

Conquer Telephone Tag

By Donald Wetmore

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Donald Wetmore
ctsem@msn.com

Productivity Institute
<http://www.balancetime.com>

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By: Dr. Donald E. Wetmore

I love technology. I am not a technical person but I admire the techno-things that have helped my business, productivity and profitability. Things like laptops, the Internet, and email have cut costs and boosted productivity and profits dramatically during the last decade.

With almost all new technological breakthroughs, there is a period that is heralded as the answer to all our problems followed quickly by a learning period during which we figure out how to best capitalize on this new way of working.

Voicemail fits this paradigm. Voicemail-the culprit that heightened "telephone tag" to an art form.

Ten years ago, I had to pay the salary of a receptionist or acquire the services of an answering service to handle incoming telephone calls. Or I might use an answering machine with a limited recording limit. I opted for the live receptionist. More personal, more real, I thought.

Then along came voicemail, a way of accepting incoming phone calls at a low cost with more options than an answering machine and a way of more effectively handling phone calls than before, giving the caller the opportunity to receive answers to their inquiries without talking to a real person.

Multiple menu options surfaced (if you would like sales, press 2, if you press 2 and would like to receive a copy of our catalog, press 4, if you press 4 and would like our winter catalog, press 5, but if you would like our spring catalog, press 6.....). I actually timed a menu option thing recently and it took over a minute and a half to get to the option that I wanted to get to the information I needed.

Voicemail also creates a new opportunity for people to duck your calls. Many people rarely answer a phone when it rings waiting until you have slogged through their voicemail menu, then to play your message and decide whether or not to call you back. Of course, when they call you back, they get your voicemail system and then you have to listen to their message and decide whether or not to return their call. Hmmm. Telephone tag and you're it!

We need a better system. Here are a few suggestions to better deal with voicemail and avoid telephone tag.

1. Use an alternative to telephone. Look, people you call are going to duck your call via voicemail so use a different mode of communication that might have a better rate of success of getting through. Fax your message or email it or even use a first class letter. Some of those “old” methods are better than the new technology.

2. Don't spill the beans. Want someone to call you back? Don't give them the entire spiel in your voicemail. Less is more. A little intrigue. Teasers. “ Debbie. Please give me a call to talk about how to make your job easier” v “ Debbie. I found a new online course for only \$259 that will show us how to get a lot more done in less time with a lot less stress. The problem is I can't afford to buy it on my own. Would you be willing to kick in half of this and we could share the program? Let me know if you want to do this.”

3. Be specific. If you want a return call, don't end with “Call me as soon as possible” or “Call me soon” or “Call me when you can”. Everyone has “too much to do”. You are then just one more thing to do. Those vague requests wind up in the “as soon as possible” pile of Never Never Land that rarely gets acted upon. Instead, give a specific day and time to call back. Don't give two or more choices because that will necessitate a call back from that person to confirm which date and time is best to return the call.

For example: “Joe, this is Don. I need to speak to you about how to make the Anderson research run more smoothly. Give me a call back on Tuesday, the fifth at 9:00 a.m. I blocked that time for you. If this doesn't work for you, please give me a call to reschedule and leave a message on my voicemail with at least two alternate dates and times for us to talk. Gutsy? Offensive? Well, 95% of the time you will not hear back from this person to change the date and time you have selected and you will accomplish what you intended to do on the date and time you have selected.

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Dr. Donald E. Wetmore
Professional Speaker
Productivity Institute
Time Management Seminars
127 Jefferson St.
Stratford, CT 06615
(203) 386-8062 (800) 969-3773
Fax: (203) 386-8064
Email: ctsem@msn.com

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