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Further than Figures

Phone Power

Tips for managing an endless onslaught of calls.

FROM: MAR-APR 2006 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, the first call he made was to his assistant, Thomas Watson. And, when he said, "Mr. Watson, come here. I want you," he no doubt interrupted Watson in the middle of something.

While the telephone has accomplished far more good than harm since its invention, you can be certain that no one has had an uninterrupted moment since the phone took its place in our world. However, both phones and voicemail are powerful tools that can make you more effective in the workplace. If you understand how to use them efficiently and thus harness their power. Here are some tips.

Direct to Voicemail

Yes, that's right. Don't let your phone ring at all, but instead program calls to go directly to voicemail. Before you write the idea off as crazy, consider this. In his 1992 book, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, Dr. Richard Swenson wrote that the average middle manager is interrupted 73 times a day. That was back in 1992, so today it's likely even more often! Assuming a workday of 10 hours, that translates to an interruption every 8 minutes. If you shorten the workday to 8 hours, the frequency increases to once every 6.5 minutes.

Bottom line: the ringing of the phone is an interruption. Even if you don't answer your phone, you will still look up to see if you recognize the number on the call display, taking your focus away from the task at hand. And, once you are interrupted, research shows that it takes 20 minutes to get back to the level of concentration that you were at prior to the disruption.

If you happen to be in a job where it's impossible to send your phone directly to voicemail, consider whether you can at least do it periodically. Or, perhaps you can come to an agreement with a colleague in a similar situation: he'll let you forward your phone to him for two hours every day if you'll return the favour. Be creative; assuming the research is correct, there's no way you'll get anything accomplished if you don't somehow carve out uninterrupted time for yourself in your workday.

Set Times

If you check your voicemail every time the light is flashing, you're not making the most efficient use of your time. Instead, you'll be much more effective if you determine in advance specific times that you will check your voicemail. For example, you may choose to check first thing in the morning, after lunch, and just before leaving at the end of the day. There's no best frequency, it depends on you and your role in your organization.

I've seen many customer service agents who successfully use an "every two business hours" approach. Interestingly enough, they get no complaints from customers, primarily because of this next idea.

Outgoing Messages

Make sure your outgoing message gives plenty of information and provides some specific details. If you include some or all of the following in your message, you will not only be viewed positively by those calling you, but you'll also set them up to be more efficient with *your* time.

- Say when you're in the office and when you're out of the office;
- Say when they can expect to hear back from you;
- Ask callers to leave specific information, rather than just a generic "Hi, this is so-and-so, call me."

As an example, here's what my voicemail message says: "Hi, this is Merge for the week of March 6th. I'm in my office on Monday, Thursday, and Friday. On Tuesday and Wednesday, I'll be speaking at a client event in St. Catharine's, Ontario. If you're getting this message, I'm sorry I've missed your call. Please leave me your name, your number, and tell me how I can help you. I check messages frequently, even when I'm travelling, so I'll return your message as soon as I can."

My clients not only leave me specific information, but will often tell me whether or not the matter is urgent, and whether I need to return their calls right away, or when I get back to the office. Most people want to be helpful, and when you make your answering message meaningful, they can.

Returning Calls

Just like checking your voicemail at predetermined times, it makes sense to do the same when you return your messages. Rather than returning calls all day long, consider "batching" them and making the phone calls in blocks of time you've already identified for this task. This allows you to be more effective overall by leaving other time during your day to focus on the things that require continuous concentration. For example, I've worked with executives who set aside 45-60 minutes each morning and afternoon just to make phone calls and respond to messages.

Leaving Messages

You've no doubt received messages in the past that are opposite ends of the continuum — the "non-message" or the message that rambles. In the first, the person says: "This is so-and-so, call me." In the second, the caller goes on and on, with no apparent point or structure. Don't be guilty of leaving either type. Leave messages that provide specifics as to why you are calling. Ideally, the person on the other end should have enough information to be able to obtain an answer or resolution to your reason for calling. If your message has several points, consider saying: "I have three reasons I am calling. One... Two... And three..." Remember, when you leave messages, you are setting an example for how you would like others to work with you. Send the right message!

Wrap It Up

Sometimes, it is harder to end a phone call than it is to connect with the person in the first place. Once you've conducted your business, use a verbal gesture to sign off. Here are some examples:

- I'll let you get back to what you were doing.
- I've probably tied up your line long enough.
- I know you're busy so I'll let you go.

- Before I let you go, let me just summarize what I'll be doing.

If you've ever felt like the phone was your enemy, don't despair. Put these six management strategies into action, and harness the power of Bell's simple creation. Let me know how you do.

[TOP]

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