

THE CENTER FOR SPEECH EXCELLENCE

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Keep Talking

For business professionals, the voice is as integral a part of an image as appearance.

by *Pamela H. Bashor and Marion Hankins*

Jim Smith, a 26-year-old electronics salesman, had researched his prospective client carefully. He knew that Farklund Contracting normally bought supplies from one of Jim's competitors, but that the company was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with both products and service. And due to an exciting item his own firm had recently developed, Jim was sure that he could make a sale today. He was new at the job, and wanted to make a name for himself quickly.

Jim was neatly dressed in a three-piece, gray pinstriped suit. His sales material was well organized in his leather briefcase. In the waiting room of Farklund Contracting, Jim mentally went over the main points he wanted to make,

remembering to project an air of professionalism, confidence, and geniality. When he was finally introduced to Mr. Farklund, Jim sensed that his potential client was in a receptive mood.

When Jim began his presentation, however, he noticed that Mr. Farklund seemed surprised, then somewhat irritated. He appeared to be paying more attention to Jim than to what Jim was saying. After only ten minutes, Mr. Farklund interrupted him, saying that Farklund Contracting didn't have a need for Jim's product at this time, and besides, he was due for another appointment in a few minutes.

Jim was stunned. Mr. Farklund had taken an instant dislike to him-but why?

Actually, Mr. Farklund was annoyed.

Jim's nasal, whiny way of talking had grated on his ears for a full ten minutes,

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the rest of the morning.

Alice Rogers, a 35-year-old department manager, was sitting at the large conference table in the executive suite of her company, listening to one of the vice presidents. She was conservatively dressed in a dark blue business suit and a plain white blouse. Alice, who had recently moved from the south to this prominent New Jersey corporation, was anxious about this, her first formal presentation. Finally, she was called upon to give her report on the quarterly productivity statistics. She had only spoken a short time when one of the executives yelled, "Speak up!" She tried to talk louder, but her nervousness and naturally quiet voice worked against her. After a while, she noticed that a few of the men began talking amongst themselves. She even thought she heard a few remarks phrased in a mock-southern drawl.

Alice's problem? Her heavy accent caused the audience to write her off as someone who

couldn't possibly have much to say to an august group of male executives. Also, her weak voice made people strain to hear her until they decided that it wasn't worth the effort. The more she talked, the more nervous she became, aware that she was not being accepted as the assured, professional woman she knew she was. She left the meeting angry and hurt.

Your Voice is the Most Public Part of You

Most business professionals try to cultivate a certain "look." They dress conservatively and are carefully groomed, well aware that first impressions have quite an impact on the people they work with. But everyone can remember meeting people whose voices don't match their physical appearances. And the way people sound can make as strong an impression as the way they dress—perhaps even stronger.

How often do you speak on the telephone to people you don't know? Have you even taken an immediate dislike to a person just from a single phone conversation? Or how about listening to interviewers on television

or radio? Have you ever found yourself paying more attention to a speaker's accent or poor voice quality than to the message that the speaker was trying to get across?

An unattractive or impaired voice can ruin an otherwise positive image. Likewise, good voice quality can help to overcome other faults.

In a study by Dr. Lillian Glass, a California speech pathologist, people who were rated as relatively attractive before they spoke were subsequently rated as less attractive if they had unpleasant voices. On the other hand, those who had been rated as physically unattractive were then rated more attractive if their voices were pleasant.

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Think about some of the negative images voices can convey:

- A nasal voice gives the impression of weakness or indecisiveness
- A voice that can't be heard is irritating (it makes the listener work too hard)
- A throaty or harsh voice implies that the person is gruff or unreasonable

- A voice that is too high-pitched may sound immature or "not serious"
- A voice pitched too low may sound depressed, strained, or monotonous
- A soft, breathy, intimate voice may help to communicate certain messages but not those of authority or honesty
- A heavily accented voice may cause the speaker to be considered unsophisticated

Fair or not, people are going to judge you on your voice quality.

A good voice should not show any effort or strain. It has a clear tone. It is smooth and flowing rather choppy or staccato, with the words spoken in phrases-not one word at a time. It is flexible both in pitch and volume. It does not tire or get hoarse, even after hours of use. Pronunciation is clear.

In short, a good voice is a pleasure to the listener.

Many people feel that they are stuck with their voices, that voice quality is

Particularly stressful jobs will tend to aggravate-and fatigue-the voice. Consequently, voice training becomes essential.

determined at birth and nothing can be done about it. Not true, voice quality needs to be developed. Bad voices are often the result of incorrect habits learned subconsciously, or ignorance of proper voice technique. Almost no voice is so bad that it is hopeless, nor so good that it cannot be improved.

There are some myths about the voice that need to be put to rest:

Myth 1: *The voice naturally tires with use, and*

some people have weaker throats than others.

If your voice gives out, you are probably straining too much when you speak. You may be talking louder than usual in a noisy room, or may be using a pitch that is too high or too low for your natural voice range. If you are using good technique, your voice should hold up for as long as you do, no matter how much talking you do during the day.

Myth 2: *Tired voices should be treated with voice lozenges, honey and*

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lemon tea, throat sprays, gargles, pills, steam, vitamins, and/or vocal rest.

Unless you have a cold, these treatments aren't going to do you much good. If you find yourself using them frequently to soothe a rough throat-particularly after long bouts of speaking, then you're probably using your voice incorrectly. That's why the irritation doesn't go away.

Myth 3: *Good voices are always low in pitch.*

This particular myth has gained growing acceptance in recent years, particularly as it applies to women. In order to emulate men in an effort to compete with them in business, women may try to copy the male voice. To them, this means deliberately lowering pitch. In truth, good voice quality has less to do with absolute pitch than it does with the whole vocal apparatus; adequate breath support, resonance, and clear articulation-as well as pitch.

Every voice has an optimal pitch range for speaking. When you use a pitch that is too high or too

low to be really comfortable, your voice begins to sound unpleasant and unnatural. Find your own optimum pitch range and stay within it. Don't try to raise or lower your pitch in order to meet an imagined ideal level.

Myth 4: *Voice training is only for singers and professional speakers.*

In fact, most business people are professional speakers, whether realize it or not. Certainly executives spend a good deal of their time in meetings or on the telephone. Salesmen, teachers, receptionists, and project managers rely heavily on their voices to persuade, explain, or present ideas. If you're in a position where you do a fair amount of talking, you need to develop a voice that will help you further your goals, not pose a hindrance.

If you have a particularly stressful job, that stress also tends to show up in your voice. And as people are learning relaxation techniques to revive their fatigued bodies, they are beginning to realize that vocal training can reduce voice fatigue and its side effects: hoarseness, sore throat, and laryngitis.

Sometimes all you need to do is recognize a problem in order to correct it. If you talk too softly, correct breathing can help you better project your voice. Other problems may require professional evaluation and perhaps training-this might be true of the tired or strained voice. Vocal chords that are constantly under stress may develop nodules or ulcers-inflammations caused by the vocal chords rubbing against each other. These nodules will heal when proper voice techniques are used. Occasionally a voice is neglected for a long period of time and surgery is eventually required to remove the nodules. Voice therapy is then needed after surgery to develop proper voice techniques and

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prevent the nodules from reoccurring.

The following exercise should give you a good indication as to whether you are breathing properly.

Lie down on the floor or on the bed, then relax. Put your hand flat on your stomach. You should feel your stomach rising and falling. Then place your hand on your chest; it should move only slightly or not at all.

Now stand up. Place your hand on you chest and read a few sentences from a book or a magazine. Does your chest rise and fall as you talk? If so you are using your chest muscles to compress you lungs, thus producing the breath that enable you to speak. This is incorrect breathing. It causes harshness, strain, and a tired voice.

Still standing, try to breath the same way you did lying down, that is by compressing your diaphragm with your stomach muscles. Then try to talk while breathing this way. Keep your hand on you chest to see if it moves

at all. It should remain motionless and only your stomach should move in and out.

Try and cultivate the habit of “diaphragmatic breathing” when ever you talk for any length of time. Your voice will hold up much better and sound more pleasant too.

There are several things one can do to protect the voice:

- Avoid screaming or shouting. This can lead to a raw hoarse voice. In extreme cases screaming can cause acute abusive laryngitis-a swelling of the vocal chords, which could take a day or two to return to normal.
- Avoid talking in noisy situations. If you can't control the voice level, than don't talk louder to compensate. Instead use a normal conversational volume level but slow down your speech and enunciate carefully.
- Minimize coughing, sneezing, and throat clearing. These are protective reflexes that help the body clear its airways. However, they do

cause vocal chords to rub violently against each other. That can lead to the same kind of vocal chord damage as screaming.

- Don't talk louder or change your pitch when you have a head cold. When your ears are stuffed up you may feel you cannot be understood unless you adjust your voice. But remember, other people's ears are not congested and they can hear you well enough.
- Don't smoke. Is others are smoking around you, drink water. This will reduce the likelihood of throat irritation.

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- Learn diaphragmatic breathing and use it whenever you speak.
- If your voice is unpleasant or uncomfortable consult a speech pathologist. He or she can evaluate your voice, detect vocal chord problems, suggest ways in which you can develop a pleasant voice, and offer training.

Much like any instrument, the voice requires periodical tune-ups for maximum effectiveness. Professionals whose jobs necessitate a good deal of speech interaction will find the going a lot easier by being aware of the critical importance of the voice, and taking steps to ensure that they optimize its use.

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