

Meeting The Voice Mail Challenge

“I hate voice mail,” said the printing salesperson. “It’s a technology invented by the devil to make my job more difficult.”

“I love voice mail,” said the printing buyer. “It’s a technology that lets me be much more productive. Among other things, it gives people the ability to communicate with me while I’m doing other things.”

I love voice mail too, and in seminars, I sometimes tell a story about how voice mail was invented by a printing salesperson—in fact, by a direct descendant of Benjamin Franklin! That’s not true of course, but I tell the story to reinforce the idea that voice mail can be a powerful tool for a printing salesperson. You just have to use it effectively, and I think the “problem” with voice mail is that most salespeople don’t.

Ducking My Calls

The perception among salespeople seems to be that buyers use voice mail to duck their calls. Certainly some buyers do that, but the more important question has to be *why* they do it. The answer is that a “cold call” from a printing salesperson doesn’t add value to most people’s day. If you catch them in the office, they might talk to you a little bit, but if talking to you requires additional action on their part, it’s not likely to happen.

Does that mean that not leaving messages and calling again and again is a better strategy? Not really, and one of the reasons for that is that some people never answer their phones—they let voice mail screen every call. With those people, the keep-calling-until-someone-answers strategy would be completely invisible. Of course, the leave-a-message-on-a-cold-call strategy doesn’t work very well either.

What’s the solution to this problem? First of all, the avoidance of cold calls. And second, a compelling message that gives the buyer a better-than-average reason to call you back.

Avoid Cold Calls

As I’ve written before, I teach a strategy that starts with the identification of suspect companies—in other words, companies that might buy enough of your kind of printing to qualify as prospects. The next challenge is to identify a decision-maker within a suspect company. From that point, most salespeople seem to want to call on the phone to ask for an appointment—in other words, a cold call. I’d rather send an introductory letter to try to warm up that eventual phone call a little bit.

What should the letter say? Stripped down to the essence, it should say “I’m interested in you because I think you buy the kind of printing I sell. I think you should be interested in me, because we’re a really good printing company. I’d like to talk to you about all of that, so I’ll be calling on the phone to ask you for an appointment.

When a letter like that precedes your first phone call to the decision-maker, you’re positioned to say “Hi, this is (Dave Fellman) from (Dave Fellman Printing). I wrote to you the other day, and I promised that I’d be calling to see if we can set up a meeting.” If I had the decision-maker on the phone, I’d continue and say: “How does that sound?” If I was talking to his/her voice mail, I’d say: “Please call me at 919-363-4068, and let’s set that up.”

Four Possibilities

That message would be quite sufficient on the first phone attempt, and it’s been my experience that a small percentage of people will return the first phone call. The key here is whether the introductory letter captured their interest, and I’ve found that there are four possibilities: (1) they don’t receive or read the letter, (2) they read it and decide that they don’t want to talk to you, (3) they read it and decide that they *do* want to talk to you, and (4) they read it and decide that they probably should talk to you, but they’re very busy and/or they don’t need any printing right now and/or they have some other reason to put you on the back burner.

What percentage of people fall into each category? I don’t have any firm data on this, but my experience suggests that it’s about 30% each for possibilities 1, 2 and 4, and 10% for number 3. That may not seem very positive to you at first, but please take another look! With a compelling voice mail message strategy, I think you have a good shot at a return phone call from all of the 3’s and 4’s and perhaps half of the 1’s. That adds up to 55% of your targeted suspects, and I think that’s something to get excited about! Remember, though, it takes a *compelling voice mail strategy* to make it happen.

Second Message

If one out of ten suspects returned my first call, I’d be pretty happy. With the others, it would simply be on to Stage 2 of my strategy, and that’s to leave a longer and more assertive message. How long should you wait before

calling again? My recommendation is to give them the rest of the call day and all of the next day before calling again, so if I left the first message on Monday, I'd call again on Wednesday.

This whole letter-and-phone-call strategy, by the way, is based on a lot of contact in a short period of time. I think of it as a full-court press (hopefully you'll understand the basketball analogy!) I want to give you every chance to show interest after I express my interest in you, and if you don't, I'm going to give someone else that chance. This might be a good point to remind you of the three criteria for a fully qualified prospect. First, they have to buy exactly the kind of printing you're best equipped to sell. Second, they have to buy enough of it to make pursuing them worthwhile. Third, and ultimately most important, they have to show some interest in buying from you.

So what should your next voice mail message say? The answer to that question is contained in this one: what exactly do you want me to do after I listen to your message? If you're thinking "buy printing from me," you're way out ahead of the selling process. If you're thinking "agree to an appointment," you're still not quite in the moment. If you're thinking "return my call," you're right where I want you to be. Now, your challenge is to tell me why I should return your call, and in just a moment, I'll continue with some advice on how to make that happen. Here's something to think about first, though. Don't talk about your company. Tell me why I should call *you* back! As the old saying goes, the first part of a successful sale is to sell yourself.

The Second Message Is The "Big Gun" In Your Strategy!

Realistically, only a small percentage of people are likely to return your first call, but that's OK, because that short message was really only targeted at a small percentage of your suspects—the 10% or so who will read your introductory letter and say: "Yes, I should definitely talk to this salesperson!"

Stage 2 is a message targeted at the people I referred to as the 1's and 4's. The 1's are the people who didn't receive or read your letter, and my experience indicates that this will be about 30% of the suspects you mail to. The 4's are the people who read it and decided that they probably should talk to you, but they're very busy and/or they don't need any printing right now and/or they have some other reason to put you on the back burner. Again, my experience indicates that this will be about 30% of your suspect list.

So what should this message say? As I wrote just a moment ago, your immediate objective is to get me to return your phone call. *That's* what your second voice mail message should be about, and as I also wrote just a moment, I don't want you to talk about your company. You'll have the best success if you can give me a compelling reason to call *you* back! I get lots of calls from salespeople. What makes you different?

Experience?

I don't think there's anything more "sellable" at this stage of the process than printing knowledge and experience. "I've been doing this for a while and I know what I'm doing" has proven to be a very compelling message. If you fall into that category, here's the message I might leave.

"His, this is (your name) from (your company) trying you again. I hope you'll remember from my earlier message that I wrote to you and promised that I'd be calling to see if we can set up a meeting. Please call me at 919-363-4068, and let's set that up." (At this point, I'd pause for just a moment, and then continue.)

"You know, I'm sure you get a lot of phone calls from salespeople, and I'm betting that returning those calls is not at the top of your priority list every day. I think this call is different, though; I think it's one you should return, and let me tell you why.

"I've been working in the printing industry for XX years, and I don't think it's too much of a stretch to tell you that I've built a considerable level of product knowledge over those years. In fact, I think if you talked to some of my customers, they'd tell you that my knowledge translates into a lot of value for them. They tell me what they need to do, and I can usually tell them the best, fastest or most cost-effective way to do it. I think my knowledge has saved my customers a lot of time and aggravation over the years, and probably money too. If that would be of value to you, Mr./Ms. Whomever, you really should call me, and the number is XXX-XXX-XXXX."

Too Long?

I timed that message out at 58 seconds, and I've been told that's way too long. Obviously I disagree, and here's why. I'll grant you that there are people who'll hit the delete button after a few seconds. (Remember the 2's I referred to last month, the 30% of your suspect list who will read your letter and decide that they don't want to talk to you?) The key to this strategy is that I'm not talking to them! I'm talking to the 1's and especially to the 4's. I couldn't care less if the 2's and even most of the 1's delete me. If half of the 4's take me off the back burner and return my call after listening to this message, I'll be extremely happy.

Other Possibilities

Here are a couple of other possibilities for a compelling message. In all cases, the first two paragraphs would be the same as above.

For an owner: “I’m the owner of XXX Printing, and here’s what I think that could mean to you. If you’ve ever had to wait for something to happen because your salesperson didn’t have enough horsepower to get your needs to the top of his or her company’s task list, that won’t happen with me, because I’m the person who makes all of those scheduling and priority decisions at my company. If that would be of value to you, Mr./Ms. Whomever, you really should call me, and the number is XXX-XXX-XXXX.”

For a rookie: “I’ve been working in the printing industry for XX *months*, and you might not think that’s anything to brag about—there are certainly people who have more sales experience than I do. But I’ll tell you what I don’t think you’re going to find, someone who brings more enthusiasm to the job, and someone who has a better understanding of the need to work really hard for his/her clients to earn their business. If that would be of value to you, Mr./Ms. Whomever, you really should call me, and the number is XXX-XXX-XXXX.”

I’m sure you’ll agree that being the owner or having years of experience is probably a lot more compelling than bringing enthusiasm to the job. The idea, though, is to have more to say than just “please call me”—and to put your best foot forward, whatever that may be. I hope you’ll also see the wisdom in selling yourself at this point in the process, as opposed to being just one of a number of printing salespeople bragging about basically the same capabilities. The thought process most printing buyers go through is not “do I want to talk with this printing company?” It’s “do I want to talk with this printing salesperson?”

Now, I can’t guarantee you that any of these messages will cause a majority of your suspects to call you back. That’s simply not a reasonable expectation. It’s been my experience, though, that when you tell them why they should, more of them will. I hope you’ll see that this second message is the “big gun” in an effective voice mail strategy.

What Do I Do Now?

So far, this discussion of voice mail strategy has taken us through an introductory letter, a brief first voice mail message, and the longer and more assertive and hopefully more compelling second message which represents the “big gun” in this overall strategy. As I wrote earlier, you’ll never find a strategy that will get everyone to call you back, but it’s been my experience that when you tell them why they should, more of them will.

OK, but what do you do when the “big gun” fails to stimulate a return call? I think that means that it’s *almost* time to give up on that suspect and move on to another one. One of the realities of selling is that you can’t sell to everyone, and you may ultimately have to accept that this suspect falls into that category. There are two more things you can try, though, before making that *disqualifying* decision—and then there are two distinct types of disqualification.

Call For Help!

In the overall prospecting strategy I teach, the *decision-maker* is usually identified by talking to the *gate-keeper*. After two voice mail messages without a return phone call, my next call is going to be to the gate-keeper, and the conversation goes like this: “I hope you’ll remember me, and I appreciate you giving me Mr./Ms. Whomever’s name a week or so ago. I wrote to him/her like I promised I was going to, and I’ve left a couple of messages trying to follow up. I was wondering, is there a particularly good time to call when I’d be likely to catch him/her in the office?”

I’ve had gate-keepers tell me to call early in the morning, or late in the day. I remember one who told me: “Well, he’s been in China for the last couple of weeks.” On hearing that, I didn’t feel bad anymore about not getting a return phone call!

Of course, I remember still another who said: “Let me make sure I understand. You’ve written and called a couple of times and she hasn’t called you back?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I replied.

“Well, don’t you get it?” she said. “She obviously isn’t interested in whatever you have to sell!” The next sound I heard was the phone slamming back in its cradle.

Write Again

Another possibility after two voice mail messages is to add e-mail to your voice mail strategy. As many salespeople have learned, some buyers who won’t return a phone call will return an e-mail. The downside to this strategy seems to be that most of the e-mail replies are negative, but I’m not sure that’s a completely negative situation. At the very least, an “I’m really not interested” e-mail might give you some closure with that suspect.

It might also suggest a decision, though—do you accept the statement or challenge it? In a moment, I’ll explain what I mean by challenging it. Before that, let’s consider the criteria by which you make that decision. It all has to do with the suspect’s volume potential, and if you know that potential to be high, I recommend either an immediate challenge or a “recycling” strategy. If you don’t *know* that it’s high, I recommend either an immediate disqualification or a “recycling” strategy. If you do know that it’s low, I recommend immediate disqualification. Here’s my attitude: If

they're not big enough to get very excited about, they need to be very, very easy to sell to!

Now, back to the idea of challenging that "I'm really not interested" response. If I felt that was the appropriate strategy, I'd say: "I don't get it. Why would you *not* want to talk with a salesperson from a really good printing company?" Remember, at this stage of the selling process, your goal is to set up a meeting. If you can do that, you have at least a chance of finding some way to displace a current supplier. If they won't even meet with you, that's unlikely to happen.

The usual result of the "challenge" strategy is the discovery of a more specific objection, for example: "I'm really busy right now" or "I don't need anything right now" or "I'm happy with my current supplier." (If you don't know what to say when someone throws that last one at you, take a look at "We're Happy With Our Current Printer," which you can find in the Article Archives at my website: www.davefellman.com.)

By the way, I'd use the same "challenge" strategy if I were actually talking to the decision-maker and he/she told me "I'm really not interested."

Disqualify or Recycle

As I mentioned earlier, there are two distinct types of disqualification. I think of them as *permanent* and *for-the-time being*. As noted just above, the permanent category is for low-volume suspects, and this is as much a time management consideration as anything else. If you'll accept that it can take about the same amount of time and effort to develop a low-volume prospect as it takes for a higher-volume prospect, doesn't it make sense to reserve your selling time for higher-volume opportunities?

Having said that, it still doesn't make sense to just keep calling and calling on a suspect who won't even return your phone call. The constant calling, in fact, tends to create a nuisance factor. It's a far better strategy to back off for a few months in the hope that something will change—either the immediate need for printing or the level of satisfaction with the current supplier or the decision-maker himself/herself. A company's overall need for printing isn't likely to change over a few months; in other words, they're either qualified in terms of the first two qualifying criteria or they're not. (Remember that the first qualifying criteria is that they buy exactly the kind of printing that you're best equipped to sell, and the second is that they buy enough over the course of a year to make pursuing them worthwhile.)

The level of interest can change, but it's a good idea not to get disqualified as a nuisance before that happens! A better strategy would be to start the whole process over in 3-4 months. This time, your introductory letter might start with "I hope you'll remember me from my efforts to contact you a few months ago. You obviously weren't ready to talk to me then, but I'm hoping that situation has changed. I still think my company and I can provide some real value to you, so I'll be calling on the phone soon to see if we can set up a meeting."

I hope you feel better prepared now to deal with the voice mail challenge!