

## Talk hard or smart

### THIS VOICE TRAINER TEACHES EFFECTIVE SPEECH WITH A BANG

By Marla Paul

**M**EM-brane," bellows Larry Adler, producing a powerful "MEM" but losing it on the "brane," which ends in a whimper.

Bill Rush listens carefully. "What you suffer from here is too much effort," he says thoughtfully, then shrieks, "MEM-BRAAANNEE." His voice resonates through the small office.

Rush is a voice trainer. He coaches people to talk, sing or shout with minimum effort and maximum efficiency.

Adler is a commodities trader. He works among the frenzied whirl of men and women who spend seven hours a day screaming their lungs out. If you can't be heard, you can't make money.

This is Rush's third consultation with Adler, who has been loudly reciting words like membrane, zero, zany, zebra and senator before the trainer's practiced ear. Adler (who asked that his name be changed) is trying to keep his pitch up—for better control—and maintain a respectable volume.

"SE-NA-tor!" Adler shouts. He swallows the last syllable and looks sheepish.

"You just forgot how to dismount," Rush says kindly. The trader tries it again, this time with success. "Consonants are your best friend," Rush advises him.

Adler has been practicing diligently—in the laundry. "It's hard in the apartment," he explains. "People get upset and it scares the dog."

Like many traders, Adler's problem is he tries too hard to speak loudly. "Their fists clench, the face turns red, the eyes close," Rush said later, describing traders' oratorical style. "They look like they are having a heart attack."

Rush shows them the alternative. "They have a choice of working smart or working hard," he said. "If breathing comes from the belly, that's a lot of work and movement and distance. With the abdominal muscles stuck out, you don't control the job well. You want to feel breathing through the waist rather than the ribcage."

Upper chest breathing is OK for runners, but talkers should pull the diaphragm up through the abdominal

cavity to force the lungs to expand. In case you've never taken anatomy, put your hand around your waist, sides and back and breathe. If you feel your abdomen expand when you inhale, you're doing it right.

Besides commodities traders, Rush works with actors, opera singers, executives, trial lawyers, newscasters, disc jockeys, salespeople and beauty queens.

Rush honed Chicagoan Ruth Booker's interview technique before she competed for the Miss Illinois title. "Bill showed me a new way of breathing," Booker said. "When I was trying out for Miss Chicago, my voice was too soft and I came across as not very confident. He taught me to pronounce my words with more emphasis." Booker won the Miss Illinois crown.

Rush taught cabaret singer Karen Mason how to croon with less effort so she didn't hurt her vocal chords. He also helped "Saturday Night Live's" Mary Gross develop power and range. "I have a breathy voice and I waste a lot of air when I speak because I don't get enough support from my diaphragm," said Gross, a Second City alum.

Of course, there's more to talking than breathing. There's pitch, pronunciation, posture and flow ("it's like a good golf shot")—all of which are part of the lesson. "I help people control communication," Rush said. "I give them insight into what the voice says and how to be in control of that. The first line of communication is what the face and the body do. The second is what the voice says."

Rush, 43, is a former professional singer who began investigating the technical workings of voice when his own went on the blink. "I couldn't get to the high notes. I wasn't sure what was going to come out. Things were getting spooky. I wanted to know why. I had no insight into what went into the method."

He began accompanying top-notch singing teachers during their lessons to observe their technique. Then he enrolled in Northwestern University and earned a master's degree in applied voice. During and after graduate school he taught singing, while performing at wed-



Scott Mikros, a Chicago Board of Trade bond trader, gets some pointers from voice trainer Bill Rush.



dings and funerals.

During that time, Rush became fascinated with and began researching non-verbal communication. At first he practiced his new knowledge in the theatrical community.

Then he began applying it to business and sales, where little voice work was being done. "When you read books on sales, when they get to the part on what to do with your voice, they get real gen-

eral and real vague," Rush said.

"One of the big problems in sales or pressure of any kind is we're a human being first and a performer second," Rush pointed out. The "human being" can't help but react to his or her surroundings.

Take the chief executive of a utility company who had to deliver bad news at a shareholders' meeting. "He's being met in a hostile environment," Rush said. "Contrary to what people may perceive, they don't have exteriors made of steel."

The executive consulted Rush to learn how to present his news with the least painful results. Adding to the executive's problem was his tendency under pressure to act like a high school principal—his former occupation. "That's how to lose it," Rush said. "He doesn't want to be arrogant. At the same time he has to be assertive. It's almost a no-win situation."

Nervousness is unavoidable. What counts is how you deal with it, he said. Rush himself was nervous about an important presentation he was to make. "Quite frankly, next Monday scares me to death. I'm going to take that information and use it for me."

"I'm going to be anxious and certain things will happen. First my inner tempo will pick up and I'll speed up," Rush said, quickening his tempo to mock the breathless pace of a nervous speaker. "Second, my upper body will tense up and my breathing pattern will change. You lose depth of voice and your pitch goes up."

**B**ut once he acknowledges being scared, he said, "I can slow down my inner tempo. I can release the upper body. I can slow down my breathing." He'll still be nervous, but it won't show much.

He also warns against the "Ted Baxter syndrome"—a super-smooth, insincere announcer's voice. "One of the things that makes you believable is accessibility. When you hear an announcer's voice it is like someone wearing sunglasses. I don't know what they're up to. It drives me crazy."

Women's voices often cause them problems, particularly in business, Rush believes, because they are confused about who they want to be. Many women, he adds, lack resonance in their voices. "They have to come to terms with how they want to sound," he said.

They fear "If I come on too strong I'll be a bitch," he boomed, then shifted into a meek "If I'm too weak, I'll be a wimp."

Rush, who has a theatrical bent, loves to play with voices and is constantly switching in and out of them to illustrate his point. His clients listen to their delivery on a tape recorder, then experiment with their sound. Ultimately they, not Rush, decide what part of their voice profile to change or retain. "I am," he said, "an extra set of eyes and ears."

Several weeks later, trader Larry Adler graduated. Now, he gets lots of attention in the pits, Rush called him recently to see how he was doing. "When he said 'HELLO!'" Rush said, "I knew what the answer was."