By Calvin Sun

In part one and part two of a previous article, I discussed e-mail blunders. Frankly, I was shocked at the heavy positive response to that article. I guess everyone is as annoyed as I am at the practices I described there. To all of you who voted on, commented on, or read that article, thanks. It's just as easy and just as damaging to blunder with the telephone. Here are the biggest mistakes I see.

1   Answering a cell phone during meeting

A special place in h--l awaits those who do so. OK, maybe that was too harsh. Let's just say I really despise people who do this. If you're in a meeting, focus your attention on the meeting. That ringing phone is going to distract everyone around you, so set it to vibrate or to stay silent, or simply switch it off. And don't get upset with the people who called you during that meeting. They don't know where you are, and it's not their fault you forgot to adjust your phone.

What about legitimate interruptions? Suppose, for example, your wife is due to deliver your child. Here are some ideas:

- Leave as quietly as possible and wait until you're out of the room before answering.
- If your phone is capable of doing so, forward calls to another person, such as your assistant or the assistant or co-worker of the meeting host.
- Give your cell phone to that person before you enter the meeting and ask them to take any calls (remembering to retrieve it afterward).
- Ignore the call, letting it go into voicemail, and then check it after the meeting or during a break.

2   "I can't talk now, I'm in a meeting"

Well, if everyone followed the suggestion above, we would never have people tell us, "Sorry I can't talk right now, I'm in a meeting," would we? Yes, I agree, making this statement *is* better than carrying on a separate cell phone conversation during a meeting. Nonetheless, I'm confused: If the person who says this to me is truly in a meeting, why [insert optional expletive here] is he or she even answering the call in the first place?

Here's one possibility: One or more attendees in the meeting can't be there physically but rather must call in and be on a speakerphone. In that case, if the "wrong" person calls, yes, the "I'm in a meeting" statement *would* be appropriate. However, be sure to explain why—that you were expecting someone else to call—and be sure to apologize to the caller for being the "wrong person."

3   Breaking telephone appointments

In the past two weeks, I had appointments to call two people at particular dates and times. One of those people, about 30 minutes beforehand, called and left a voicemail. He apologized and said that he had been called into a last-minute meeting and would be unavailable to speak at our earlier agreed-upon time. He suggested alternate days. I appreciated that gesture, and I let him know.

When I called the second person, at the agreed-upon time and date, I received no answer. Thinking he was late, I waited about five minutes, then called a second time. Again, no answer. I called once or twice after that and then forgot about the matter. The next day, when I did reach this person, he sounded a little annoyed (thus breaking rule 1 above). "Calvin," he said, "I was called into a last-minute meeting, so I couldn't take your call. It was a little embarrassing to hear my phone when you were calling." I did apologize, telling him that had I known about the meeting, I wouldn't have called, and that the ringing of his cell phone probably disrupted the meeting. The key issues, of course, were his failure to tell me (or to have someone tell me) about that meeting and his apparent failure to silence his phone.

Telephone appointments are just as important as face-to-face ones. If you can't keep the appointment, let the other person know as soon as possible.

4   Outdated voicemail greetings

If you're going to be away from the office, say so in your greeting, especially if you don't plan to check voicemail. Unless they know otherwise, people who leave messages will have a false expectation. Of course, many times, I call people and they never answer anyway. In that case, maybe it doesn't make any difference whether they say they're away or not.

Be sure to change your greeting back when you return. Nothing is more embarrassing than having a greeting that's three weeks old.

5   Unhelpful voicemail referrals

I once called a person and heard from her greeting that she was out on maternity leave. Her greeting directed callers to contact either of two co-workers but never gave their telephone numbers or extensions. What good is such a greeting, except for those who already know the number? Another greeting told me to hang up and dial the number (which the greeting did announce) of a subordinate. This greeting is better but still involves extra work for the caller.

Two superior options are to:

- Forward calls to the covering person.
- Set your zero out or covering extension to be that of the person.

In either case, get permission first, particularly if it's your boss.

6   The "surrogate greeting"

I hear these greetings more than I care to. Generally, it happens when I call a (usually male) executive. After the three rings, I hear a (usually female) voice announce the greeting.

This type of greeting sends the wrong message: namely, that you can't be bothered to set your own greeting. Even worse, it might signal that you're technologically illiterate. Matthew 25: 23 says that to be entrusted with large responsibilities, we first must be faithful with small ones. Imagine, therefore, the message the CIO sends with a surrogate greeting: "Trust me with your million-dollar ERP implementation, but just be aware that I don't know how to set my own voicemail greeting."

7   Lack of zero out

Need I say anything more? You've probably all run into that annoying Audix message that you get when you try to zero out: "No operator defined." Take the time to define your covering or zero out extension. Your callers will appreciate it.

8   Confusing "nametag" with "greeting"

Your nametag is the short recording in which you record your name—nothing more, nothing less. The system uses it when you send voicemail internally, so recipients know who the sender is. The system also generally appends it to a default system greeting for you. The nametag is not your greeting, so don't confuse the two. Who wants to hear this kind of greeting:

Your call is being answered by Audix. Hi, this is Joe Brown, I'm away from my desk. Please leave your name and number and I'll call you back. Thanks and have a nice day is not available. To leave a message, wait for the tone. Record at the tone. [beep]

The person essentially has recorded a double greeting. Don't make this same mistake.

9   **Answering with "hello"**

When you answer this way, it sounds unprofessional. In addition, it wastes time, because the caller then has to ask if it's really you. Instead, answer with your name.

10   **Speakerphone abuse**

Speakerphones provide convenience. Unfortunately, convenience for you could come across as arrogance to the other person. You risk giving the impression that the other person is too unimportant for you to use the handset. If you're on hold, or navigating a menu system, or doing anything else not requiring a live person, a speakerphone is okay, as long as you keep the volume down. However, once the live person answers, disable the speakerphone and pick up the handset.

If you must use a speakerphone with the other person, get permission first and identify all the people at your end. It's best to use a conference room and to shut the door. Keep in mind that when you use a speakerphone at your cubicle, you risk disclosing your personal life to your co-workers.

Additional blunders?

These are my top ten irritants. I know there are more, and I welcome your comments here or via e-mail at csun@calvinsun.com.

Calvin Sun works with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications, and leadership. In addition to writing this column, he contributes to TechRepublic's Help Desk Blog. You can contact him at *csun@calvinsun.com*.

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