

Use voice mail to your advantage

Your message can make or break your professional image

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By **Fiona Collie**

A clear and positive voice mail greeting can make a lasting impression. A garbled or unclear one can put your professional image at risk. Keep these tips in mind the next time you invite callers to leave a message:

Quiet on the set

Eliminate background noise when you are recording your greeting. Some businesspeople record their outgoing messages in public places, with traffic noises in the background or at home, with dogs barking and dishes clanging nearby. They may think people can't hear these extraneous noises, says Linda Allan, Toronto-based certified management consultant specializing in behaviours in business, but they're wrong. Instead, record in your office with the door closed. If that's not possible, seek a quiet room, or at least make sure you're in a quiet area.

Use a handset

For the best quality, record the greeting using a landline and handset. Avoid cellphones and speakerphone mode. While mobile devices and speakerphones are useful, they don't create the best sound quality. "Pick up the handset and speak right into it," Allan says. "You'll get the crispest message and nobody can misinterpret [your words]."

Set a good pace

Treat the recording like Goldilocks; and find the speaking pace that's "just right." Most people either talk too fast or too slow, Allan says. If you speak too quickly, people can't understand what you're saying. Slowing down too much makes people impatient. Enunciate your words clearly and get to the point.

Stick to the important details

Try to be as brief as you can when framing your greeting. If you're absent and there's no way the caller can reach you, there's no point going into details. Instead, ask them to leave a message and give an approximate time when you'll return their call. For urgent matters, provide instructions on how to reach another team member or an assistant.

Watch your tone

Maintain a professional tone of voice. You should always sound "pleasantly professional" in a voice mail, Allan says. Too often people sound tired, she says, or mumble through their greeting. "You have to speak with a smile because people are picking up on your personality just from the energy in your voice mail."

Follow the same rules – professional tone, no background noises, keep it brief — when leaving a message on a client's voice mail.

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