



Palm Beach Trade Winds

By: Mike Bailey Boca Green Country Club



I Hate Answering machines But ...

I hate answering machines. They are too impersonal. I refuse to talk into one of those boxes. I usually just hang up, unless I really have to leave a very important message. These are the typical comments by one who has not objectively evaluated answering machines, or one who has not reaped the benefits of such a device.

The fact is, whether we want to admit it or not, answering machines are a valuable tool for our industry. Two way communications begins by you picking up the telephone, however, no one being in the office can frustrate your callers very quickly. Our demand of responsibilities takes us out of the office more often than in. (This would also hold true for commercial salesmen who must call upon their clients.) If we are to still allow a receptive ear to begin this interaction, there are a few means of receiving calls. The ultimate, of course, is to have a secretary. Very few golf course maintenance budgets can justify this expense unless the person is connected via a switchboard to the other departments, or the maintenance department operates on a larger scale of 36 holes or more where the secretary would be involved with other office services. Another avenue to consider is an answering service. They can provide adequate service with a "personal touch," however you still have not reached the desired person and this service is more expensive than an answering machine.

Now let us begin to objectively evaluate the advantages of an answering machine. Most normal golf course operations generally have a phone with a bell or a wall phone somewhere in the shop. Hopefully a staff worker will pick up the phone or perhaps the mechanic is the designated operator. The drawbacks of this style are inefficiency of labor time and quite often a sense of unprofessionalism. The mechanic, busy working on a machine, is constantly being interrupted to answer the darn phone. (If you had to get up from underneath a machine with greasy hands to walk over and pick up the phone where usually they hang up before you get there, you too would answer the phone in a disgruntled attitude.) Or, how often have you had a worker pick up the phone and simply say, "Guf Curse." You then ask if Mr. John Q. Supt. is in and he says, "Nope." You then say "Can you take a message," he says, "Yea, wait a minute, I gotta go get a piece of paper," then when he finally gets back, the pen doesn't work or

the pencil broke. After giving a slow description and spelling each word letter by letter, the worker becomes busy and forgets to give your message to John Q. Supt., and the next time you see John at the chapter meeting he says, "No, I didn't know you called — I never got your message." Just a few sour instances like these quickly dictates an answering machine to be a must.

Let us evaluate the cost effectiveness of these so called "great devices." Just like everything else, one can purchase the most basic answering machines for around \$50 or let us examine the Rolls Royce of machines for around \$200 — a super deluxe with every feature to ever consider. After a review of the features, definitely buy the most elaborate, because yes, those features really pay for themselves. After complaints from our golf pro about not getting thru to me on the phone, I said, "I think you're right, I should purchase an answering machine like yours at home." The first comment he made was "don't get the cheapest, instead go get the fanciest one on the market." I thought, sure, that's easy for you to say, but the club will never go for it. To me, a box is a box — right? WRONG! After hearing the sales pitch, the following is a list of features that should be standard equipment:

1. COUNT INDICATOR (for the number of incoming calls)
2. LENGTH COUNTER, (determine the length of message)
3. RING ADJUSTMENT (picks up on first ring or more)
4. VOICE ACTIVATED (messages will be recorded until caller hangs up or the tape could be dictated as a message up to 30 minutes)
5. VOLUME ADJUSTMENT (ability to screen incoming calls)
6. REMOTE RECEIVED (a beeper activates your messages from a remote location)
7. REMOTE MESSAGES (ability to change recorded message from a remote location)

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After enjoying all these features, I would actually go buy the very best again. Even if it were my money. A \$200 expenditure can pay for itself so quickly, not to mention the added convenience to the employees in the shop. The saving in labor efficiency is so staggering, the recorder can actually pay for itself in just 16 weeks. Consider this: a mechanic at a pay rate of \$10.00/hr. consumes an average down time of 15 minutes a day answering the phone at a club expense of \$2.50/day or \$12.50/week. Within a matter of only 16 weeks, consider the recorder paid off. In my situation, in regards to management of project common grounds, homeowners, members, developer, golf course, and not to mention, The Green Sheet and other association work, I can spend over an hour a day on the phone or in other words, a labor cost of \$50/week. In just one month, the machine pays for itself.

In country club communities, where members tend to call quite often because of common grounds maintenance, the recorder becomes a valuable buffer. The need of spending ten or twenty minutes talking about a problem that could probably be resolved by your laborers in less than that time, the recorder can receive the valuable message needed to cure that person's complaint, whereby you can spend your management time more valuably.

The incoming recording tape messages can be kept on file for verification of complaints and your work completed to resolve those complaints.

Now that we have analyzed the benefits of a recorder there is one last topic to analyze — the negative attitude of your incoming callers' distaste for recorders and one's general tendency to just hang up. There are a few psychological factors to combat. To initiate an interaction on a one way avenue, you and the recorder must catch your incoming caller off guard — by asking them a question such as "Hello, are you trying to call the golf course maintenance department?" The clincher here is for you to ask a question so the caller realizes what department they have called. All too often wrong numbers are dialed, so by you declaring who you represent, all incorrect incoming callers should then hang up. I receive many wrong numbers wanting either the construction or sales department, pro shop, club house and whatever else. My message starts off by asking this question. I then go on to say, "I am Mike Bailey, the golf course superintendent." By stating my name and job title I have clarified myself to incoming callers. Here again the caller realizes they have placed a correct call.

I then ask the caller to state the nature of their business and say that I will return their call. This allows me to understand specifically their needs so when I return their call, hopefully the situation has already been addressed. Nothing can be more satisfying than to call a person back, especially when that person generally tends to stereotype answering machines as being an inconvenience and to give the message, "I have already resolved the problem thanks to your advising me via my answering machine." ■



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