"Voicemail Surfing" A Comprehensive Guide on Using Voicemail to Circumvent Gatekeepers

By Gregory Pankow, Candidate Development Project Manager, RW Stearns, Inc.

What is Voicemail Surfing? Voicemail Surfing is using documented, built-in features of the different voicemail systems to get directly to the person you need to speak with, avoiding receptionists, administrative assistants, and others that we call "gatekeepers".

Anyone connected with the recruiting business, whether they are corporate recruiters, contingency recruiters, agencies, or even name sourcers, knows the value of speaking with an individual directly. Despite this fact, there are often multiple barriers to contacting the person you (or your client) needs to speak to. Gatekeepers will often ask your name, company, and reason for calling. Also, you may have to call the same competitors time and again to find people for your company, and the receptionist will inevitably begin to recognize your voice. The issue may even be time related. If the person you are trying to contact is rarely at their desk, you will probably not want to go through their receptionist or automatic system every time you call.

Voicemail Surfing can provide multiple benefits: 1) It can be used to discover extensions for certain individuals. These can often be turned into phone numbers that can be used to dial them directly; 2) It can also be used to go from one phone extension to another without hanging up the phone or going through a gatekeeper; 3) It can be used to open up the most stubborn voicemail systems by finding automated attendant numbers that receptionists normally do not answer.

The first thing you need to be familiar with when Voicemail Surfing is the usage of the "*" key. As simple as it sounds, this key on your telephone will open up new worlds.

All voicemail systems rely on commands much like computers do (although in a much more simplified form). Think about the * as your "Esc" key on your computer keyboard. In almost all voicemail systems, pressing the * key during the greeting message on someone's voicemail before the beep (*this is very important, as different options are available after the beep*), will provoke some kind of reaction from the system.

Sometimes, just pressing the * key and listening to the result from the voicemail system will have you following a set of instructions to get you to the person you want (or their extension). Other times, a combination of keys is necessary, and these are not always intuitive.

Since the commands are specific to different voicemail systems, other keys become important as well. We see systems where the "#" key is also important. The "0" is less utilized but still important. All of these keys are meant to take you out of someone's voicemail greeting and into the voicemail system itself. Often, when I am presented with a new voicemail system, I will even try the number keys to see what responses they bring.

Some voicemail systems will respond only to multiple keys. Audix voicemail systems, for example, will answer only with silence if you just press the * key. However, if you press the * key, followed by the 8 key, you will hear a prompt to enter the extension you wish to transfer to. If you then follow with a **6 (that's two asterisks), you will be transferred to a directory where you will be prompted to spell the person's name, which will then give you their extension.

If your eyes are starting to glaze over, or you are becoming more confused than when you started reading this article, relax. I will walk you through the process of obtaining a direct dial number, and even give you a real life situation of how I resolved an extremely tough Voicemail Surfing issue.

Even if my ideas cannot resolve your problem, remember that voicemail systems have reference manuals too. If you do an internet search for a phrase that the system responds with after pressing a key, you can often use it to find the online version of the system's manual, which will list its commands.

Let me walk you through a hypothetical case at a hypothetical company. Let's assume that I need to talk to Mr. John Smith, Vice President of Marketing at XYZ Company, Inc. My problem is that when I call and ask for him at the main number, the receptionist always asks my name, company, and reason for calling. She is not a stupid person, so inventing a reason compelling enough for her to transfer me is not always possible. What I need is a way to get to Mr. Smith directly.

It may sound obvious, but if you have not previously called into a company before, the first thing you should do is call their main number. With all of the voicemail savvy you will learn from this paper, it is easy to forget that many companies have an automated attendant even during business hours that will give you a dial-by-name directory. In many, if not most cases though, you will get a receptionist. Tell them you have the wrong number and hang up the phone.

In this scenario, since we reached a real person when calling from the main number, we need to find a number that is not being answered and has a voicemail box.

The first step is to look closer at the company's main number. It needs to be their "real" main number. An 800 number is of no use (you can get real main numbers in places like Google Maps, Yahoo business listings, or Hoovers). Let's say that their main number is 650-121-4000. Try dialing 650-121-4020 or 650-121-4046. Remember, we just need to get a number that is not being answered.

Another way to find numbers that are seldom answered is to go to the company website and see if they have a listing for investor relations or public relations. These often go to individuals who rarely answer their phone.

Let's assume that when you dialed 650-121-4020, it rings about five times and then you hear, "Hi, this is Mary Jones. I'm not at my desk right now, so please leave me a message". Quickly, and before you hear the inevitable "beep", press the * key. If nothing happens, remember that one of the systems I mentioned above is called Audix. It is a system where pressing the * key alone will result in nothing but silence. Since that is the case here, press the 8 key, and the system will respond with, "Enter the four digit extension and pound sign". The system is now waiting for you to enter an extension, to which we would be transferred by entering the extension number if we had it, and pressing the # key (like the Enter key on your computer).

Since we don't have an extension, what we need is a directory, so after pressing *8, press **6 and you will hear "Enter last name and pound sign". We are now in the company dial-by-name directory.

We wanted to speak with John Smith, so begin typing out the name on your phone keypad, using the letters above the numbers, and starting with the last name. You can hit the # key at any point, but since there are more than likely going to be other Smiths at XYZ Corp, try the entire name.

After you spell out his name and press #, you will hear "John Smith, extension 4033". We now have his extension.

Now all we have to do is replace the company's main number of 650-121-4000 with 650-121-4033 and we have a number that will dial directly to Mr. Smith's desk, bypassing receptionists and, frequently, administrative assistants.

The above situation is often the case; you dial an unanswered extension, enter the company directory, find the extension of the person you need, plug it into the main number, and get your direct dial. Other times, your task is not this easy. Let's look at some possible stumbling blocks you might encounter along the way.

Many companies today are not only aware of the efforts of recruiters to locate their employees, they also arrange their phone systems to make it more difficult.

For this reason, you may find that extension 4022 and 4023 are not always in the same department, let alone sitting next to each other.

Other times, you may be presented with an extension that does not seem to fit the main number and you cannot simply replace the last four digits with the extension.

Let's return to our example of John Smith at XYZ Company, Inc. What happens if I take the company main number, replace the last four digits with his extension, dial it, and get a message that the number does not exist?

This is a fairly common occurrence. The reason, is that even though the company's main number may have a prefix of 121, their employees' numbers may be based on a different prefix, 136 for example. If this is the case, I would need to dial 650-136-4033 to reach Mr. Smith. The question is, how do I determine what the prefix is?

My favorite technique is to go to an internet search engine (I use Google, so my examples will reflect this) and search for the phrase "XYZ Company", and include listings that only have the 650 area code, but DO NOT include the last four digits of the company main number of 4000. In Google, this is done by entering the following search string: *"XYZ Company" 650 -4000*.

The reason we are searching for all numbers not including the last four digits of the phone number instead of those that do not include the prefix is because some companies do not change their prefix, but rather base their employee extensions on a different set of last four digits. This means that even though the main number may be 650-121-4000, the employees' extensions may start at 650-121-6500. Let's assume though, that in this case the company has a different prefix for employee extensions.

After running our search, we should now see results that will list numbers for individuals or departments at XYZ Company in the 650 area code. Let's assume we see that one of the results is an article about Mary Jones at XYZ Company, and includes her direct dial, which is 650-136-4022. We can now replace the last four digits with John Smith's extension, and get a direct dial number for him.

What if our problem is a little more difficult? The example I used before was for an Audix system, which has a built-in directory that can be accessed from any extension. What happens though, if XYZ Company uses another system like Avaya Messaging, which also has a directory that can be accessed from any voicemail box, but DOES NOT give you extensions. It does allow you to type in a name and be transferred to an extension, but since you don't know the actual number, you can't use it for dialing directly. We can, however, use it to jump from one extension to another.

All we need is number at the company that does not answer. This could be the investor relations, or PR numbers I mentioned before. Or, we could just try a few random extensions until we find one that

picks up with voicemail. Once we get this, we can press the * key and follow the Avaya instructions to be transferred to Mr. Smith. While not as convenient as dialing directly, it does allow you to avoid the receptionist and other gatekeepers and go directly to Mr. Smith's phone.

What if our problem is more serious than this? There are voicemail systems that do not have a directory that is accessible via individual voicemail boxes. If you cannot get extensions, nor jump from extension to extension at will, what do you do to avoid the gatekeeper?

The answer is usually what I call the "magic" number. All companies have an automated feature that picks up after the receptionist goes home. It almost always has a dial by name feature, but is relatively useless, since when the receptionist goes home our Mr. Smith will either go home himself, or might not answer his phone if it rings. Remember, our idea is to reach him directly, not just leave messages.

The magic number is a number that is set up so that employees can have access to their voicemail when out of the office. It also almost always includes a dial-by-name directory of employees. It may give extensions and it may not, but it will allow you to surf their voicemail system to find our Mr. Smith.

More good news is that this number is usually something easy for their employees to remember. For example, if their main number is 650-121-4000, it may be something like 650-121-4040 or 650-121-4444. Sometimes they will even put it at one number above their main number (650-121-4001), although this is usually used for a fax.

Finding this magic number can be more challenging if the company has hundreds of extensions or more. If it is a very large enterprise company, try other even numbers, like 650-121-5000, or 650-121-6000. The good news is that once you find it (and most of the time you will), you can make note of it and always be able to bypass gatekeepers at that company.

Another consideration is the fact that the company may have multiple voicemail systems, for example one for office personnel and another for sales representatives. If you don't find the person you are looking for at their first "magic" number, try to find others.

Many companies also centralize their voicemail system, so if you can't find an extension or magic number at their headquarters, try a branch office. They will sometimes give you a way to transfer to the person you want at a different geographic location.

Another obviously important issue is the spelling of the person's last name. If you are searching for "Judith Belochioski" and the spelling you have for her name is "Judith Belokiosky", you will not find her in the dial-by-name directory. Fortunately most voicemail directories will accept partial entries. Try typing in "Belo" then pressing #. It will most likely then give you a list of people to transfer to that have last names starting with the same letters (Ms. Belochioski among them).

At this point I would like to give a case study as an example. The purpose of this real life situation (which I was actually involved in), is to show how even the worst case scenario can be solved with creative Voicemail Surfing.

We had the task of contacting a group of people at a large company with headquarters on the West Coast and branch offices around the U.S. When I called to speak to the first person, their receptionist asked my name and company before transferring me. Since I did not want to repeat my name and company every time I called, I pressed * when I heard a voicemail message at the extension she transferred me to.

The response was "Enter your ID followed by pound". Since I know that one of the systems that uses this message is the Cisco Unity Messaging System (see the 6th page of this paper for Cisco Unity commands), I pressed the # key without entering an extension. I then heard "Hello, Cisco Unity Messaging System.... For a directory of extensions, press four". I pressed four and went to the dial-by-name directory. This way I was able to note the four digit extensions for all of the individuals I needed to contact.

My problem was that they did not "plug in" to the company's main phone number, or any of their branch numbers (replacing the final four digits of an office with the four digit extension).

My next step was to try searching for any direct dial number (other than their main numbers), in the attempt to find any number that would be compatible with the extensions I had. After an exhaustive search, I found absolutely no direct dial numbers (this is a very rare occurrence).

Since nothing else worked, I tried dialing a few digits up from their main number and got "this number is not in service" type errors.

By trial and error I found a small branch office on the East Coast. Dialing up a few digits got me to someone's voicemail box at the company in question. Since the people I wanted to speak to were also in this East Coast office's directory (which was a nationwide directory), I was now able to use this voicemail as a "jumping off point" to transfer to the people I needed to speak to on the West Coast.

Later, with further experimentation, I discovered the "magic" number set up for employees to listen to their messages outside of the office, and was able use this number every time I called, without ringing a valid extension or speaking to any gatekeepers.

Granted, this represents a fairly extreme case and took more time than normal for me to understand their system, but in the long run it saved me hours of time by not having to go through the receptionist for every call. It also helped me to avoid potential problems with a protective gatekeeper.

Hopefully this paper will also help you save valuable time, as well as potentially uncomfortable situations with gatekeepers.

P.S. Please be aware that companies can modify their voicemail system's commands and new versions of voicemail systems also appear, so you may need to modify your techniques slightly at different companies or as systems are upgraded.

Happy Voicemail Surfing!

Instructions and Hints for Specific Voicemail Systems

Voicemail System	Instructions
Audix	Audix is one of the most friendly systems for Voicemail Surfers. Its commands are simple and powerful. From any voicemail box, type *8 to transfer by extension (if you have them). After this, you may type *2 to transfer by name. You can also type **6 which will give you a company directory. In the company directory, follow the instructions and type the last name to get an extension. Once an extension is given, the system will wait silently for you to type another last name or just hang up to end the session.
Avaya Messaging	If you hit * and the system replies with "To log into this mailbox, press star. To log into another mailbox press seven. To transfer to another mailbox, press eight. To disconnect, press nine", then you are on Avaya Messaging. Press 8, then * to dial by name. Normally it will not give extensions.
Cisco Unity Messaging	If you hit * and the system replies with "Enter your ID, followed by #", it is a Cisco Unity system. Very easy, just hit # without typing an ID and you will either hear "Hello, Cisco Unity Messaging System" or the company's prompt. Usually hit "4" for the employee directory, but listen, as it can vary. Once one has extensions for the desired people, you can be transferred to them via any voicemail. Just type in the extension before you hear the "beep" in their voicemail message (no * no # no need to type in anything but the extension) and you will hear "Wait while I transfer your call".
Inter-tel Axxess	From the main auto attendant press 1 to dial an extension, then press * to enter your mailbox number, press # to spell a last name and then when you find the name you want press 2 for additional information (this will give you the person's extension). You can also access this option by pressing * from any voicemail box. Another useful option is the ability to use the 1 key to scroll through the entire list of names at the company.
Meridian Mail	Many times, from an Meridian Mail box you can dial *70* and go out to the main auto attendant where you often have the option to dial by name. Sometimes *7# works. Some Meridian systems do not have this option. If this is the case, you will hear "...for message options press 70". Previously "unsurfable", *some* of these systems can be overcome by finding a voicemail box that is not registered with the system, and will give you a message along the lines of, "you have been forwarded to a voice mail system, however the person at extension XXXXX does not subscribe to this service". If you hear this hit the "1" key repetedly (four, five or six times) until you hear an option to transfer via extensions or dial by names.
Octel	With Meridian Mail, Octel is one of the first voicemail systems. Like Meridian, different systems have different features enabled. Although Octel is a legacy system, it is still in use at many of the largest corporations. Like Meridian it is only ocasionally surfable. If you press *, you will usually hear "Please dial the number of the person you are calling. If you have a mailbox on this system, please press pound". Pressing # will only prompt you for an extension. If you press * after that, the system will disconnect. Since many Octel systems are in use at very large corporations, try pressing 0 (zero) during the greeting. The purpose is to route you to an operator, but many times it will route you to an auto-attendant (sometimes with a directory) instead of the human operator. If this does not work, follow my instructions for finding a "magic" number with an auto-attendant as discussed earlier in this article.
Siemens HiPath Xpressions	If you hit * and hear "your input is not valid" and hitting # produces the same message, it is an Xpressions system. With this system, just hit the 0 (zero), during the voicemail greeting and you will hear many options. Listen to them all, but usually the * key will now give you a dial by name directory.

Please be aware that companies can modify their voicemail commands, as well as removing certain features (like dial-by-name functions). In addition, new versions of voicemail systems also appear, so you may need to modify your commands slightly at different companies or as systems are upgraded.

RW|STEARNS

About RW Stearns, Inc.

Since 1984, clients have relied on RW Stearns (www.rwstearns.com) for solutions to their ever-changing sourcing, staffing and tactical competitive intelligence needs. We have completed over 16,000 projects, domestic and international, spanning all industries, ranging from CEOs to individual contributors, and specializing in those industries and job families in which other research firms are not typically successful.

Our policy of putting "strategy first" when undertaking client engagements has consistently led to timely and cost-effective solutions, accurate intelligence, and satisfied clients. For these reasons and more, RW Stearns has long been recognized as the premiere solution destination for hiring managers, recruiters and strategic planners around the world.

For more information about our services, please contact us at:

RW Stearns, Inc.
201 Mission Street
Suite 2030
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-593-1000
info@rwstearns.com