

Using Voice Mail

Voice-mail systems are used by many school districts to help maintain effective communications with people in their communities. There are many times when an office is unattended or when someone is involved in an activity that cannot be interrupted. A voice-mail system allows a caller to leave a message and to thus avoid calling over and over again only to reach no one. However, a voice-mail system that offers endless choices leading to more choices with no opportunity to leave a message and no chance to talk to a “real, live” person may do more harm than good toward improving communication with your constituents.

Here are some tips for setting up a voice-mail system that is user-friendly and for leaving voice mail that conveys your message.

Setting up your system

- ▣ Explain to district employees that voice mail is a tool to make their jobs easier. Voice mail answers their phones when they are away from their desks. Emphasize that voice mail is intended primarily to provide coverage when real people are not available. Whenever possible, staff should answer the phone rather than relying on voice mail to accept calls.
- ▣ Direct staff responsible for setting up your voice-mail system to keep menus for incoming calls short, no more than four items. Also, ask them to resist the temptation to take a caller from one menu to another menu to another menu, and so on. Transferring a caller from one menu to another can narrow down who should receive the call, but it can also be extremely frustrating for the caller who just wants to talk to someone.
- ▣ The personal greetings a caller hears as he or she navigates through your voice-mail system are your opportunity to tell your constituents important information. This is your chance to make a good impression.
 - ◆ Ask all employees to update regularly, daily if warranted, the greetings for their voice mailboxes.
 - ◆ Keep personal greetings short and professional and follow these general guidelines:
 - No music or jokes.
 - Record greetings from a script to avoid “um” and “uh.”
 - Speak slowly and clearly.
 - Include your first and last names.
 - Affiliate your self with your school or department.
 - Avoid using the standard system greeting that can come across to a caller as cold and impersonal.

(Over)

Avoid chewing gum, food or slurping beverages while recording a greeting.

- ◆ Let callers know how they can reach an operator if they choose not to leave a message.
 - ◆ Don't refer callers to other telephone extensions. This can be frustrating to a caller who may then get voice mail over and over again.
 - ◆ Let callers know that although you are unable to speak with them, their call is important to you.
- ▶▶▶▶ If you are going to be out of the office, make it clear to callers when you will be back to listen to messages. Let callers know whom they may speak to in your absence.
 - ▶▶▶▶ Check your messages regularly throughout the work day and reply promptly.
 - ▶▶▶▶ Use discretion when listening to voice-mail messages over speaker phones, and use caution when leaving a message. Some information is best conveyed only in a live conversation.

When leaving a message

- ▶▶▶▶ Plan your message. Jot down the points you want to make, and limit those points to one or two per message.
- ▶▶▶▶ State your name and phone number first and then get right to the point of your call. A stream of consciousness approach doesn't work.
- ▶▶▶▶ Be brief. Some voice-mail systems have a limit on how much can be recorded. You don't want the main point of your message to be deleted.
- ▶▶▶▶ Speak slowly. The listener needs time to process information and write it down.
- ▶▶▶▶ Enunciate clearly. The telephone can distort high frequency sounds. Pronounce word endings and do not swallow syllables. This is especially important when giving your name.
- ▶▶▶▶ Put vitality in your voice. A monotone voice lacks enthusiasm. Try to stand up or smile as you leave your message. People can hear a smile over the phone.
- ▶▶▶▶ Modulate your volume. A loud voice irritates the listener. A soft voice won't always be heard, and the listener may miss vital information. Do not cradle the phone in your neck or use a speaker phone.
- ▶▶▶▶ Modulate your tone. Avoid sarcasm and irritation if you want your call returned. Keep an even temper and state your request.
- ▶▶▶▶ Avoid telephone tag. Give the listener options. Tell him or her when you can best be reached to prevent frustration.
- ▶▶▶▶ End with your phone number. Although you give your phone number at the first of your message, repeat it at the end of your message. This will give the listener time to write it down.