

The sound of your voice is what really counts

By NEESA SWEET

No matter how much money your company spends on telephone equipment, effective use of telecommunications can come down to one single element—the quality of the human voices on the line.

The voice is seldom considered when choosing among a private branch exchange (PBX), central office (CENTREX), calling features, data transmission and system capability. However, what a caller says and how he says it ultimately completes the job for the client or makes the sale.

Chicago voice consultant William Rush says the ability to create desirable characteristics in your voice is particularly important on the phone because these conversations

can't rely on physical presence and appearance. Speech mannerisms that are unnoticed in face-to-face meetings can become distracting on the telephone.

Mr. Rush said voice control depends on four factors: breath, pitch, articulation and flow.

"You want the most sound for the least effort," Mr. Rush said. He suggests breathing from your waist, with your sides, rather than your abdomen, expanding with each breath.

As for pitch, most people can effectively speak at a tone about five to seven musical scale notes above the lowest note that they can sing. This level provides room for the voice to fluctuate up or down, while avoiding scratchiness.

The musical scale, "do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do," is a useful tool for testing pitch level, he said.

A little experimenting will help determine the most comfortable speaking pitch. The base level is used for supporting words, the words that "frame" an idea. Key words in a sentence are spoken somewhat higher, while certain accent words are spoken lower.

Pitch also can be used to convey meaning. For example, something said in confidence might be spoken at a lower level.

Articulation, or diction, refers to the ways words are pronounced. Improvement in this area requires control of factors such as the amount of outward push on consonant sounds.

Flow refers to the movement of speech toward a key word or idea.

Just as a ballet dancer creates a fluid motion out of several smaller steps, so the sentence must be delivered as a coherent whole, Mr. Rush said.

While these are basic elements of speech, a speaker also must be aware of the authenticity, transparency and self-regulation levels within his voice. We tend to "measure" these subjective qualities in each others' voices, and often respond to their underlying message rather than the speaker's words, Mr. Rush said.

The perception of authenticity can be partly controlled through pitch. "If you start too low, there is nowhere to go and your conversation will come across as being flat," Mr. Rush said.

Transparency, or its obverse,

opaqueness, refer to the perception created in the listener that he can "see into" another's voice.

"Henry Kissinger's voice is very opaque," said Mr. Rush. "It is low and even and gives no information."

Non-transparency in a voice can be the verbal equivalent of wearing mirrored sunglasses, Mr. Rush suggested. It can chase listeners away rather than draw them in.

There is verbal and vocal information in everything we say. When vocal information is missing, listeners will have trouble validating statements, and thus there will be less perception of trust. Transparency is important in sales situations, or in conversations between lawyers and their clients.

One element of controlling transparency might be to bring the voice down at the end of sentences, Mr. Rush said. "Lowering the level at the end of a sentence makes the sentence say, 'I'm convinced!'" he said.

Self-regulation means assuming control of such factors as breathing. "If a person has the capability to self-observe, then he or she can self-regulate," he said. Self-regulation is especially important in situations such as telemarketing, where the 30th call must sound as good as the third.

Speed is the overriding factor in control of a conversation or control of the conversation's outcome, Mr. Rush said. Often, our inner perception tells us we are not going fast enough, when in reality, we are talking too fast.

When the level of speed and the level of excitement are faster than the listener's, then the listener finds himself feeling too slow and thus anxious. Slowing down can actually turn the listener's anxiety into excitement, Mr. Rush said.

He suggests reminding yourself to consciously slow your thoughts, slow your body and thus slow your speech from the inside out.

The physical environment is another factor that can affect the quality of a telephone conversation. In a "bullpen" type of room, where people sit close together and talk on the phone, there is a tendency to lower the voice and lessen pitch, Mr. Rush said.

The unconscious desire is to avoid being intrusive on the next person as well as not wanting others to hear what you're saying.

While managers can enhance employees' effectiveness by seating them farther apart, Mr. Rush suggests trying to imagine that you are actually alone in the room. "If you can behave as if no one is around, then the voice has a chance to be more transparent, to be more alive through a wider range of inflection," he said.

Mr. Rush said certain relaxation techniques can control the quality of the voice on the telephone. In addition to slowing down in general, focusing on loosening the upper body can be helpful. "Upper-body tension can change vocal quality; it can put a tentative edge into the voice." #

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