

Sail Past the Gatekeeper

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Wouldn't it be great if when we called a business person, we would actually get him/her on the other end of the line? The reality is that nine times out of ten, we end up talking to the person's voice mail or the administrative assistant. Decision-makers are busy and want their phone systems and administrative people to run interference for them. Getting past these "gatekeepers" can be tough. Whether talking to voice mail or to the assistant, your challenge is to make yourself important enough to gain access or receive consideration. The following tips should help you to open the gates:

1. First and foremost, make the gatekeepers your ally. Show them respect. Be overtly friendly and sincere. Use humor and warmth as a way to distinguish your self from the many other callers hoping to gain entrée to the decision-maker.
2. Consider the gatekeepers as essential to your knowledge base, not as your enemy. They can help you learn more about key executives, divisions or the company's initiatives. Do everything you can to engage them in conversation so that you can ultimately ask them some questions.
3. Never try to pretend you are an old friend or family member of the decision-maker. Deceptive practices rarely work.
4. If the administrative assistant says the executive is tied up and offers you voice mail, always ask when you might get ten minutes of the executive's time. Typically, this statement will prompt a conversation about why you are calling. If you have done your homework on the company and have identified some of their problems, you should be able to gain consideration with a strong value proposition. You should also be able to ask the person additional questions about your perceptions. The more you know, the more you can fine-tune your sales approach, but be cautious of making people feel like you are interrogating them.
5. If the administrative assistant still refers you to voice mail, be polite and thank the person.
6. If this is a repeat call to the executive and the assistant again suggests voice mail, tell the person that you are interested in sending some information to solve the executive's problems, but you want to make it relevant. Then, ask a few more questions about the organization. You might also ask if it is possible to have the executive's e-mail address. If the assistant says to send information to his/ her attention, pay close attention to how the company's e-mail system is structured. You may be able to decipher the executive's address from the information the assistant has given you.
7. If you are returning a call, be sure to state it. The gatekeeper will give your message priority.
8. If the gatekeeper does give you valuable information, consider sending the person a small token of your gratitude. If you do so, the next time you call, you may get even more consideration.
9. If you get the executive's e-mail address and send the person information, ask for verification that it has been received. Place a call to the person as soon as you see the message has been received.
10. Decision-makers are often at their desks by 7:30 a.m. and rarely leave before 6:30 p.m. so that is a good time for the executive to answer his/her own phone. The lunch hour is another possibility.
11. Continually, fine-tune your elevator pitch and practice it out loud so that when you do leave a voice mail, it is listener-focused. Also, make sure your message is very concise, under 25 seconds. People rarely listen all the way to the end of a long message. Remember

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to say your name, company name and phone number both at the beginning and end of the message. Pause for a second or two between each statement so that your enunciation is clear. Make it easy for the person to call you back. Be sure you come across as a strong communicator with a positive, upbeat voice.

12. Listen very carefully to the voice on the other end of the line before you leave your voice message. Try to get a sense of the person's communication style and emulate it.
13. Strive to make a positive impression with whomever you are talking to, even if it is a machine.

Gatekeepers can either be your friend or your enemy. If they see you as just another annoying salesperson, you will stand little chance of getting the decision maker to take your call. If they like you and see you as a nice person, they will give you consideration. Everything depends on your approach.

Question: *We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click [here](#) – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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