

# Escaping Voice Mail and E-Mail Purgatory

By [Craig James](#) on Dec 05, 2008 | [Creating Demand](#)



If there is a sales person alive who hasn't found himself or herself leaving a seemingly endless stream of unreturned voice mails and unanswered e-mails, I'd like to meet him or her.

***Even the most seasoned sales professionals are subject to this 21st Century version of the dreaded gatekeeper.*** With the exception of cold calling, few aspects of sales are more distasteful than finding yourself chasing someone with whom you'd been actively engaged for days, weeks - even months. And have no idea why you're having to do so. In today's issue, we're going to learn some ways to both effectively deal with these situations, and to reduce how often we find ourselves in them in the first place.

***One thing we salespeople strive for is control.*** We're in sales because we can control our income. We can, to a greater degree than other staff, control our schedules (unless we're inside sales, we're not tied to a desk). And we can control the work load we have (want more money? Go get more work - more prospects).

The one thing that truly great sales people want to control, though, is the sales process itself. ***And voice mail and e-mail - which were once heralded for their ability to positively impact productivity - have had the opposite effect on us salespeople: they've wrested control from us.*** It is now the prospects who control the flow of communication. It is they who decide whether to reply to us, or to ignore us.

Is there a way to fight back? Of course there is. Otherwise, I wouldn't have much of a tip to write today!

What are some ways we can minimize and retake control of a sale? ***The best way I've found to deal with the loss of control that comes with leaving voice mail messages is to simply not leave them.*** Dialing \*67 before the number (if it's a direct dial, and not a switch board) so as to mask your phone number, calling before or after normal business hours, calling back multiple times until you reach the person - these are all ways you can avoid leaving messages and being forced to play the waiting game.

What if the voice mail message directs you to "dial extension 102 to speak with my assistant, Mary Jane?" Well, speaking with an assistant is slightly better than leaving a

voice mail, because you get to speak with a human being. Problem is, we all know that this traditional "human gatekeeper" is only a small step up from the technological one. Or is it? Most of us have been taught that gatekeepers exist for one reason - to prevent sales people from getting through to their bosses. In fact, they exist for another reason as well - to decide whom to let through to their bosses. In that sense they function much as traffic cops do - deciding whom to let pass, and whom to stop.

***They keys to being one of the few to be let through are:***

- 1. Not treating them condescendingly; rather, treating them with respect*
- 2. Not claiming that you have a solution to what you think the boss's problems are - it's presumptuous, and it's what every other sales person does. So she'll instantly lump you in with them. On the contrary, suggest that - based on your knowledge of the company, the industry, and the role the gatekeeper's boss plays in the company - you believe it would be worth her boss's while to consider what you have to discuss with him. That shows humility - an refreshingly attractive quality missing from most sales people.*
- 3. Asking the gatekeeper what she thinks. This empowers her (gatekeepers like that), and forces her to use that power to make a decision. The easy way out is to say "no". But with the deferential approach you've taken, she's more likely not to take the easy way out, and pass your request along.*

Because gatekeepers are their boss's trusted right hands, they'll be infinitely more effective at convincing their bosses to return your calls than even your best, most creative voice mail will ever be.

What if the voice mail message does not direct you to an assistant? In that case, try hitting "0" and ask whoever you end up with what the person you're trying to reach is busy doing, and - based on the response - ask for guidance on when and how to best connect with him or her. Then put it in your calendar to call at the exact time recommended, or craft a compelling e-mail, whichever was suggested.

Sometimes you'll be asked by an operator what department you want. Here's where you may want to use a bit of subterfuge. Tell her, "Accounting" - that's a gatekeeper's keyword for "they're calling to pay us". And they've been directed never to screen those calls out. When someone in Accounting picks up, feign ignorance, apologize for reaching what is clearly the wrong department, and ask if you could be connected to Mr. Big (the person you're trying to reach). If that call goes directly to him (and not through his admin), it will look like the internal call it is, and he's more likely to pick up the phone. Voilà, you're in!

***Actually leaving a voice mail message should only be used as a last resort.***

Nevertheless, if all these tactics fail and you have to leave a voice mail, you might as well leave the best one you can. Demonstrate that you understand something about their company, their industry, and one or two challenges a person in his or her role is likely

experiencing. Suggest that you could be a resource he could use to deal with these and other challenges he may be facing. Then, instead of asking to be called back, say that you'll call back again at some specific time. This leaves you - not the prospect - in control, and does away with the helpless feeling of waiting we all loathe (if your message is compelling enough, and you struck a cord, trust me, he'll find a way to reach you).

*A final word on voice mail:, if you're been leaving voice mails and not getting return calls, try leaving this message, suggested by a Selling Power reader: "If you have no interest in the subject about which I've been calling, please have your admin call me back and tell me so. Otherwise, because I have reason to believe you would be interested, I'll have to assume you're not getting my messages, so I'll have to continue calling until I'm told you're not. If you are interested, I look forward to speaking with you."*

And lastly, what about unanswered e-mail from prospects with whom you're already engaged (i.e., not cold prospecting)? It's quite likely that they've:

(a) become overwhelmed with their current list of tasks

(b) had a new task tossed in their lap by their boss or

(c) are leaning towards, or have selected, a competitor. In each of these cases, how does the prospect react when he sees your third or fourth "Hey, what's up?" e-mail? You know. And the response? You know that, too. Not wanting to break the bad news to someone who's worked as diligently as you have, he ignores it. And you're left wondering what's going on. Your solution: Pick up the phone and use a take-away. This enables a dialogue (instead of a monologue, which is what e-mail is), and is your best bet at getting a return call.

### ***Action item***

Next time you're tempted by habit to leave a voice mail, catch yourself and don't. Pick one of the tactics presented here, and try it out a few times. If it works, great! If not, try another. What you'll find is that a mix of tactics will be required with different people. And instead of sending that "what's up e-mail", pick up the phone and find out what's going on.

But if you get voice mail - well, you now know what not to do!

Sales Solutions Founder and President **Craig James** has over 12 years' experience in sales and sales management, primarily in technology and software. He has sold products and services ranging from \$1,000 to \$250,000. He knows salespeople – what motivates them, what holds them back, how they operate - and how to get them to improve themselves, and their value to their employers.