



Gone in 60 Seconds

Getting attention is priority #1 for Voice-mail and E-mail communications

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WHAM, BAM, RING, ZING . . . I USED to think it was just my office that operated in a continual frenzy, with phones ringing off the hook, non-stop E-mail, and incoming overnight mail shipments. But recently I've realized that this is just the pace of work today. My friends and acquaintances from many industry sectors tell me that they face the same pressures. Life has speeded up, and as a result, our working days perk along at a highly caffeinated pace that would make our pre-Starbucks ancestors cringe.

Each new gadget or technology that is developed to give us more time only speeds things up another notch. The problem is that while we have faster, more convenient ways to communicate, many of us haven't adapted our style of communication to the way that things work today. *If you don't capture someone's attention in 60 seconds or less, they are literally "gone."*

Communication in an Era Of Accelerated Timelines

Overwhelmingly, people now equate "professional" with "succinct." And it is this succinct communication style that you must use for the two most important weapons of the networker's arsenal: the telephone and the E-mail system. To use these tools effectively, you need to learn how to deliver a concise, professional message—something that can be difficult for many people who still long for the days of personal phone communication and letters!

In this article, I will analyze voice-mail and E-mail as networking tools, and point out some techniques that you can use to develop a professional image for yourself in the process. Even though many of my examples will be for job seekers, the advice works across the board for anyone seeking to communicate succinctly.

Voice-mail

If you are in the throes of a job search, you probably consider the voice-mail systems in use today to be a major impediment. The chance that you'll get a return call seems to many to be remote, and anyway it seems unlikely that you'd be able to make a good impression in one minute or less. But it is exactly this point that you need to remember about voice-mail: You *cannot* present yourself on a voice-mail message! You are simply leaving enough information so that the person you're calling will know why you have made contact, and so choose whether or not to return the call. The bottom line is that brief professional messages get callbacks; lengthy, over-the-top meanders do not.

Here are two examples from our office, where many voice-mail messages fall into one of these two categories:

Long-Talkers: These people believe that, because they are unlikely to get a return call, they might as well relate their life story via voice-mail and get their networking call out of the way, "just in case." Messages of this type are distinguished by a total lack of concern for the listener's time. And the caller makes very little effort to get something specific out of the call. They simply dump information on the listener—*way too much* information. Like most people who receive this kind of voice-mail, I fast forward through much of it.

Mystery Callers: At the other end of the spectrum from the "Long-Talker" is the mysterious voice that leaves no more than a name and number. The voice provides no information that would help the listener choose a time to return the call or any guidance as to what the subject matter might be. If you are leaving these brief no-information voice-mails, think of the company you are in . . . this is just the kind of message that slippery salespeople like to leave. We don't return any of those. Do you?

Although I generally don't recommend anything "canned" or "artificial," a voice-mail message is an exception to this rule. In fact, the best voice-mail advice I can offer you is that you should be ready with a script, perhaps something like the one that follows. That way, you'll know just what to say when you hear that little beep as a secretary suddenly—and unexpectedly—puts you into the Director's voice-mail system. (On another topic altogether, it wouldn't be a bad idea to know what to say if the Director picks up her phone . . .).

"Good afternoon Dr. Smith, my name is Jane Doe. I'm a Ph.D. organic chemist who works extensively with process scale-up. I'm calling to ask you about ABC Pharma Company's interest in this area. If you would be so kind as to return my call, I promise to be quite brief, because I know how busy you must be. You can reach me at 973-555-1234 any morning this week between 8AM and 11AM, or on Thursday afternoon. Thanks."

Note that in my example above, Dr. Doe did not specifically say, "Dr. Smith, I am looking for a job." This is because one of the "Golden Rules" of networking is that you do not immediately ask for a job. Do this and your message will get "the HR shuffle"—an immediate forward to the Human Resources department. And yet, Dr. Doe wasn't sneaky, either. Her message was very much "upfront."

When Jane Doe receives her return call from Dr. Smith, that

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conversation has to get around—quickly—to the fact that it is a networking and employment-related matter. By asking for Dr. Smith to return the call about the firm's "interest in the area" of chemistry scale-up, Dr. Doe can request from Dr. Smith the names of the individuals in his organization who would most want to hear from her. You can't always avoid getting referred to HR—this will still happen—but in this case, the possibilities are equally strong that Dr. Doe will enjoy a fruitful networking call with Dr. Smith.

To recap, here are the most important elements of voice-mail communication:

- Keep it short. Deliver your name, reason for calling, the best times to reach you, and your phone number.
- Show some understanding of how busy your contact is—it will increase your chances for a return call.
- Develop a brief description of yourself that will pique your contact's interest.
- Never leave a message indicating that you are job seeking and expect a callback.

E-mail

E-mail communication is the other tool in your networking arsenal in which you have 60 critical seconds to succeed. We all know that E-mail messages are unique because of their brevity and their informal nature. It's easy to jot off a quickie E-mail

note without a lot of thought; you do that all the time with friends and acquaintances. But when you are in the throes of a job search, it is prudent to direct more attention to the E-mail process than you might normally.

As a recruiter, I "network" all the time. My phone calls and E-mails, just like yours, are supposed to turn up leads. Although I am not searching for a job for myself, the fact that I am looking for people to fill my clients' open positions makes the process essentially the same. Often, I find that certain people—notably those at a senior level—are more approachable when I send them a short E-mail request prior to making contact by phone. So I regularly send E-mail networking messages. Whether you are in the job market or not, paying some attention to those introductory E-mails isn't a bad idea. You are being judged all the time, and by people who may matter a great deal to you.

Tips for Making an Impact by E-mail

- *Proofread!* Despite the inherent informality of E-mail, your networking contacts are important enough that your messages should be reviewed for typos and clarity. Be precise and unambiguous. Make sure your referenced attachment is included.
- *Keep it succinct.* I've found that it is almost always possible to say what you mean with fewer words and that doing

so simultaneously improves the impact of the correspondence. Are you being overly wordy?

- *Choose a good subject line.* Your choice of a subject line determines how quickly your messages get read—or how fast they get dumped into a “holding” mailbox. If your subject line is “Referred by Susan Smith,” your message will certainly be read more quickly than one that says “A moment of your time,” which sounds a great deal like an advertisement.
- *Be positive and not negative.* Generally, a positive expression is more easily understood than a negative one. For example, “You may call me any evening after 6:00 p.m.” works better than “I am not available until after 6 p.m.”
- *Lists read easier and have more impact than long sentences.* If you are sending someone an E-mail outlining your lab skills, list them instead of incorporating them into one long sentence or a paragraph. The list will be easier to read, and it will create a more immediate impact. In E-mail, you can take liberties with “white space.” Long E-mails without some white space look intimidating, and are often shuffled off to an “I’ll read it later” place on the hard drive.
- *Keep your internet jargon in the chat rooms.* Although many Web forums are full of Internet shorthand, your introductory E-mail messages should be free of “IMHOs” and the like.

- *Put your main points up front.* Just a few short years ago, when getting E-mail was unusual and fun (ah, those were the days . . .), we would pay close attention to each incoming note. Today, our mailboxes are full of spam, and much less attention is paid to each piece of E-mail. So, you should make every effort to avoid burying your main points in a pile of superfluous fluff. In particular, the first paragraph of an E-mail message is critically important; one thing you might want to include there is the name of the contact that referred you to your correspondent.
- *HTML E-mail will confuse the issue.* Some applicants like to show off their abilities with HTML and use this format for their E-mail networking. The E-mail loads slowly, it doesn't save properly into database software and, in general, becomes a nuisance. HR staff in every company you write will thank you to avoid the use of HTML in your correspondence.

The Informality of Today's Communications

Both E-mail and voice-mail are intrinsically informal — which is far trickier communication than most. You must deliver a professional communiqué in an atmosphere that isn't really suited for it. That's a tall order, but it is reassuring to know that if you manage to be totally professional in your voice-mail and E-mail messages, you'll be heads and shoulders above the crowd.

And that isn't a bad place to be for a networker. ■