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Clandestine calling: New service sends callers to voice mail on the sly

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Ever needed to call someone, but didn't really feel like talking?

Maybe it was a boyfriend or girlfriend you wanted to break up with, or a boss you needed to call in sick to. Perhaps you needed to confirm a meeting, but didn't want to listen to a colleague's 30-minute monologue.

Voice mail sure is a handy tool. That is, when the call recipient doesn't pick up the phone.

Touted as a way to avoid awkward and unnecessary conversations, a new service called Slydial allows callers to reach a mobile phone's voice mail directly, without ever worrying whether or not the person receiving the voice message will pick up the phone.

Here's how it works: Callers dial 267-SLY-DIAL, listen to the voice prompts, which include an advertisement, and punch in the 10-digit mobile number that they wish to dial "slyly." The call goes straight to voice mail sometimes, other times after a brief half-ring.

"I think it's really touched a nerve in the marketplace," said Gavin Macomber, co-founder and executive vice president of marketing and business development for MobileSphere, the company that created Slydial. "There's so many times when you want to call somebody and you just want to get some pertinent information to them."

Slydial isn't exactly a new concept. Several mobile service providers offer a similar feature to their in-network customers. The difference with Slydial is that calls can be made to mobile phones with all major service providers, given that the calls are made within the United States and the call recipient has caller ID.

MobileSphere says that four weeks after the launch, more than 250,000 people nationwide had used Slydial to leave a voice message for someone. Slydial also offers a paid-for subscription service that allows users to bypass ads, but the company will not release the number of people who have subscribed.

Is Slydial an edgy new tool that's catching a lot of media buzz? Sure. Whether it'll become a common way to communicate is a matter of debate.

"I think that with any situation you wanted to avoid or put off until you're ready, it's not a bad feature," said Laura DeCarlo, executive director of Career Directors International, an association of professional resume writers and career coaches. DeCarlo also is the owner of A Competitive Edge Career Service in Melbourne. "But beyond that, can I see a beneficial application, when the whole idea is to directly reach someone to make something happen? No."

It might not seem like a technological phenomenon to everyone, but Slydial makes one wonder what's appropriate and what's not when it comes to voice mail.

Many don't have a clue, said Susan Berkley, the "voice of AT&T," owner of The Great Voice Company and author of "Speak to Influence: How to Unlock the Hidden Power of Your Voice." Berkley recalls a study done years ago that categorized three bad voice mail leavers.

"There are ramblers, riddlers and racers," Berkley said. "The ramblers go on and on and on and they never get to the point. . . . The riddlers leave a message and they say, 'Oh, hi, it's Susan, I'm at the place, bye.' And the racers, of course, they talk so quickly that you can't really understand what they're saying."

Key components

Don't want to be known as one of the three Rs? Brush up on your voice mail etiquette. One step to leaving a good voice message is, well, leaving an actual message.

"The most common voice message I get on my business line is someone leaving their phone number then hanging up," DeCarlo said. "They don't say why they called or who they are. . . . I'm not talking about a few, I'm talking about hundreds a year."

To leave an effective message that has a better chance of getting returned, leave your name and number at the beginning and end of the message and a good reason for the call, Berkley said.

Leaving an e-mail address as an alternate way to return the call is OK, but there are guidelines.

"Well gee, is that Cathy with a C or Kathy with a K?" DeCarlo asked. "If you're going to leave your e-mail address, make sure you spell it out."

While details are important, remember to keep it brief.

"Voice mail is not a license to tell your life story, it's a convenience device," Berkley said.

Also, never ever mark a message as "urgent" unless it truly is.

"It's just like sending an e-mail with 'urgent' in the subject line and you open it up and it's like, 'We're having a sale on Viagra this week!' " Berkley said.

Voice techniques

It's not only the content that's crucial for a good voice mail, it's also how the content is delivered. Here are tips from Berkley: Don't cradle the phone between your ear and your shoulder, sit up straight or stand, and speak with energy and a smile.

"To be really great on the phone, you have to be an enhanced version of yourself, which is you with energy, enthusiasm and clarity," Berkley said. "Nobody's going to return a call from a depressed-sounding person."

And don't try to sound sick if you're calling in to work sick via voice message. Employers don't buy it.

"Just call in sick, for Pete's sake," Berkley said. "We don't need the sound effects. We know you're faking."

Outgoing messages

While it can be irritating to receive a bad voice message, it can be even more irritating to leave a message for someone with a horrible outgoing message.

"Perhaps the most annoying thing a person can do is put their kids on their voice mail," Berkley said. "And that is seconded only by having music on your voice mail message."

And it might sound cute, but it's probably not a good idea to do silly impersonations on outgoing messages either.

"Your voice is your personality," Berkley said. "You don't have to do anything extra. Don't try to sound like James Earl Jones. Just be yourself."

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