

# The Voice Doctor

*RR Interview: William Rush, Voice Consultant*

by Pamela Savage Forbat

**W**illiam Rush entered the field of voice consulting through the theatrical world. As a professional singer, Rush became interested in the mechanics of the voice when he nearly lost his own 20 years ago through strain. He received a master's degree in applied voice from Northwestern University and turned to voice coaching for several Broadway touring companies, including *Annie*. He then made his way into the Chicago Commodity trading pits where his "Shouting Made Easy" seminars have found an endless supply of traders with sore throats. Rush now offers private consultation and workshops on vocal effectiveness for sales professionals in a wide variety of industries. In the following interview, Rush discusses the importance of the voice in cold calling, the unique voice problems salespeople face and what they can do to overcome them.

*How is the voice important in a telephone sales presentation?*

The voice is the calling card in a telephone conversation. In a face-to-face presentation, a great number of negative voice factors aren't quite as important. For instance, I'm working with two people now who do beautifully face-to-face because they carry themselves well. But in both cases, they have speech mannerisms that over the phone are really disconcerting. When you see them in person, you don't really notice the mannerisms as much because of the overriding physical presence. We first see with our eyes and then with our ears. We simply can't afford to do everything face-to-face, though. Right now, people are trying to do "dress for success" with the voice to create the perfect sales voice. But few people have insight into what the voice is really doing.

*So is the voice more important than the message?*

Yes. The voice itself is really what the other person is listening to. It tells more than what a person is saying. When I'm cold called, this is immediately what I check. What someone hears in the first few seconds will often determine whether the conversation will continue in any meaningful



way. It's important that what one's voice does doesn't put people off. If it does, some barriers are created that the salesperson will have to work through. The batting average of successful sales will go down.

*What are the elements of the voice that affect how a message is received?*

I measure four general areas: breath, pitch, articulation and flow. With an awareness of those areas, people can have a fairly decent voice-product. They can then become aware of their own internal responses.

*What do people need to know about the qualities of the voice to be aware of what they're doing?*

First of all, most people make the assumption that they're going to have to do something about their voice. Usually, that's not the case. Most people are doing most things fairly well most of the time. A lower-pitched voice isn't any better than a higher-pitched voice. Most of us are in the middle.

My goal is to train people to maintain an evenness of quality in their voices and get away from "magical thinking" or long,

drawn-out motivational processes. I know of one woman who would get up in the morning and do about an hour of aerobic exercise, read motivational materials with breakfast and listen to motivational tapes while dressing—all to prepare for morning cold calls. This is really making the job hard. What I want to do is help people very quickly and efficiently get at what their voices are doing and name the individual skills they need in order to self-correct as they go.

*What voice problems are most common among salespeople?*

They think a deep voice is best and end up in what I call the "Ted Baxter syndrome." The problem with a Ted Baxter broker is that it's like talking to someone in mirrored sunglasses. Listeners can't tell if that broker is trustworthy. They want to hear a confident professional, but they want to hear a person, too. There needs to be accessibility.

I call the next problem "overdriving your headlights." The hardest thing for salespeople to deal with is when they're moving at such a pace that the client can't keep up. When you're working on something that's really going well for you, it's hard to realize your mind is working faster than your client's. The rapid-fire machine-gun deliv-

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ery usually not only loses clients' attention, but makes them anxious. Clients feel pressured and resentful. The first thing I look at in a sales presentation is slowing down the inner tempo before slowing down the pace of the voice.

Because there's something to be gained or lost in a sale, there's a normal physiological reaction to the anxiety of the risk in that situation. The upper body tenses, breathing quickens and anxiety reactions alter the voice. Pitch gets higher, the voice takes on a slight edge, the depth is lost from the sound and the speed of delivery increases. This throws a warning signal to the listener. At that point, things go on hold as far as the listener is concerned.

*Do you think salespeople overcompensate with their voices because they're insecure about themselves or their product knowledge?*

Not really. I think brokers just want to do

well and try harder. This often comes through in the voice as pleading. Someone will get on the phone and sound completely different than in normal conversation. This makes clients wonder if the broker is credible and causes them to question the product's validity as well. Salespeople can be very sensitive, which works as a double-edged sword because they often tie their personal value into their productivity. The most difficult thing for them to do is just get out of their own way and trust their talent. Voice control allows them to take the focus off personal worth as the source of a selling problem.

*What characterizes the most effective voice in a sales situation?*

Within its own type, whether high or low, it's a voice that has a sense of purpose. There's easy pacing, but with no sense of being swept along. There's a flow. In tennis, you'd call it a good stroke; you move steadily through the point of contact. There's enthusiasm, perhaps, but more importantly, the voice sounds goal-oriented. There's also a sense of inclusion, of drawing the client into a conversation. There's variety in pitch and depth. Without depth, an edge comes into the voice, and the voice starts to lose focus.

*How can brokers read a prospect's voice?*

Usually, prospects will try hard to keep a polite distance. A mask slams down on the voice. This can be very confusing to brokers because they initially can't tell how prospects are feeling. But prospects will generally allow 15 to 20 seconds before they make a judgment about the broker's voice. Then they'll give a broker an opportunity to ask questions. In those first 15 seconds, there's no way to get a sense of whether or not a prospect is interested. When a prospect asks a question using a clinical tone of voice, brokers can start feeling like they're really cooking with that prospect. But they must answer the question tersely without sounding too professorial and not let the voice wander.

*Should brokers try to pattern their voices after their prospects'?*

We all do a certain amount of patterning unconsciously. But I feel that brokers must use their natural voices in almost all cases. You lose credibility when you purposely plan patterning. If you're talking to someone who has a soft voice, though, you shouldn't boom, even if that's your natural style. Prospects who talk quickly and abruptly usually don't want to intimidate, but they want information concisely.

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### *Salespeople are afraid of using silence. But silence will elicit questions and answers from a prospect.*

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They're probably on the same creative tier as the broker who's calling, so brokers in that case should match their pace of speech.

*How are negative emotions conveyed by the voice?*

When we get irritated or impatient, there's a subtle shift in pitch and pressure that comes through unintentionally. People also easily pick up on forced cheerfulness and enthusiasm, and it really makes them mad. I tend to depart from scripts for cold calling. I like a tight outline, but I prefer working opportunistically. If you are going to use a script, you have to find some way to own it—to make it part of your personality. If clients hear a flat quality in a voice, they think the broker is trying to remember the next word, or that the idea presented isn't the broker's own.

*How should brokers change their voices to get hostile or confused clients to be more responsive?*

If they judge a conversation is worth pursuing, it's often a good idea to directly ask if it would be more convenient to call back at a specific time. Otherwise, just continue a presentation as cleanly and coolly as possible. The mistake that could be made vocally is to try to cheer up the prospect or turn to social banter to relax the prospect. If the voice says it means business, that will defuse the situation.

*How can silence be effective?*

It's one of the hardest things to use. If you've said what you planned to say, just shut up. Salespeople are afraid of using silence for fear a prospect will say, "Is that all?" But silence will elicit questions and ideas from a prospect. It gives brokers the opportunity to get more information to ask better questions. But you can't quantify when to use silence in all conversations. You need to use individual judgment in each conversation.

*What about brokers who have a minor speech problem, vocal habit or ethnic accent? Should they work to get rid of it, or can they capitalize on it?*

Very often, vocalisms such as "umm" and "you know" are replacements for thought. They also fill up what could have been an effective use of silence. When this comes through constantly, a person has some work ahead to change. Communication stops dead. But with accents, I say leave them alone except in cases where a person tends to put emphasis on the wrong words or syllables because their native language has a different syntax from English. An accent can be absolutely charming. Most people aren't immediately attracted or turned off by accents. If a person with an accent is assertive in using his or her voice, the accent can become a marketing tool. On a follow-up call, you'll clearly be remembered.

*Do women have unique voice problems?*

Very definitely. Usually, they do better on the phone than in person. I'm not sure why. They're subtly given double messages: Be firm, but don't be pushy. Be gentle, but don't be passive. I call women's voice problems "nice ladies don't." Nice ladies don't ask for what they want. What it comes down to vocally is nonassertiveness. Women I've worked with have told me that there's always this threat in the back of their minds that if they did what I told them to do, their prospects would think they were cold.

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There's a tendency to retreat when there's conflict or some problem-solving to do. Women don't need to slug it out verbally, but they shouldn't suddenly get self-effacing and obsequious.

*What steps can brokers take to change their voice behavior?*

What makes voice unusual to start with is that we don't hear ourselves. I can look in the mirror and get a good idea of what clients will see when I walk in their offices, but I can't do that with my voice. By taping their calls, brokers can get warmer in understanding the elements of the voice. You can see if your articulation is good, your pace is even, your thoughts are organized and whether or not you're focused on a goal. But pitch and depth are very difficult to identify and differentiate. You can speak at a pretty high pitch, and as long as there's

depth in the sound, the listener doesn't think of the pitch as quite so high.

Results will be skewed considerably if you don't use good recording equipment. If the microphone has a very narrow dynamic range or if the tape or playback ability is poor, a lot of high and low frequencies will be missing. The nasal overtones will be accentuated. Hissing sounds will come out much stronger.

*What do you do in your workshops?*

In a seminar, I really get down to nuts and bolts. I demonstrate the options people have in expressing the four elements of good voice—breath, pitch, articulation and flow. For example, I show what good breathing is all about and dismiss the myths we have from childhood. I try to quantify it so people won't forget it five minutes later. The workshops also provide group feedback. My aim is to get people comfortable with the fact that they're never going to hear themselves the way other people do. Voice exercises as homework are necessary training as well. In private consultation, I usually meet once a week for half an hour and tape everything for playback at home. I have brokers give their sales presentations to me in person and over the phone, which is the toughest forum they'll ever face. ■