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## What the Examiner Sees... or, In this Case, Hears

by Larry Bothe, 9/13/2013

In this series of articles I usually choose an area of operation or task from the private pilot PTS and then write about what I see applicants doing that could be improved. Where I'm able I describe teaching methods and key points to help the CFI get the point across to his student so he can be safe and meet or exceed PTS standards during the checkride. This article continues in the vein of things I encounter when dealing with flight instructors and applicants, but it has nothing to do with the PTS for any FAA certificate or rating. It's more like the PTS for Life: How we use cell phones. Trust me, there's room for a lot of improvement.

Cell phones are a way of life. I couldn't do my job as a pilot examiner without one. In fact, almost four years ago my wife and I got rid of our land lines. Now we each have a cell phone; that's it. I have a smart (Internet-enabled) phone, and I pay a premium for the data package. Why? Because it syncs with my Google calendar. Whenever an applicant calls me I can instantly tell him or her what days I'm available to do a checkride. If it's within a week I can match available days against forecasted weather and make a good choice of day for the checkride right on the spot. If somebody suggests a flight on short notice I can immediately put the information into AOPA's Fly-Q and have a flight plan with weather and fuel required in seconds. Those sorts of things weren't possible before smart phones. I mention all of this only to point out that I'm not some old guy who hates modern technology. On the contrary, I love this stuff. I just don't like it very much when people use cell phones in discourteous and unprofessional ways.

Here are some of the situations I encounter when trying to contact flight instructors and applicants:

**No personalized outgoing message:** I try to call somebody, they don't answer, and I get a computer-generated outgoing message like "The person at 812-123-4567 is not available. You can leave a message after the beep." Why is that bad? Because the caller (me!) doesn't know if he is leaving a message for the intended person, or

somebody else. We often obtain phone numbers under less than ideal circumstances; it's noisy and we write down what we think we hear, the message we got is difficult to understand (more on that later), or we are told to call so-and-so, and I think the number is..., etc. I'm not even sure I have the correct number, and then the outgoing message is not in any way personalized so I have no clue if I'm calling the correct phone number for the person I want to reach. **The solution:** Take a few minutes to learn how to record an outgoing message in your own voice. State your name, and ask callers to leave you a message. That's all it takes. If you're an applicant, and perhaps a wanna-be professional pilot, do you want to give the impression that you care so little that you can't be bothered to record an outgoing message? If you're a CFI, will your potential students think you have time for them if you don't have time for a simple task like recording an outgoing message? Think about your image. Be professional.

**The smart-assed outgoing message** (more common among the younger generation). I call and there is a personal outgoing message, and it goes something like this: "Yo, this Joe, you know what to do!", or "This is Pete; what's up?" That may have been OK when you were in high school or your early college years, but now that you seek important goals, like a pilot certificate, or you're a CFI and want students (or a better job!), a more professional approach will yield better results. **The Solution:** Rerecord your outgoing message to include your full name, and ask callers to leave a message. Nobody likes a smart-ass.

**The long-winded outgoing message** (more common among the older generation). Back in the Dark Ages, before cell phones, and we were just getting into the era of message recorders at home, it was very common for an outgoing message to include detailed instructions about how to leave a message. But now we're in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and everybody knows that you leave a message after the beep, and that they need to leave their name and number, and what they want. So stop with the tutorial! Save the instruction for the airplane. **The solution:** If you have an outgoing message left over from the Jurassic Period, rerecord one without the instructions. Just your full name and a request for the caller to leave a message will do nicely. Then your callers won't have to listen through directions that they already know all about before they can leave a message. We're busy too, remember?

**The "race-to-the-finish" message** left on my phone. I get a call from somebody who needs a checkride, but I'm up flying so they have to leave me a message. They give their name, and then launch into a long-winded explanation about being nearly finished their training and need a checkride, maybe next week, because they're going on vacation, yadda-yadda. Then they realize that the recording time is going to run out soon so they speed up their delivery, and then give their phone number at the end. By that time they are talking so fast that I can't understand the number. I hit 4 on my phone to make the message play over again. Listen to the whole thing again; still can't get it. I

ask my wife to listen; she can't get it either. Frustrating! **The solution:** When you leave a message, *always* start out by giving your full name and phone number at the beginning, speaking slowly and distinctly. Next tell what you want in a few words; "I need a Private Pilot checkride, hopefully sometime next week." Then go into the details of special circumstances if you think that's necessary. If the recording time runs out before you're finished, no problem. You already gave your name and phone number so I'll be able to call you back without doing 15 minutes of research to get the correct number. Yes, I know, cell phones usually capture incoming phone numbers, and sometimes that solves the problem of the garbled number. But callers don't always want me to call back on the same number as the initial call (they called on their office phone but want to be called back on their home or cell phone), so just give your number at the *beginning* of each message you leave. Make it easy.

These two situations are not common, but I get them once in a while. The result of either one is that I can't leave a message. **Mailbox not set up.** I have to call you multiple times until I finally catch you near your phone. **The solution:** When you get a new phone, set up the mailbox immediately. In this day and age callers rightfully expect to be able to leave a message if you're not available. Think of it this way: How can I help you if I can't communicate with you? **Mailbox is full.** There's an outgoing message, often generic, and then a computer-generated voice advises that the mailbox is full and the call terminates. Boy, that person sure doesn't care about the rest of us. **The solution:** If somebody else set up your mailbox for you, you still need to learn how to access and delete messages. Keep your mailbox cleaned out. If you're so busy and get so many calls that you can't keep up, you need to set aside some time each day, maybe just before you go to bed, to clean out your mailbox.

Here are a few tips to help you manage messages. These procedures work with Android phones (70% of the market) and with the two largest carriers, Verizon and AT&T. Other carriers and iPhones will perform the same functions with different commands.

- If you really need to save a message then press 9 and save it in your archives. Don't leave it in your main mailbox.
- If you know a message is unneeded or unwanted after just a few words then you can get rid of it instantly by pressing 7 twice. There is no need to listen all the way through and then press 7 at the end. This is very helpful when cleaning out accumulated messages.
- Couldn't understand part of the message, or get that hurried phone number at the end? Press 4 to play the message again. You don't have to save it and then play it back.

Of all the situations I described above, the two I encounter most often are the race-to-the-finish message where I can't understand the phone number, and the lack of a personalized outgoing message so I can't tell if I'm leaving a message for the desired recipient. If I have trouble understanding the phone number but decide to take a shot at what I think it is, and the call goes to voice-mail, and then I get the generic computer-generated impersonal outgoing message, I have no idea if I have accomplished anything. When leaving a message, please give your full name and phone number first, while you're still speaking slowly. And take a minute to record your own outgoing message so callers will be sure they reached the real you.

What's a good outgoing message? Mine is *Hello, this is Larry Bothe. Please leave me a message* (slight up-inflection at the end, almost like it is a question). Polite, very short and simple, only 10 words, no instructions. I think it serves me well. What's the best classic TV show outgoing message? The hero from Miami Vice was a detective named Sonny Crockett who lived on a sailboat in a marina, with an (unseen) pet alligator named Elvis. His outgoing message (on an answering machine) was: *"This is Sonny. Tell me something I don't already know."*

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