

The Seven Deadly Voice Mail Sins

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A recent survey indicates that over fifty percent of vacation travelers check business voice mail at least once during their holiday. Voice mail has made it possible for us to stay in touch with the office from anywhere and at anytime. We can “leave a detailed message” and make important business decisions without once talking to each other. What a boom to productivity!

The advent of voice mail meant the end of the “day off” as we knew it. Ten years ago, if you took a day off to play soccer with your kids, you did not work that day. Now, if you take a day off, you are very likely to say before you leave the office, “Don’t worry, I will be checking voice mail.” Not just executives “check voice mail” on their day off. Secretaries, clerks, frontline supervisors and salespeople all check voice mail. If you are taking a long weekend, it has become expected that you will check in. And all you need is access to a phone.

How did this happen? It all started when we decided to use voice mail as one of our primary means of communication. In business today, if someone leaves you a message, she expects a response within 24 hours. It is considered poor office etiquette not to respond promptly. And early voice mail did not always have the “extended absence greeting” feature. People had no way of knowing we were on vacation. So we felt obligated to check in; someone, somewhere was waiting for us to answer a question. Even with the “extended absence greeting,” we checked in. Who wanted to come back from vacation with forty voice mails to respond to? Better to keep up with them and avoid having to respond to them all at once.

All this checking and sending voice mails has intruded on our personal time. But you can minimize the intrusion if you and your colleagues avoid the Seven Deadly Voice Mail Sins.

Deadly Sin # 1: The Weekend Voice Mails

How often do you start your Monday morning with more than five voice mails? Unless your company is in the middle of a crisis, you should not be checking or sending voice mails on weekends. You cannot do much to resolve the issue until Monday anyway. This sin is easy to combat. Do not send voice mails on weekends. Do not check voice mail on weekends.

Deadly Sin #2: The “Response to the Response” Voice Mail

This voice mail simply says, “I received your voice mail.” Sometimes the person repeats the entire content of your original message, wasting more of your time. The best way to combat this sin is to send voice mails to the offenders that end with, “You need not respond.”

Deadly Sin #3: The “Who was that?” Voice Mail

“Hello my name is Jane Garbled, and I’m calling from Mumble Inc. Please return my call at...” - said so fast that you can’t write the number down. How often do you receive voice mails that are completely unintelligible? You use the playback feature and the slow feature, and you still cannot discern the message. These sinners say their names and phone numbers at the speed of light. No slow or play back function works well enough for you to figure out how to return their call.

You can punish the offenders by immediately deleting their voice mails. You can avoid committing this sin yourself by following this simple rule. Speak clearly and write down your phone number as you speak into the phone. If you are saying it faster than you are writing it that is too fast for someone who will have to listen to it and write it down.

Deadly Sin #4: The “Thinking Out Loud” Voice Mail

These sinners literally “think out loud” on your voice mail. These voice mails can be five minutes long, but the actionable information is about ten seconds. I know an executive who does this while driving. In addition to his “thinking through” the issue with your voice mail, he keeps you posted on his location and the difficulties of navigating his car while talking on the phone. “I’m not sure what we should do about Acme Company....oh hold on I’m making a left turn.”

If the sinner is a direct report or peer, you can give them some feedback. If the offender is your boss, all you can do is speed up the voice mail -a great feature! And don't commit this sin yourself.

Deadly Sin #5: The "Every time I have an Idea" Voice Mail

These sinners leave you up to ten voice mails a day. Every time they have an idea, they leave you a voice mail. They expect you to respond to each one, even when the second message contradicts the first.

How do you combat this one? Before you send someone a voice mail, think about what else she needs to know and to consolidate the information. Send one voice mail with multiple pieces of information. Ask your colleagues to do the same for you.

Deadly Sin #6: The "Back and Forth" Voice Mails

When did we decide that we should not have live conversations, and that we could resolve complex issues by exchanging voice mails? Someone will send a voice mail with a problem and a proposed solution to three people. The issue is hotly debated in a voice mail exchange. Misunderstandings occur, resulting in more voice mails to clarify what was really meant. At some point we realize that this issue is too complex to resolve without discussion. We need to have a meeting.

We really needed to have a meeting from the very beginning. We wasted time exchanging voice mails on an issue that was too complex to discuss, debate and resolve on voice mail. You can avoid this sin by choosing the right issues to communicate using voice mail. Voice mail works when you need to communicate facts. It works if you have a question and need a straightforward response. It works when you are answering someone else's question. If the issue is complex, save everybody some time and make a phone call or call a meeting.

Deadly Sin #7: The "Ignoring the Extended Absence Greeting" Voice Mails

A colleague recently left a tongue-in-cheek, extended absence greeting that said, "Stop and think before you hit the pound key. I'm in Hawaii. Someone else can help you." One dawn, while her family still slept, she slipped out of the hotel to a payphone and checked her voice mail. She had 42 messages! It would take at least ninety minutes to listen and respond to them. These sinners had decided that she really did not mean it; they knew she would check voice mail and respond.

How do you combat this sin? Do not leave voice mails for people on vacation. Do not respond to voice mails on vacation. People stop sending you messages. It really works.

Each of us controls the impact that voice mail has on our personal lives. You can say no. No, I will not respond to voice mails while I am on vacation. No, I will not send or listen to voice mails on weekends. No, I will not waste other people's time. People can have successful and powerful careers and still draw boundaries. Companies need talented people. No company will really fire you for not checking your voice mail.