- While stating your phone number, write it in the air or on a piece of paper. This will slow down your speech and give the listener time to write it down.
- Mention a good time for the person to reach you. People appreciate this information, and it helps avoid telephone tag.

Make sure your phone messages send the right impression.

- Stand up and smile when leaving your VM. Believe it or not, your voice sounds more confident when you're standing. Also, the listener can hear the smile in your voice.
- Leave your full name and phone number, even if the other person already has it. That way, he or she won't have to look it up. State your name and phone number at the beginning *and* end of your message so the recipient doesn't need to replay it.
- If possible, listen to the message you've left. Many VM systems let you erase your message and start over—which you'll want to do if your original message contained “ahs” and “ums” or otherwise sounded unprofessional.

Optimize your VM system

- Make sure your own VM system works properly. Having your phone ring indefinitely or having callers hear that your mailbox is full is unprofessional.
- Check your VM system frequently so you can respond to all messages promptly (within 24 hours).
- Review the greeting message you've recorded for your VM system. If it sounded unprofessional or if you hear distracting noises in the background, revise it.
- Update your greeting message after a vacation or an out-of-office period. Someone who calls you in February doesn't want to hear, “I'll be back from vacation on January 26.” Put a “sticky” note on your phone as a reminder to update your greeting.
- Listen to all your new VM messages before responding. A later message may negate the need to return a call.
- When forwarding a VM message, provide an introduction and state your name.

Mind your voice mail manners

As with all your communications, your VM messages should reflect a professional image. Following the guidelines above will help you come across as courteous and considerate at all times. Your colleagues, family, and friends (not to mention strangers) will appreciate your effort. ★

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