

# Popular Threads on Solosez

## Answering the Phone

So, I'm still exploring my options on what kind of phone setup to have once I move into my office (sometime in April). I'm obviously trying to be budget-friendly and after talking with the AT&T rep, it seems setting up my own phone line to ring in my office is actually rather inexpensive. (from \$10.69/month for a single line). My reluctance with doing that setup is essentially that I would have to answer all my own calls. No receptionist.

My reluctance is two-fold. First, I wonder whether answering your own calls gives a negative impression to potential client callers who probably expect a receptionist/secretary to answer the phone. Second, if I'm meeting with a client, I would probably have to turn off the ringer on the phone so that I'm not disturbed, which would mean that the calls would go to voicemail.

So the question is: any of you answer your own calls? Pros/cons? Any comments?

Gabriel Jimenez, Los Angeles, California

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I answer my own calls or they go to voicemail. Have never heard any negative comment about it, but who really knows.

Shell J. Bleiweiss, Chicago, Illinois

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I answer my own calls as well. Be sure you get a phone with caller ID so you can screen out the sales calls. I don't think having calls go to voicemail if you are with clients is a bad thing, as long as you return calls promptly. I don't think there are any cons, for me at least.

Leanna Hamill

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I've answered my own calls for years and years. The only downside, in my experience, is dealing with telemarketers and such. When I am not in the office, I forward it to my mobile phone. I think clients in general appreciate your immediate availability that way. I have yet to run into someone who looked down his or her nose at me for me answering my own phone. Frankly, I probably wouldn't want that person for a client anyway.

YMMV, caveat emptor, and illegitimi non carborundum.



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Mike Koenecke, Richardson, Texas

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Although I have a fairly large staff (9 people), when the telephone rings, if no one else picks it up after a couple of rings, I answer it, as do my two associates. Sometimes callers are surprised, but more often, they are quite pleased to get us right away.

The problem, however, is that when you answer the phone, it interrupts ongoing work or thought processes. Also callers sometimes expect/demand an immediate answer, which makes me feel uncomfortable if I'm caught off guard.

Vicki Levy Eskin, Florida

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Its a matter of personal preference, I think. I have *\*always\** answered my own phone, including when I was a partner at an AmLaw 100 firm (where, at some point, it actually became firm policy that lawyers were to answer their own phones). Downside is that its harder to dodge a call you'd rather not take at the moment. I have *\*never\** had an adverse comment from a client. I have had clients comment that they appreciate that when they call, they can either talk to me or leave a voice mail, rather than have to pass through a secretary or receptionist. With respect to the client meeting issue, I have sat in my office with clients when the phone rang -- I just let it ring and bounce to voice mail. Never a problem. Others may have different views and experiences. Bottom line -- do what makes you most comfortable. I don't think that clients necessarily give a flipone way or the other. Just my 2 cents.

Mark Jakubik, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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I had a receptionist for 20 years. For the last several years I have answered my own calls. Clients are happy, they get me directly. I don't have the kind of clients who are looking to be impressed, and I can't impress like a big firm anyhow. The two necessities are 1) knowing how to use the phone, including voice-mail/caller id/do not disturb, and 2) knowing how to not let people waste your time. Hang up on ads, control conversations, don't get sucked in by tire kickers, make quick decisions on whether to go to the next stage with cold calls, refer out what you can't or don't want to handle. Don't use marketing devices or attempt practice areas that bring in large numbers of non-clients for every paying client.

Rebecca K. Wiess

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I answer my own phone. Before setting up my solo practice, I worked for a number of years at a well-regarded megafirm where all attorneys were expected to answer their own phones. Our direct lines were even printed in the city phone directory and available through directory assistance.

Secretaries were used as back-up, as well as the firm receptionist. In most cases, however, unanswered calls were sent to voice mail.

Perhaps there is some advantage to having a back-up receptionist or answering service, but I don't see the need for it in my practice.

Nancy DuCharme

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I guess I am in the minority here, as I never answer my phone. If I am not working on something at my computer, I am in court, in meetings, in depositions etc. Before I had someone handling my calls, I think I missed A LOT of potential clients. Often clients run down the phonebook ads calling lawyer after lawyer. Usually in my practice area, unless it is a referral from another attorney or a past client, potential clients want to speak with someone ASAP or to be set up for a consultation ASAP. I could never do this when I answered my phone because I was very often unavailable to talk. My assistance emails me calls, and I can retrieve them while on the road on my BlackBerry and return them very quickly.

I think a lot of this depends on your practice area.

Michael D. Day, Meriden, Connecticut

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I tend to agree. In my area of practice I get lots of calls from creditors, etc. seeking information. A secretary can handle that. In any number of cases clients don't need to talk to me and speaking with my secretary is more than sufficient. There is also the issue of speaking with someone NOW.

When I first went out on my own I answered the phone for about 5 months. Never again.

Marc S. Stern, Seattle, Washington

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I've done it both ways myself. Having others answer the phone is a wonderful thing, especially if you have people who know a thing or two about you. If the staff can answer simple questions (credit cards, hours, directions, email address, appointments, etc.) then you will save more hours than you can count. Also, sometimes you get an emergency call while you're on the phone or an appointment cancellation, etc. and the person can notify you. At least in my practice, the phone calls tend to come all at once (i.e. They're not evenly spaced throughout the day.)

There's also a perception, especially to high maintenance clients and opposing counsel, that if they repeatedly get voicemail, that you're not in. A secretary can tell people that you're working on a project, and even assist with status updates.

It may seem like you are saving a few bucks by not having someone, but I'm pretty sure it's a false economy (especially if you field a large number

of calls.)

David L. Leon, Dallas, Texas

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What Shell said.

Jane E. Tate, Kailua, Hawaii

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Someday soon I hope to have the need to have an assistant, but for now its just me so I answer the phone. having caller id is a wonderful thing though many clients and potential clients block that. I can't say that I blame them since I do family law.

The one thing that does bother me is when I call anywhere and they ask "Who is calling" then have you wait more than 30 seconds. That always gives me the impression that if they don't think you're important enough or they just don't want to deal with you, especially, if its 2 PM and their at lunch.

Another peeve is first getting a voice mail greeting telling me what their hours are when I'm calling when they should be there. Ok, fast Eddie Crutchfield is still my hero. He killed Voice mail at First Onion then when they finally convinced him to allow it, he made a rule not answering a voice mail in 24 hours was a firing offense. They even made you sign an agreement to that effect before they added it to your line.

John A. Davidson

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My productivity and sanity has substantially improved since I hired my assistant and gave her the job of answering and screening calls. My clients know that absent an emergency or my being sick, I will get back to them within one business day or less, so I don't think they feel neglected if I am not immediately available to take the call.

It is so easy to get sucked into conversations that I really don't have time to have. My clients can be very emotionally needy, and they do not want me to tell them that I really, REALLY can't talk right now. As David said, my assistant can quickly give them status updates or ask them for various bits of information that I might need, and I can stay focused on whatever project is in front of me.

E. Alexandra Golden, Needham, Massachusetts

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If you're not doing something that creates an exceptional volume of calls, I prefer answering my own phone. Encourage your clients to use fax and email--I explain that it usually takes less of my time their money.

As to image, BELIEVE that it is an advantage to your clients that you are solo. A couple of times I have been attacked in court as, "Nothing but a one lunger--doesn't even have a secretary." My answer, "I confess, your Honor, I am forced to give each of my clients my personal attention." Judges seemed to like that.

These days I am apt to brag that modern computer technology allows me to compete with firms that have the biggest libraries and staffs AND enjoy the remarkable assistance available from a 2500 legal lisitmates.

Mostly, things like this are a question of confidence. Don't do things that undermine your confidence.

John Page, Tampa, Florida

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I've always answered my own calls for two reasons: I often have French speaking clients who have a hard time communicating with someone speaking only English; one of my law professors was and is a powerful attorney in a huge law firm and he answered his own calls. The caveat is that I record my voice mail message on a daily basis to indicate when I will be there and I am training myself to avoid calls from people I don't want to talk to at the moment.

Lynne Ostfeld, Chicago, Illinois

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If my staff is busy and the phone is ringing, I will answer it. Not a problem. When I started out, I answered by own calls. No negative impression at all. Even now when my staff answers the phone, I instruct them not to ask who is calling. If someone is asking for me, they must want to speak to me. I do not want any callers thinking that I am screening them.

Robert W. "Robby" Hughes, Jr., Stone Mountain, Georgia

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The only comments I have ever received from clients concerning my lack of a receptionist have been entirely positive. As to the voicemail concern, a certain number of calls will always go to voicemail (you can't always answer your phone, in the best of circumstances) but any problems can be avoided by conscientious response to the voicemails.

J. Robert Thompson, Lilburn, Georgia

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i am so busy that I just have an answer machine

i encourage clients to use email instead

new clients just leave message

if they cant deal with that they would probably not be satisfied with my small firm anyway

there are some clients that want the big office with receptionist etc etc

i explain, if needed, to clients that I am a litigator and am in court a lot

sure I could have a person to answer calls but that would just mean more expenses and client would not get to speak to me anyway

but the MOST IMPORTANT THING IS;

return the calls as soon as you can !

and BTW the clients who leave a message on 09:00 again at 10:25 and then at 11:57; avoid them !

clients who can't wait for the day to pass before hearing from you, don't respect your time

Christian Vinaa, Gentofte, Denmark.

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I, like many other solos, am truly solo (unless you count my cat). I have no secretary or other help, except once in a while I get a law school intern for the summer months. Thus I have no choice but to answer my own phones. It's been 15 years now and I have no problem with it. Caller ID is useful because it can help you screen calls when you are in a crunch situation, or just don't want to talk to someone right then.

It often surprises some people that I do answer my own phone, and it has sometimes won me a client. They like the personal attention. Don't be daunted by it---it's just a fact of solo life.

Diane Leigh Davison, Baltimore, Maryland

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You can overcome the blocked calls problem by paying your phone company to reject blocked calls. With my phone service, SBC, the caller would have to unblock his/her number by inserting a \*82 prefix (e.g., \*82 (714) 671-2089). I hesitate to require that, however, because the inconvenience and inaccessibility could make an unfavorable impression on clients and especially potential clients.

'Tis a dilemma.

Susan K. Ashabraner, Fullerton, California

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I will also answer my phone if it is ringing and it isn't being picked up. Never have had a problem with it.

The question, tho, reminds me of one time someone called (I didn't

recognize the voice) and after I answered with, "Runquist & Associates", they asked if I was "[staff name]". I said "no, may I ask who is calling?" They refused to tell me their name and, after guessing who I was a couple of times, asked who I was (I continued to ask who was calling). They finally hung up on me, only to call back again a minute later. This time, after I answered, they asked to speak to "Lisa Runquist". I said, "Speaking." There was dead silence, as they processed the fact that they had just been rude to and had hung up on the very person they wanted to get free legal advice from.

Lisa A. Runquist, Los Angeles, California

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It seems that recently, large law firms have receptionists, but the receptionists no longer take messages unless one insists. The receptionists in large firms almost universally offer to send you to the person's voice-mail, Personally, I'd prefer it if it directly to voicemail if the receptionist isn't going to be bothered taking a message.

Veronica Schnidrig

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Here's a blog post on this issue from Tom Kane's Legal Marketing Blog:

<http://www.legalmarketingblog.com/client-communications-337-voice-mail-won't-kill-you-but-a-machine-answering-your-phone-will.html>

Lisa (who answers her own phone except when she's busy or not around, when it goes to voice mail) Lisa Solomon, New York

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I do not pretend that my approach works for everyone, but I must screen my calls heavily or no work gets done. While I have no compunction about picking up the phone if I am not tied up, caller ID still allows me to prioritize.

Call volumes here can be excessive, peaking at over 300 a day. Prioritization is an absolute. I have three incoming lines. Most of Friday it seemed that all three stayed lit up. Two assistants assist in managing, but optimum responsiveness is not always achievable.

I can talk to one person at a time. In person visits take priority over phone calls. Work has to get done also.

Depending on the nature of a phone call, sometimes I can deal with email at the same time, sometimes not. Practically speaking, one works 12-18 hours and goes home. At the end of the day, priorities govern what gets done.

Darrell G. Stewart, San Antonio, Texas

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I answered all my calls for the better part of six years (I had a service for awhile, but it turned out to be a bad move.) I enjoyed not having to pay for staff. I later started a new practice with a new partner who was used to having staff (and had qualified staff when I moved in.)

One of the biggest advantages is emergency or time sensitive issues where voicemail isn't going to cut it. When I didn't have staff, I noticed an increase in phone tag. (leaving messages back and forth). With staff, I can tell them to come get me if so-and-so calls. Have an adjuster who won't leave an offer on VM? Interrupt me. Court's calling about a hearing in five minutes? Get me off the other line. You get the idea.

David L. Leon, Dallas, Texas

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Further to the "Answering Your Own Calls" thread....for the many of you who answer your own calls, what do you say when you pick up the phone? "Thank you for calling [name of law firm]" or "This is [your name]"? Pros and cons?

Lee Bateman, Las Vegas, Nevada

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I simply answer "Good Morning/Afternoon, Hughes & Associates Can I help you?"

Robert W. "Robby" Hughes, Jr., Stone Mountain, Georgia

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When I answer my own phone, I just say "Alan Inglis". Assistants answer: "Inglis Law Office, this is xxx yyy". Either way, the tone and inflection are to be positive, upbeat, and unhurried (i.e. we're glad you called and will be happy to do whatever we can for you). Short, but welcoming, and the caller knows right up front who he or she is speaking to. Have never heard a complaint. Have gotten compliments for the immediate identification. Assistants know up front that unpleasant phone answering can be a firing offense. (I try to hire people who wouldn't do it anyway. As a Nordstrom's executive once said, "We can teach cash register...we can't teach attitude.") Solicitation calls get ONE pleasant "no, thank you" then a dial tone.

Alan L. Inglis, Rancho Cucamonga, California

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Staff says: "Law Office, this is \_\_\_\_\_, can I help you. Sometimes I do, but sometimes I recognize the caller ID and say "Hi \_\_\_\_\_." On those occasions it is a frequent caller that knows my voice.

Darrell G. Stewart, San Antonio, Texas

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I say "Alan Bernstein"... Am I missing something, in that I should go incognito when I answer the phone assuming it is for me?

Alan Bernstein

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"Mike Koenecke speaking."

That's how my Dad always answered his phone. [Which was odd, because his name was Dick.. [rimshot])

Mike Koenecke, Richardson, Texas

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"Susan Ashabraner" with a cheerful tone.

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"Rob's Ribshack, What's Your Beef?"

Dan Nguyen

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If the staff is busy and I answer the main line, I usually say "Law Office" (though most people think I'm saying "loffice") or "Leon & Schulman" (though most people think I'm saying "Leon Schulman" and ask to speak to "Leon").

If the staff is busy and I answer my own personal line, I'll say "This is Dave."

David L. Leon, Dallas, Texas

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I answer by stating my name. People don't listen so they often ask for me. Years ago a cousin of my father's started his own engineering/consulting business. It was just him in a big warehouse for awhile. His son said that when someone called, the dad would put on a different voice, ask the caller to hold on, the dad would get up, walk around the table, slowly come back and, in his regular voice, identify himself and ask if he could help. The purpose, obviously, was to make the caller think that this was a big enterprise.

Lynne R. Ostfeld, Chicago, Illinois

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Yes, I get that:

Answerer: "Mike Koenecke speaking." [pause] Caller: "Can I speak to Mister Koah-neck?" Answerer: "Sorry, he died this morning."

Actually, the last bit is what I would \*like\* to say, but there are actual business-related calls which start that way.

I also have learned to do a slow count: If I answer the phone and hear silence, I silently count "one thousand one, one thousand two..." then hang up. Otherwise you get...

Answerer: "Mike Koenecke speaking." [four second pause] Caller: "Hello?" Answerer: [click]

If they don't know whom they are calling, I don't want to talk to them. May their predictive dialers explode in their collective faces.

Mike Koenecke, Richardson, Texas

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I usually answer

" The Wiener Office- We really cut the mustard"

Lew Wiener, Corte Madera, California

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I think it's very good that you "get off your buns" and answer your own phone <G>!

Bruce Dorner, Londonderry, New Hampshire

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"We're having a great day at your Archer Road Wal-Mart, this is Long, how can I help you?"

Long Duong

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