

# The Ideal Voice Mail Message

Article by Roxanne Hawn



## Strategies for connecting and moving the conversation forward

The invention of the smart phone changed the use and perception of telephone calls. Not only did mobile phones make home phones unnecessary for many, but the ability to send and receive text messages or emails on a smart phone made calls themselves feel unnecessary. Even in many workplaces, answering the phone is now either impossible due to nonstop time demands or discouraged by company cultures that prioritize digital communication. Whereas calls once stood out as important and sometimes fun, more people find them time-consuming and frustrating.

Along the way, voice mail usage also suffered significant drops. People not only stopped leaving voice mail messages, they stopped listening to voice mail messages received.

In 2012 Vonage, a voice over Internet Protocol (IP) carrier, tracked an 8 percent drop in voice mails left for users. Even worse, Vonage saw a 14 percent drop in people even bothering to listen to voice mail messages others left for them. The company has not released updated stats, but I'd assume the decline continues five years later.

Caller ID also played a role in the decline of calls answered by making it easier to know which calls to reject.

Caller ID and missed call alerts now serve as their own form of call messaging. People can see who called. They assume they need to contact you. It's much faster to scroll through a list of incoming callers than to listen to recorded messages. Some people even use audio-to-text transcription options in their cars or from their mobile phones that turn voice messages into notes.

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## "Does that mean the number of incoming calls and voice mails are also in massive decline in the world of veterinary medicine in favor of electronic communication? Probably not."

Millennials seem the most vocal about an aversion to phone calls and may consider voice mail something only their grandparents use. People of all ages, however, are trending away from voice mail. Ask your friends and colleagues about their voice mail usage. Their answers might surprise you (or make you feel old).

Does that mean the number of incoming calls and voice mails are also in massive decline in the world of veterinary medicine in favor of electronic communication? Probably not.

"To answer your question, yes, I do see practices that accept texting, email and even chat messages through their websites from clients," says Brenda Tassava, CVPM, CVJ, a veterinary business consultant.

"Is it displacing phone calls? Not to any significant degree. I was just in a practice yesterday that has 30 incoming phone lines and cannot keep up with the call volume with four receptionists on at all times."

### Polished, professional voice mail messages

In other words, voice mail isn't dead yet for veterinarians. Let's consider strategies to make your voice mail messages effective. Always strive to move the conversation forward, even if that's simply to let clients know:

- The best times to reach you
- When you'll try to call again
- How to connect with you in other ways (email or text message)

It can help to rough out a script to start each message that includes your name and the name of the practice, so that it's clear right away who called. If you need a reply urgently, say that right away, too, since the person may not listen to the whole message.

Jodi R.R. Smith from Mannersmith Etiquette Consulting and author of *From Clueless to Class Act: Manners for the Modern Woman* and *From Clueless to Class Act: Manners for the Modern Man* agrees that veterinary medicine is a profession where phone calls remain important and necessary.

If you need to leave a voice mail message for a client, Smith offers these ideas on how to make the most of your message.

"First, I am a big fan of the belt and suspender method," she says. "So, the office would call; if the person is not there, the voice mail message is brief *and* is followed immediately with an email with all of the details."

For example, a voice mail message appointment reminder call might say the following: "Ms. Smith, Fluffy's next veterinary appointment at [name of practice] is on Monday the 12th at 1:00. Please respond to the email we are sending you now to confirm the appointment."

Then, the email would say: "Ms. Smith, Fluffy's next appointment is on Monday the 12th at 1:00. Please click to reply/confirm this appointment at [name of practice]. If we do not hear from you in the next five business days, this slot may be given away. Thank you."

### More scenarios and scripts

Smith suggests the following sample messages for other typical voice mail messages a veterinarian or veterinary practice team member might need to leave.

#### If you're calling to see how a pet is doing after a recent medical encounter/treatment:

- **Voice mail** – "Ms. Smith, this is Dr. Vet just checking in on Fluffy. If you have any questions, please contact our office at 212.555.1234."

- **Email** – “Ms. Smith, this is Dr. Vet just checking in on Fluffy. If you have any questions, please contact our office at 212.555.1234.”

**If you're calling with a pet's medical results or treatment decisions:**

If it is bad news, do *not* leave the bad news in a voice mail.

- **Good news voice mail** – “Ms. Smith, this is Dr. Vet, and you will be glad to hear all of Fluffy's testing came back fine. She is good to go until her next appointment.”
- **Bad news voice mail** – “Ms. Smith, this is Dr. Vet, and we have the results of Fluffy's tests. Please call our office at 212.555.1234 so that we can discuss these results.”

**Tips for connecting with clients**

To increase the chances veterinary clients will take your calls or listen to any voice mail messages you do leave, consider these strategies:

1. Make sure you know how your phone number comes up on a typical Caller ID. Something like FRVH might make sense to you, but clients may not read it as the name of your practice.
2. Ask clients to program the practice's name and phone number (or whatever number you typically call from) into their mobile phones, so that your name pops up when you're calling. People are much more likely to take calls if they know who is calling.
3. Ask clients if they use voice mail or not. Many don't activate this function at all. This simple question may save your team time and frustration.
4. If clients do not use voice mail, explain the other communication options your practice uses (text, email, online chat) and ask which one the client prefers. Make a note of this preference in the pet's chart and client account file.
5. If it's necessary for you to have phone call access to clients for specific days or procedures, then be sure to ask what the best number is for that given day since the home or work numbers you have on file may be outdated.

Keep in mind that regulations for use of email and text messaging may require clients to opt-in—meaning they give permission for you to contact them in this way. So, you'll need to be clear if you plan only to use email or text messages for one-on-one communication during active casework or if you may also use it for other reasons as well, including reminders or promotions for your products or services.

If you end up in a prolonged game of phone tag despite your best voice mail efforts, it may be best to schedule a face-to-face appointment or a planned phone conversation at a specific time for cases that require a real discussion about test results or treatment options.



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## Related Reading

**Time to Hang up on Voice Mail,  
Harvard Business Review**

<https://hbr.org/2013/09/time-to-hang-up-on-voice-mail>

**At the Tone, Leave a What?  
The New York Times**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/fashion/millennials-shy-away-from-voice-mail.html>