

# Popular Threads on Solosez

## Time Thieves

/rant on

Sheesh! What is it that people don't understand about, "I don't have time to talk with you right now?" We're talking family, friends, etc. "Okay, but it will only take a minute. <Conversation continues...>"

Someone give me some magic words!

/rant off

Mike Phillips, Cary, North Carolinda

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See <http://www.abanet.org/genpractice/solo/spring2000/spring2000bandits.html>

On the other hand, I've often found "The dog's barfing" or "The firetruck just arrived" also work well. So too does pulling out the telephone jack.

jennifer rose

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"This conversation has become tiresome", and hang up. Of course my social skills have been called into question.

Brian Schowalter, Durango, Colorado

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The old police whistle at full blast seems to work well.

Hugh Tedder

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"I'm sorry, but my office is on fire at the moment. When would be a good time for me to call you back?"

"Hello, this is Mike's answering service. He can't speak with you now, but if you leave a message, he'll get back to you."

Or, on a more serious note, "I've got a couple of emergent matters I'm dealing with at the moment, so this isn't a good time -- how about we make an appointment to speak later today or this week, when it's better for both of us?" If they continue with the conversation, follow the directions on the shampoo bottle: rinse and repeat...eventually even a relative probably will get it.



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And ultimately, perhaps the white lie routine, if truly pressed by the clueless and persistent friend or relative:

"I'm sorry, I'm about to get onto a conference call with several people, and I need to finish preparing in the next 5 minutes. I'll have to call you back (or can you call me back tomorrow?)."

One of the things I do is try to train them in advance, so to speak. I make a bit of a point of letting the most likely violators know -- in advance -- such as at family gatherings and the like -- that my days typically are pretty hectic, etc.

David Abeshouse, New York

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Serious answer to "Okay, but it will only take a minute..." Interject "Sorry got to go, talk to you later." Hang up the phone. Anything else is enabling behavior.

If you stay on the phone out of politeness, you let them take advantage. There are ways to quickly get off the phone. Practice them and deploy them when needed.

Being repetitive sometimes works. Repeating yourself over and over. Acting distracted works. Obviously continuing to work on something else has an impact.

Darrell G. Stewart, San Antonio, Texas

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Mikey, I worry about your blood pressure. If it's somebody I want to talk to, I say, "I'm in the middle of a client project right now. Can I call you back at \_\_\_\_ o'clock?" And I really will set it for 3:00 with a beeper. If it's a "Do you have a minute?" sales call, I say, "No, I don't. Please send your information to me and I'll take a look at it Friday. Thanks." And then I hang up.

Actually, if it's a toll-free number, a number I recognize as sales, or an unknown/anon, I don't even answer.

Carolyn J. Stevens, Lolo, Montana

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"Is it an emergency?" When the answer comes back, "no" or more likely, "well. . . no" just jump on it and say, "good, I am really slammed. I'll give you a call as soon as I have time. Talk to you later. Click (as in the sound of the phone being hung up)."

Henry Reckler, Denver, Colorado

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Two additional thoughts.

One, if all else fails, and it's someone you don't want to offend, just hang up in mid sentence and the party at the other end will think the call was inadvertently connected. When they call back, don't answer.

Two, if you really are slammed and don't have a minute, get in the habit of turning off your phone, literally or figuratively, and simply not taking calls.

Henry Reckler, Denver, Colorado

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How about, "Okay, but I will have to bill you for the hour." Then send them a bill. They might get the message that your time is money.

David Tarvin, Omaha, Nebraska

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I dealt with this today. On a tight deadline, dealing with two different client matters, one involving a court filing.

When the phone rang, I let it ring. I'll get to the messages later. When the cell phone rang, I answered it for two known people, telling them that I'd like to speak with them but I'm with a client / in the middle of a rush project right now. They both got it. If not, they'd get "I've gotta go." "I've gotta go." Okay, talk with you soon, goodbye.

I can't worry about possibly hurting someone's feelings when I really don't have time to talk. They'll get over it. Or not.

Okay, gotta go.

Alan Bail, California

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But my wife won't pay, so it is an empty threat.

Mike Phillips, Cary, North Carolina

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Rant on again/

Worse, when it's someone who calls for legal advice and you give them some basics and suggest they come into your office. At that point, they say they don't really need a lawyer (so they don't have to pay) and then call you back for advice on how to handle the judge at their next hearing!

/rant off

Madeleine Butterfield Bass, Providence, Rhode Island



caller wondering if you would ever have time for them. Better to make (or transfer them to an assistant to make) an appointment for a telephone conference.

Patricia Joyce, East Greenwich, Rhode Island

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I think the only thing that works is that you are physically occupied: "my next appointment is walking in," "I have to keep this line clear for a conference with a judge," "sorry, I'm late for court."


John P. Page, Tampa, Florida

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I believe you are talking about a different situation. My response, on which you comment, was about handling situations Mike was talking about that involve family and friends. They are not clients in the normal sense. You don't shift them to assistants to make appointments.

Henry Reckler, Denver, Colorado

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When it comes to our home telephone, for years I have been preaching to my wife that a ringing telephone is an invitation, not a command. I have been partially successful. Caller ID sure has helped. Now she just feels compelled to look and see who is calling.  Henry Reckler, Denver, Colorado

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I MUST hang up now. {click}

Joel Selik

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If its same person who always does it, explain to them the problem in a quiet moment, and tell them you will have to hang up sometimes.

Joel Selik

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AHA! That was always my error . . . .

I would just say "click" and if that didn't work, then I would say "dial toooooooooooooone"

at which they would usually say "what the hell are you doing?"

and then they would hang up. So I guess in the end, my way works too.

Frederick Mischler, Dayton, Ohio

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I think the most important thing to remember is that you won't spend any more time being polite and sounding regretful than sounding harried and abrupt. So

-- if the caller is a friend and a repeat offender, use the next opportunity to regret that you don't have time and ask him/her to call you at home tonight between (after dinner and won't answer) and (I'm watching Dog and won't answer). You train them from calling your office and you train them to your available home hours.

-- if it's a client and you're truly too busy, don't pick up but check voice mail in a couple of minutes to see how urgent the call is.

-- if it's toll free, assume it's a sales call; don't pick it up.

-- if it's anonymous, unknown, or blocked, assume it's a sales call; don't pick it up.

It helps tremendously if callers know you routinely check messages and return calls. Of course, it helps tremendously if they leave a message rather than call and call. "I tried to reach you!" "Really. I checked my voice mail each hour and I didn't have a message from you."

That's my theory of phone management and I'm stinkin . . . don't you love typos . . . sticking to it.

Carolyn J. Stevens, Lolo, Montana


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There are certainly a lot of great responses and getting rid of bad phone callers is actually fairly easy.

The real problem is the potential client caller - the most important rule is that just because he is certifiably insane does not mean he has a bad case off which you can make a small fortune.

I use to tell all potential clients that I did not give advice over the phone and to make an appointment. But I quickly realized that they were far worse time bandits if I actually let them come to my office without screening them first.

The key is how do you quickly and efficiently size up his case and decide whether to tell him to come on down or to call the bar referral list for

another attorney (or call that sob OC who I can't stand ). That is where the true art of solo practice comes into play and it is far more difficult than making silly excuses to get out of the phone call. Furthermore, getting out the phone call temporarily is usually the kiss of death for landing the good case. 9 times out 10 they are calling around and the first one to talk to them will get the case. If you say, call you later, you will never talk to them again. Sometimes when I am truly leaving I get their phone number and call them on my cell phone as I head out the door.

The first thing I do though generally is get their name (they often don't start with that), and then I ask if this is an employment matter (since that's what I do a lot of). Then I find out their employer and I say tell me real quickly what's the issue. I don't let ramblers ramble on. I just interrupt with quick questions: "have you been fired? Do you think it was because of your race or sex?" Often they say no they've just been wrongfully terminated. I then simply start asking them a spiel of other questions related to both wrongful termination such as FMLA and things such as COBRA rights, unpaid wages, overtime violations, etc. The key is to almost do rapid fire questions at them and don't let them ramble, interrupt with questions and drive the conversations where you want it.

Now admittedly not everyone is cooperative and occasionally I have to cut them short. One of my favorites is say, Hold on just a second I need to put you on hold, my phone is ringing off the hook. I do so and never come back to them. They go into voice mail and finish their rant and I delete it.

Sterling L. DeRamus, Birmingham, Alabama

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If your spouse is regularly a time thief, it might help to explain that, the sooner you can get off the phone and finish your work for the day, the sooner you can come home and spend time with him/her. Promise to talk about the issue as soon as you get home (or even call on your cell phone on the way out of the office).

Lisa Solomon, New York

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Mike: Do what my husband says -- "I'm done with you" followed by a click. He did it so often that I have been trained to no longer call him at work unless it is a dire emergency. He does it to his mother and everyone else. It seems to work for him. Yeah, he's a nice guy so people don't fault him for being rude that way.

As for Brian S's comment that he has no social skills -- I am starting to feel the same way about myself. I'm losing my social skills left and right these days. Argh.

Jennifer N. Sawday, Long Beach, California

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Thanks to all for the comments. CJ's post prompts me to revisit a question that has been asked her previously, but one to which I do not remember the answer. Our telephone company provides a service called "Privacy Director" that will not allow the phone to ring if the Caller ID says "Number Blocked" or "No Information". The caller is told, "This number does not allow receipt of telephone calls with a blocked number. At the tone, please state your name, and you will be connected," or something like that. Almost all such calls we receive are sales calls. Many of them are from potential clients worried about black helicopters. I'm considering putting the service on our main line. Has anyone tried it?

Mike Phillips, Cary, North Carolina

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It's kind of passive aggressive, but a friend of mine has been known to dial her land line number on her cell phone and then tell people "oh I've got to go, I've got another call."

Personally, I usually find that just being firm and saying I've got to go works pretty well. But you have to be firm. If it'll just take a minute, and the minute goes by, then reiterate you've got to go even if it means interrupting them. I know that may seem rude, but at the point when you've already said that you have to go, and they have prolonged things on the pretense that it won't take more than another minute, I think it's justified. Just say you're sorry, but you'll have to get back to them when you have more time, and go. I know you're down south, so this may be more culturally difficult to do. But as long as you don't seem angry, I think people understand.

Of course, I'm even happier when I don't have to feel so stressed that losing the time is going to really be an issue. Maybe I'm just dumb and inefficient, but I like having time for friends, family, etc (although not for salespeople and telemarketers, but I don't really have any trouble be very abrupt with them).

Perhaps this is an introvert/extrovert issue too. I suspect that introverts are more drained by this sort of thing, so find it much more annoying.

Jake London

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How about "Sure, I'll be glad to hang on just a sec. At \$(your rate) where do I send the bill?"

And I send bills to family at my regular rate, I don't always collect on them. When my son got a speeding ticket, he got a real quick lesson, because he gets about \$5.50 per hour in retail, part time.

Jeff Molenda

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It's a two-way street. My staff knows that if my wife calls, I answer it. If I'm on the phone with a time burglar, I can always tell them that the "wife-line" has rung, and if they still want to have a living lawyer tomorrow, I'd better take it, NOW! If they don't get it, then I explain to them that my wife is one of those testy trial lawyer types (unlike myself, who is one of those laid back probate guys). That usually does the trick. Also, I tell all clients that I tend to return phone calls after 2pm. That cuts down quite a bit on the serial callers (every fifteen minutes).

David L. Leon, Dallas, Texas

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