



Working in The Phone Zone

The telephone is the job search power tool

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EVERYONE HAS ONE ON THE DESK. Along with your PC, it is one of the most important tools in your job search armory. It can also be a huge time-waster and the single most aggravating part of your networking process. What I want to share with you in this month's column is how to make better use of the telephone to minimize wasted time and make a greater impact on important contacts.

I'm a 20-year veteran of telephone marketing. No, I don't mean those sleazy calls you get at home in the evening while you're eating dinner. Instead, I am in the business of representing my company and myself while on the phone. This is what you will be doing, too, because telephone skills are required if you are planning to "market" yourself into your next job. In reality, you must become a telephone marketer, opening doors for prospective interviews.

Overcoming the Basic Problems

As you may already know, using the phone to advance your job search is not an easy matter. On the surface, it seems easy. That's the problem: if you treat the phone as if it were simply an extension of your voice, you will not make a lot of progress. Here are some of the normal stumbling blocks encountered while using the phone to make "marketing" calls:

Problem: It is difficult to build rapport on the phone because you do not have the ability to see or employ body language.

Solution: Don't let this stop you from using body language (even though you may look rather strange to those near you). Sometimes getting your whole body involved as you would in person does indeed help you make a point, because it adds much-needed emotion to your voice. This will make the difference between what is perceived on the phone as phony 'excitement' and the real deal.

Problem: It is entirely possible that you can accidentally intrude on someone at an inconvenient time, and not even know that you are doing so.

Solution: Make a habit out of checking on this in the first moments of your phone conversation. For example, "Do you have a brief moment for a question, or am I catching

you at a bad moment?" So many callers to our office assume that they can launch into a 10-minute introductory statement just because someone answered the phone!

Problem: Many scientists find that they cannot communicate complicated information as well on the phone as they can in person.

Solution: Don't bother with the complicated information. Develop a succinct manner of presenting yourself and your accomplishments, one that whets the appetite to learn more (which can be developed later in written communication or a face-to-face meeting). Learning to speak in "sound bites" is essential when communicating by telephone.

Problem: Communicating without distractions is much more difficult on the telephone than in person.

Solution: Don't make important networking calls from the lab. Find a quiet place, and clear the desk for your conversations. Don't have anything in front of you except your notes for this particular call and a pad of paper. Make sure that everyone in your proximity knows that you are not to be interrupted.

The Job Seeker's Golden Rules

Now that you understand and appreciate the basic weaknesses of the telephone as a tool in the job search, you also have to realize that nothing can replace it. It is essential. But there are some additional cautions that need to be taken into consideration in order to maximize the positive benefits of this communication. Here's my list:

1. **Be nice to gatekeepers.** If you have already begun networking, then you know it is very difficult to get information from receptionists or secretaries of important people. These folks are often referred to as "gatekeepers," for that is what they really do. They are in charge of who goes in and out of their bosses' space, much like the gatekeeper of old. Gatekeepers can even keep you from getting through to an individual scientist in the lab, not just the Director of Research. Basic courtesy goes a long way here. The first thing we do at my company when we need to get through to some hard-to-reach hiring manager is ask politely if he or

RECOMMENDED READING

Telephone Techniques:

The Essential Guide to Thinking and Working Smarter
by Lin Walker, AMACOM Press, NY, NY, 1999 (\$12.95).

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Answering Machine Etiquette

ANSWERING MACHINES AND VOICEMAIL are a fact of life. If you are in the throes of a job search and don't have one, run to your nearest Wal-Mart or call the phone company. There's only one thing worse than a job seeker without voicemail . . . and that's a job seeker with a "cute" message on the box.

After years of speaking to job hunters' answering machines, I believe that one of the single greatest things that you can do to shoot yourself in the foot is to personalize your message in any "nonstandard" fashion. I am reminded of the candidate for the Medical Director position whose answering machine droned on with Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze*, or the sales rep whose customers were treated to a trio of meowing cats on each message they left.

Throughout the life of your circulating CV, you will no doubt get phone calls from a variety of people to the home number shown on your paperwork. Whether it is a Director of Human Resources or the hiring manager that received your résumé, most people are not impressed by "cute."

she is available, and explain our mission. Secretaries are used to being treated in a haphazard manner and sometimes even lied to by people who want to get past them and to the boss. If you are friendly, and explain your intent, you stand a much better chance of getting through.

2. **If rule #1 doesn't work, call when they aren't around.** Often you just won't be able to get past that gatekeeper. In this case, try calling at lunch, or before/after normal hours. A busy manager is someone who is at her desk far longer than the receptionist is. You will also find that the automated system that many companies use after hours will allow you to dial the manager directly by a lookup of last name. If you can't get through, ask the gatekeeper to share the E-mail address of the boss with you.
3. **Never ask for a job.** I've mentioned this before in my column and you will no doubt see it again. It's critical to remember that this process uses the phone to gather information that will eventually help you move to the job of your choice. It isn't going to land you a lot of job offers by itself. When you ask for a job right out of the chute, it "labels" the conversation. The label that most people in industry will assign to your call is, "Send to Human Resources." While it may be perfectly acceptable to talk with HR, it was not your

immediate goal. Your goal is to ask good questions about your area of career interest and learn more about "who does what" in a company that is on your target list.

4. **Use voicemail to your advantage.** Voicemail is either a plague on mankind or a boon to the job seeker, depending on whom you ask. Personally, I hated voicemail until I realized that busy people will only return those calls which sound the most professional—in other words, there is a screening procedure that takes place and it is perfectly possible to win in that scenario. Most "sleazy" callers, the kind who are selling something, leave very little information. A good voicemail message on the other hand means including your full name, a phone number, a good time to call you back (or a message which states that you will try again), and a short comment about why you are calling, followed by a promise to be brief. It is very important to state why you are calling. For example, "Dr. Smith, the reason that I am calling is that I have a quick question about the area of clinical affairs. I promise to be brief, I know how busy you are."

Those who approach the telephone with the wrong set of expectations can suffer pain and rejection. You probably won't find a job exclusively by the telephone. However, if you have the right goal, such as, "to gather information and advice that will move me closer to my next position," then the telephone can be of tremendous assistance in moving you forward. ■