



A 3-Step Strategy for Making Voicemail a Highly-Effective Sales Tool

By Colleen Francis

Being effective at prospecting requires that you maintain a steady pace with your sales calls. That's how you ensure your sales funnel remains large enough so that you meet your sales targets year after year. In making those calls to new leads and prospects, sales people often complain to me that, when their calls are intercepted by someone's voicemail, the voicemail box too often becomes a black hole. No matter what you put into it, your efforts never see the light of day ever again—prospects don't return your calls and you spend more time than you think you can afford being on the phone leaving message after message.

It doesn't have to be that way! The key to mastering voicemail is to recognize its true character and to use that knowledge to your advantage so you can set up more sales meetings in less time.

Facing Up to the Facts About Voicemail

Let's face it: nobody really *likes* voicemail. It's slower to use than other communications tools and yet we've all learned to accept it as a necessary part of our busy lives. To understand how you can leverage this imperfect technology to your advantage, exercise those empathy muscles that all *successful sales professionals* possess.

If you think it's tough being the calling party having to deal with that robotic message taker, put yourself in the shoes of the *called party* for a moment. While most will admit reluctantly that voicemail can help avoid calls they didn't really want to answer, it's still a major nuisance that taxes their time as much as it does those who are trying to leave the messages in the first place.

Recognize that not everyone leaves short, purposeful messages. In fact, too often it's left to the called party to trudge through each message to determine which ones require some kind of action on their part. That's why, in the end, both the caller and the called party wind up feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. It has even prompted Michael Arrington of the widely read Silicon Valley-based blog TechCrunch to plead publicly "think before you voicemail."

Here's another important fact to bear in mind. In sales, no matter how successful you become, you will always have to deal with voicemail. Finding ways to master it so that it helps you reach the goals that matter to you—that's what will set you apart from the other eighty percent of sales people in any organization. Treat it well and it can be a highly-effective selling tool that helps you make a positive first impression on prospects. Treat it poorly and it will be a clamshell that will snap shut on you.

Three-Step Strategy to Break Open the Voicemail Clamshell

Over the course of more than a decade as a sales person as well as a sales trainer and coach, I've noticed that the most successful sales professionals out there have some common habits in how they use this particular technology to their advantage. Based on that, I've developed a three-step voicemail strategy that you can apply to your own business and start getting the results you're looking for today.

- **Step #1: Leave a short, purposeful message that requires no action by the person you are calling.** Here's an example of what that message might sound like:

"Hello, Janet, it's Colleen from Engage Selling. Sorry, I missed you. I'm calling because Chris at the Gizmo Corporation asked me to speak with you about the work we are doing to improve his sales results. I promise to call you back Wednesday at 2:00PM."

Notice that the message does *not* include leaving your phone number. There's a reason for that. Your first message must not require any kind of task or action on the part of the called party. You're the one who makes the commitment to call back at a specific date and time. Also, if the call is a referral, be sure to include that person's name in your message. Doing so helps to establish that you're not some stranger at the other end of the line. You're a known quantity who has

something that is useful to offer to the person you are calling. This gives the called party an added incentive to talk to you.

- **Step #2: Leave a short, purposeful follow-up that fully meets the commitment you made earlier.** True to your word, when 2:00PM rolls around on Wednesday, pick up the phone and make that follow-up call. If you're intercepted by voicemail again, leave a friendly message that sounds something like this:

"Hi Janet, it's Colleen at Engage Selling calling, as I promised, to try and reach you today. Sorry, I missed you. Chris at the Gizmo Corporation thought you'd be interested to learn more about how we are able to reduce your sales cycle by three months. I promise to try you again Thursday at 10:00AM."

- **Step #3: Leave one final, purposeful message that takes ownership of why that person hasn't called back yet.** Again, meeting your commitment to call, you pick up the phone on Thursday at 10:00AM. If voicemail greets you one more time, leave one final message like this:

"Hi Janet. It's Colleen at Engage Selling. I promised I would reach you today at 10:00AM. Sorry I missed you. I noticed you've been hard to reach this week and I'm wondering if that's because you're busy with your sales team talking about training, maybe you've already engaged another sales trainer or I've simply been picking the wrong time to find you at your desk. Why don't you give me a call at 111-111-1111 and if I don't hear from you, I will try again on [blank date]."

You *must* take 100% ownership for why that person might not be returning your calls. Not only does this ensure you maintain a friendly, professional tone, it also says to the called party that there are no hard feelings for the lack of callbacks (and there could be plenty of good reasons for this that have no bearing on you whatsoever). Also of note in that third and final message, be sure to include your phone number so that the called party can call you back. That way, you leave the door open rather than slamming it shut.

One more thing to keep in mind about this three-step strategy to prying open the voicemail clamshell: It's field tested—that means that when it's implemented consistently, it yields some really impressive results. Clients who have incorporated it as part of their everyday sales-calling strategy have reported back to me that their callback ratios have improved by as much as 80 percent.

So embrace voicemail. Treat it right. And be prepared for truly amazing results that influence your bottom line!

Colleen Francis is Founder and President of [Engage Selling Solutions](#). She understands the challenges of selling in today's market and how traditional sales techniques from decades ago often fall short. She's studied the habits of the top 10% of sales performers and complemented conventional wisdom of the sales process with proven techniques for a sales approach. You can email her at colleen@engageselling.com.

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