

Popular Threads on Solosez

Do You Ever Ignore Phone Messages?

I am wondering how many of you ignore phone messages when you're either too busy, or if the message is of little interest to you (e.g. is not in your practice area, or caller annoys you within their first communication towards you).

I know it's probably bad business from a PR perspective, but sometime my callers present themselves as a giant time-suck if I were to return the call. One example that I've faced several times now is the person who has already lost their home to a foreclosure sale and want it back. The usual excuse or complaint is lack of notice. I am not interested in these cases (by the way, if any of you want these cases, I will pass them on to you).

In the end, is it bad to ignore the occasional message?

If I'm involved in something, I will absolutely ignore a message. I'll definitely return it before the end of the business day, but sometimes it's just not worth losing my train of thought in order to impress someone by answering my phone on the second ring.

I also think it's a matter of managing client expectations. I'm starting to get into the habit of ignoring calls when I don't recognize the number because a few clients whose calls I answered immediately in the beginning now expect that kind of responsiveness and even get a little pissy with me when they have to leave a message. One guy in particular has yet to fork over any money, but calls every two hours "I left you a message but I haven't heard back...." I won't call that guy back for a good week.

I think that first phone call sets the tone. If you answer on the second ring the first time they call, anything less than that in the future will be less than acceptable.

Gina Madsen, Nevada

I have taken to handling these by being slow to return calls (sometimes 48 hours or longer) and by the time i return them, the person has already found another attorney. but if it's like you describe -- someone who you can tell is not a client you want, i don't think you are personally obligated to return the call, if you have a staff person who can call and say this is outside your area of expertise. another technique i've used is to call when i know they won't be home (at home during the day) or at work after hours... then i can just leave a message.

I would suggest you might not return a call, but i think there are warnings from the ethics folks to not do that in case someone thinks you've established a lawyer-client relationship by making the call to you. so i won't put that down in writing here. but i also think if someone is that stupid, well.... anyway, I'm going to stop here...

Jean Maneke, Missouri

Funny that you ask this. I find myself doing the same thing form time to time and also have been wondering if I am the only one. When I ignore these messages - I feel as if I am jinxing myself... doing something bad that will haunt me in the end. Bad lawyer karma, if you will. I think to myself -- how hard can it be to reply and let

them know that I can't help them? Most times, the phone calls drag on & on.....and I end up chastising myself for having *wasted* the time.... thanks for posting this question... Happy to know I am not alone in this practice!

Tatiana D. Czaplicki, Illinois

Here's my take:

I respond to *every* voicemail and email, within 1 business day if at all possible.

If somebody calls me for something I don't do, I just tell them that before they start telling their life story. Hopefully I'll have a colleague's name handy to pass along.

I figure that even crazy-sounding people have friends. And you can bet that they'll tell anyone who will listen about the attorney who didn't return their phone call. Their friends may know they are crazy, but the bad reputation can still spread.

Too many attorneys are known for *not* returning phone calls. I don't want to be one of them.

As for time, I just signed up for Ruby Receptionists (www.callruby.com). In addition to answering phones, they can make calls for you. I'm still getting setup with them, but I'll bet I could give them a couple names & numbers and ask them to tell the callers "Mr. Flusche doesn't handle X, but he recommends contacting Bob Jones...."

Andrew Flusche, Virginia

I don't know, but just this week I had someone leave TWO messages, and then call me a third time, because I just plain didn't have time to call him back fast enough, and then he failed to show to the appointment. So is it okay to sometimes ignore messages? I'd say probably, in some situations, there is nothing wrong with it. Just depends.

Lesley A. Hoenig, Michigan

Speaking of not losing one's train of thought, I think we are trained to check our emails too often. I know everyone feels like it is absolutely necessary to look at your BlackBerry as soon as it beeps or vibrates. However, like the book "Four Hour Work Week" (yeah, week, not day - interesting read) recommends, only checking your emails at set times everyday (e.g., at 10 a.m., 4 p.m., 10 p.m.) would reduce the distractions that take away from your concentration and productivity. I have been following that rule (for the most part) since leaving a large firm, and it's been wonderful. Of course, I have at least 100 Solosez emails every time I check, but they are fun to read. I am sure there are some who say that their clients and colleagues must be able to reach them immediately. No doubt, but they can be "trained" to call your cell if your response cannot wait 6 hours. I was quite doubtful of the recommendation above myself, but I haven't had any complaints.

Mikio Miyawaki

Regarding e-mails: I tell clients that an e-mail is the same as other written correspondence. They can expect an answer within 48 hours, quicker if necessary. I bill e-mails read and answered as correspondence, same as paper letter and phone call.

Regarding calls: I block several times each day to return calls. If I'm engaged in something, I let the call go to voice mail. We've talked about how long we need to get back into the groove we allowed ourselves to interrupt to answer a call. I've chosen to let them ripen until a certain blocked-out time. Thanks, Barbara, for that great strategy.

My answering message clearly says to leave message, name, and phone number. Callers who do not leave messages do not get a call-back. Commercial calls don't get a call-back unless I'm interested. I record all messages in PhoneSlips. Just had a guy complain that he's been trying to reach me since December 1. PhoneSlips shows that he didn't leave a message. I'm supposed to have his number memorized and telepathically know what he wants? "When did you leave your message? Oh, that explains it. I don't search through the caller ID box. You didn't leave a message, as my outgoing message says. And remember that the client information sheet explains that, too." All in as nice a tone as I can muster.

CJ Stevens, Montana

I hate it when people do not return my call. For this reason, I never ignore a message. I return calls within 24 hours.

Cecilia P. Ventimiglia, Nevada