



The Customer Communicator Web Extra



Back to basics with voice mail

Voice mail can be a deterrent to effective customer service — but only if you let it. The following customer-oriented voice-mail tips, from Karen Leland and Keith Bailey of Sterling Consulting Group will help you provide excellent service and keep phone tag to a minimum.

■ Don't hide behind your voice mail.

Good customer care requires that you answer your own phone at least some of the time. When you do, you send a positive message of availability.

■ **Update your greeting regularly.** You should always update your greeting to reflect your schedule and provide callers with the best times to reach you. Callers should also get a strong sense of the expected time for a call-back from your greeting.

Additionally, if you're going to be out of the office for a prolonged period of time (for instance, on vacation), let callers know when you'll return and provide the name and number of a coworker who can assist in your absence.

■ Respond to messages promptly.

Depending on the nature and urgency of the call, if callers don't receive responses within a reasonable period of time (usually within 24 hours), they will begin to assume that voice mail is an ineffective way of communicating with you. Get into the habit of regularly checking for messages at least three times a day, including every time you come back from being out of the office for lunch or a meeting.

■ **Encourage customers to leave effective messages.** Try saying something like: "Please let me know the reason for your call and

any specific information I'll need in order to help you." Additionally, you may want to encourage customers to email you with any details they think you might find helpful. And unfortunately, in the rush to leave a detailed message that covers all the important points, many callers often forget to leave their phone number. State in your greeting: "Please leave your phone number, even if you think I already have it."

■ **Allow frequent callers to bypass your greeting.** Most systems will allow you to set it up so that your caller can bypass your greeting by pressing the pound (#) key, and go straight to leaving you a message. Likewise, give callers an out by allowing them to press "0" to reach a live operator.

■ **When leaving messages, don't assume.** There are three big assumptions to avoid. Don't assume the customer recognizes your voice. Always state at the beginning of your message, "This is so-and-so calling." Don't assume the customer has your phone number handy. Make it easy for him or her to respond by including your number in your message. Don't assume the customer knows what you're talking about. Introduce your message with an opening that tells the customer why you're calling.

