john truscott
church consultant and trainer

Recording a voicemail message

TN105 Training Notes series: Communication

Most of us will be used to preparing church or personal voicemails for our mobiles or landlines. Some will also leave 'out-of-office' messages on their email systems. Many assume this is all so straightforward.

But it's not! I hear voicemails that sound anything but caring, I leave messages that are never returned until I chase, and I receive out-of-office emails that seem offhand or which come through days later when the sender is back at their desk.

So let me suggest some principles for leaving really good response messages by phone or email. Our messages communicate more than just the actual words we use and, as Christians, we want to honour our Lord.

I'll make it pretty basic to help beginners – if you are an old hand you should still find ideas for improvement here.

Reasons why we leave messages

Whether it's your private landline, a church or mission agency office system, or your mobile, you want to save people frustration at not being able to get to you – and not knowing how or when they will be able to reach you. The benefits may be yours too if you need to get their message but cannot, or do not wish to, be disturbed at the moment they ring.

It may be that you are away, busy with a priority activity, having time off, or simply showing those you are with at the moment the call or message comes in that they matter more. For example, I was not amused when a supper guest at our house put his mobile down beside his place and took a personal call during the meal!

If, on the other hand, it's an email and you are unavailable for an extended period (instant responses are not usually expected for e-traffic), you want to explain that you cannot reply as soon as the sender may be expecting.

But any voicemail or out-of-office reply should show value for the caller or sender too. All Christians should want to sign up to that. So how might we go about it?

Voicemail messages - basics

There is one simple principle for all that follows: put yourself in the caller's place and think what it feels like for them to get your message. You want to relax them and help them to respond. What follows applies whether you use an answering machine or a system such as BT1571.

1   **Record a personal message**

If the sender hears a standard message provided by your telecoms company, they cannot be certain they have got the right number and they tense up, feeling they are talking to a machine (as they are!). Take the trouble to record your own message.

2   **Consider a time-specific message**

It's simpler to have one general message for all occasions, but you score a bonus point if you have a message you change each week (or whenever) to give an accurate idea of when you can get back to them, or days you will not be able to return the call. But beware forgetting to update the message or you lose two points for the one you gained!

3   **Keep any system simple**

For church and mission offices with recorded options ('"press 1 for the Pastor", etc.), keep them short and simple as these easily wind callers up. Especially if they eventually get through to your extension and then have a long voicemail to contend with.

4   **Select a low number of rings**

Hearing 12 rings and then a message ratchets up the stress level. On the other hand, if you have voicemail on all the time but want to get in before it activates when you can take the call, you need enough time to do that. Find the best compromise.

5   **Listen to the message**

Always listen to your message (and rerecord if necessary) – and from time to time ring in from another number and location to see how it comes across.

6   **Beware compromising security**

Be careful that your message does not say, in effect, "We are all away on holiday, the house is empty and the key is under the doormat". Some do (almost).

Voicemail message content should be:

1   **Personal**

Say who you are right at the start. If it's an office number say it's the organisation but then add your Christian name. You are aiming to get far away from the idea of talking to a machine.

2   **Positive**

After the personal start, don't go into a negative message ("The office is closed…", "I'm not available…") but say something positive first such as "Thanks for calling but I'm afraid I cannot take this just now…."

3   **Sensible**

Include the key information the caller will need to know. It's good to be different from most, but avoid in-jokes and quirky approaches if this is a public number and you've no idea who will call and what emotional state they may be in.

4   **Short**

Thirty seconds should be the outside limit, so avoid long messages about church service times, for example, unless this is an information-only number.

5   **Simple**

By all means provide an alternative number to ring (especially if you may receive emergency calls in a church) or an email address, but keep detail to a minimum. The caller may not expect a message and be wrong-footed by something complicated.

6   **Truthful**

Make no promises you cannot keep. If you say you will phone back within an hour, ensure you do. If you say you will get back when the office is next open, don't delay. I am amazed at how often I am not called back, with no eventual apology for this, when the message said I would be.

But just as important as the words you use is the way in which you say it, so …

Voicemail message style should be:

1   **Natural**

By all means record the message from a written script (so you get the details right first time), but never read it out like a French dictation class. It needs to be you talking naturally, and at your normal speed (some dictated messages are too slow).

2   **Welcoming**

Try smiling as you record the message – so your voice comes across as reassuring and charming. Sound as though you are pleased the caller has rung. You are trying to make this very different from a robot message. Never record when in a hurry or angry.

3   **Varied**

Avoid a monotone voice or just one speed. Record it as though talking to the person in the room. Many callers feel self-conscious when hearing a voicemail and then having to speak to it – so anything to relax them is helpful.

4   **Clear**

The one time you need to slow down is when giving out an alternative telephone number or email address – and you might want to repeat it. A rushed number on a message is difficult to get hold of, and frustrating to the caller if they have to ring back to check it.

5   Professional

The message needs to sound professional, not as though it was recorded on a busy street or with children in the background. Choose time and place with care. An outline script as in point 1 above may help you get it all together well.

A note about withheld numbers

Most of these are spam but not all – some church systems send as withheld. If you have a phone that shows the number ringing, it is wise to let withheld numbers switch to voicemail and then you cut in if a real human starts putting a message on – though this does not work with BT1571. Most spam callers, other than pre-recorded ones, do not leave a message.

Out-of-office emails

Here we are dealing with print, but the basic principles are the same.

1   Understand how it works

If you set up an out-of-office message on a cloud-based system (gmail, Microsoft 365, etc.) all will be well. Otherwise, you need to leave the computer on while you are away. If you do not do this, all the messages go out when you eventually switch it back on – which is not what you intended!

2   Check the wording

If you write a message for the Christmas break and then turn it on again at Easter, people receive the Christmas message. I know because I get quite a number like this. Double-check that the words on the reply are correct.

3   Give helpful information

If your out-of-office message is switched on when the office is closed, say when you will deal with the email (and then do so!). If you are away for a long period (eg. on holiday), provide an alternative email address as a speedier response option.

4   But be aware of security

As for voicemail, your message can tell people your home or office is vulnerable because you are away. An out-of-office reply is more likely to say you are absent at given dates so word what you say carefully and don't give too much away. Balance that with point 3 above.

5   Avoid the auto-destruct option

A few Ministers send me out-of-office replies which tell me they are away and "all emails will be deleted …. so please resend once I'm back". I understand why they do this but the message that comes across is so negative that I squirm. It benefits them but inconveniences me. What does it say to someone who is not a church member?

6   Keep to all the voicemail principles

You want the message to be personal, positive, sensible, short, clear and truthful. Double-check it from time to time to ensure no typos creep in.

A note about taking emails at any time

Some Ministers and Christian workers now take emails when on holiday, saying that this is preferable to finding several hundred waiting for them on return. This has to be each person's decision, but I want to question the wisdom of this action. Work emails will almost always include matters that cause concern or increase stress – which can ruin the detox aspect of a day off or holiday. See also Training Notes TN106, *Taking time off,* on this website.

Note also that there is no model voicemail or 'out-of-office' message shown in these notes. This is deliberate. Each circumstance is different – there is no one-voicemail/email-fits-all. Better to put something together that follows these principles but is also 'you'.

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN105. See also Articles A11, *Become a better emailer*, A39, *A plan for your communications,* and A54, *How to get a message across,* plus Training Notes TN2, *Ten steps to help you communicate,* and TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN105 under Communication.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU
Tel: 01727 568325   Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk   Web: https://www.john-truscott.co.uk.