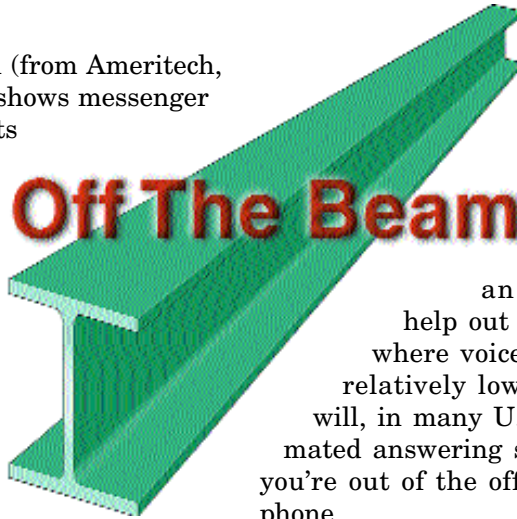


A recent television commercial (from Ameritech, one of the Baby Bells, I believe), shows messenger service that has fallen victim to its own success: It just lost its biggest account because its telephone lines were always busy. While the telephone company's answer for a small business is a second phone line, mine is even simpler. Get voice mail.

The advantages of voice mail were recently hammered home to me by my work on this issue's listing of Steel Detailers (pages 49-60). When we mailed the questionnaire out, we inadvertently left off a line for respondents to report their city and state. Fortunately, most of the respondents were either members of the National Institute of Steel Detailing or of AISC, so we had their addresses. But for those whose addresses were missing, I painstakingly called each one.

In most cases, I readily reached a person who quickly answered my simple question. In the majority of the other cases, I reached an answering machine and I could leave a brief and succinct message requesting the required information. But in a few cases, either the phone just rang and rang—or I reached a busy signal—necessitating callback, after callback, after callback (if I was a potential customer, would I have bothered calling back, or would I have phoned a competitor?).

Both endless ringing and busy signals are equally bad for any business—large or small, detailer or



engineer. I'm not sure how anxious I would be to entrust the detailing of my project to a company that hasn't even invested in an answering machine. Unfortunately, not even an answering machine would help out with the busy signals. That's where voice mail comes in handy. For a relatively low fee, the telephone company will, in many U.S. locations, provide an automated answering service that works both when you're out of the office AND when you're on the phone.

As long-time readers of this magazine may remember, in the past I've ranted about bad voice mail systems. I haven't given up that crusade; nor am I being inconsistent by advising small businesses to invest in voice mail. For the most part, I actually like voice mail. My problem with it is when it's abused. Too often companies record long and convoluted messages. Likewise, too many people ignore their voice mail and messages vanish into some etherspace of telephony. I also prefer systems that give you a simple option (such as dialing zero) to reach I live person—though I realize this is impractical in a small company.

At any rate, feel free to call my voice mail system—and I'll be sure to call yours back.

Scott Melnick

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