

How do you get around voicemail?

by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

Voicemail is an invention that makes the job search more challenging because now more people can avoid your call. Before, only those with secretaries had that ability. Unlike secretaries, voicemail cannot be won over by your charming ways or let slip information that will help your quest. Voicemail can be an invisible, impenetrable wall between you and your prospect.

Voicemail can also be your friend. It takes accurate messages. It lets you make a mini-pitch to someone. It gives a forum to say what you want and when and how you can be reached. If you have it as a job-search tool, you never miss a call; the message is never botched by your eager pre-schooler.

But always getting voicemail feels daunting. How do you get past it?

Know how to use it. Before you call, put a smile on your face and energy in your voice. Write a script if this kind of calling scares you. Take a deep breath so your voice doesn't wobble. You want to sound like you're worth calling back.

When you call, say who you are, who sent you (if anyone), what you want, and how to contact you. Repeat your name and leave your number slowly enough so someone can write it down. Make it easy to get back to you.

Decide how many calls equals enough in your mind. Four? Five? Clients often tell me, "I can't get him to return my call."

"How many times did you call him?" I ask.

"Once." One call does not equal effective prospecting.

Make your call-back task visible. On a sheet of paper, organize a list of your prospects going down the page. Across the page put four or five columns. When you make a call, put the date and time in a column next to that name so you know when to call back and when to stop. Keep that list near the phone and work it.

What time of day should you call?

All occupations have a down time or odd hour when people tend to be more available. That's the time to call. For many, it's before 8:00 AM and after 5:00 PM. The switchboard's closed, the staff isn't there; a call could be from a family member, so we answer the phone.

Don't call on Monday. Everyone's avoiding everything that day. Try Friday mornings when the end of the week is in sight, and everyone's happy about that.

How often should you call?

This is a ticklish balancing act. Call often enough to get someone's attention, but not so often that you're a pest. If you're networking, call every three days if you're in a rush, every ten days if you're not. If you're following up on an interview, every five to seven days.

It doesn't feel like it when you're on the sweaty-palmed end of placing these calls, but most of us do return calls. We may be careless or busy, but we generally feel an obligation to dial back a caller. It's good business etiquette.

You believe you've called a billion times. Your list will help you know the truth. Be gently persistent and endlessly cheerful, even though you begin to think the non-responder was badly raised. You want the favor; the other has the favor. Keep calling.

When should you stop calling?

I don't know, and I'll tell you why. When I was in college, I was trying to get an internship, and I called this man a billion times over a couple of months. He never returned my call.

"Okay," I said one spring morning when I mustered up the courage to smile and dial one more time, "This is the last time I'm calling." I had taken such a big breath, preparing to leave my message, that I didn't realize he was actually saying "Hello" on the other end!

I think there's something to that one-last-try attitude that finally gets you through. Use it. If it doesn't work and you don't get the miracle call, place your last call and tell the voicemail, "I've called several times to schedule a meeting with you and haven't been able to reach you. I hope you can call me back, but if not, I'll assume you don't want the meeting and will stop calling."

Do not blame. Don't give the non-responder a you're-a-jerk treatment. You don't know why the person hasn't called you or whether your paths will cross again. It's never worth it to burn even the tiniest bridge. Give your movin'-on spiel with the hope of a miracle in your voice. Miracles happen.

There is a difference between persistence and phone stalking. If after four or five calls over a several week period you hear nothing, you probably should find another way to get into the company.

Is there a silver bullet that will pierce the voicemail wall?

You have to imagine you're a leopard circling your potential lunch. If the task is all up to you, you could miss out on your protein this afternoon. It works better if you have other wild cats who can help you. Do you know someone else in the company who might give you entree to the entree? Does someone else know this person who can also put in a good word for you? The more people who can influence your target, the greater your chance is of getting a callback.

Another way to pierce the voicemail wall is pre-emptive work on your part. Anticipate non-response and figure out how to get around it. If you're making a network connection, ask the person referring you what are good times and ways of getting through. Ask for help from your source if you don't.

If you're worried about the voicemail freezeout after an interview, ask in the interview what their time frame is, how many people they'll interview, how you can check up on your candidacy, and who's the best person to call. Having the right name is often key to getting phone calls returned.

If you keep track, keep calling, and find more than one way in, you won't lose out to voicemail.