

PRISM

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THE VOICE AS A MARKETING TOOL

by William Rush

As a self-employed communications professional, one of my easiest tasks is to say what is special about another person's work or services. It is very easy for me to enumerate the benefits of working with one of my partners.

For example, I can tell a Chinese-American prospect seeking accent-reduction training that Betty Jacobsen's approach not only helps them reduce their accent, but

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that her background in linguistics will aid in learning how to speak English with English language rules rather than Chinese. Likewise, I can tell a stutterer that Roberta Strandberg has superb clinical skills and an extensive background in communicative disorders.

My hardest task is to tell others what I do, since my field is still a bit exotic. I opted for humor in solving this problem. When people ask what a voice consultant does, I tell them that I teach people how to make their words and voices agree with the visual aspects of their presentations. I help lawyers sound sincere, stockbrokers sound like a million dollars over the phone, and technical speakers sound interesting and lively.

Other professional communicators – especially self-employed ones – need to identify the track they are on. There are many different kinds of writers, for instance, and a potential client needs to know (in a few words) what you specialize in.

The second task is saying what you do in a way that tells people that you are good at what you do, that you will be easy to deal with and that you will do what you say you can do.

The elements of interest in vocal communication are speed, pitch, quality, text and inflection.

Speed: Most people speak too quickly, especially when they are challenged or if there are stakes in the game (such as a job interview). A moderate pace will help you retain control of your message and the mechanics of making sound.

Pitch: Most of us react in one of two ways when we are uncomfortable or there is risk. We tense in the upper body and the pitch goes up. The voice takes on a tone or urgency, often with a strident quality. The other reaction is to drop the pitch far too low for easy audibility. Teenagers will often do this when they sense they are overpowered. We usually characterize it as mumbling. The pitch needs to be high enough for the last syllable of our sentences to glide downward. This signal tells our listener that we mean what we say, it tells how important the idea is, and it often indicates enthusiasm for what we are advocating.

Quality: A fairly clear, steady sound will be most



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believable. A sound that either brays or sounds like an announcer usually will not work.

Text: Less is usually more. I chose the lawyer, stockbroker and technical speaker line because the juxtapositions were informative, economical and light.

Inflection: A message becomes more credible if the speaker represents it positively. Speaking in declarative sentences – making sure that the last syllable of the sentence inflects downward – gives the listener a reason to entertain your ideas. If you sound tentative, why should they be enthusiastic?

Inflection is also a product of our socialization. Women will tend to inflect upward at ends of sentences more often than men. Women will also tend to give answers posed as a question. If the audience is male, there is great risk that the idea will not be heard, taken seriously, or worse yet, be appropriated by the listener as his own. The best idea is to voice your ideas as declarative statements and make sure that the last syllable comes down at the end.

Not surprisingly, many people unconsciously hear the items I have discussed. They make judgments about our competence, interest, enthusiasm and confidence based on what our voice tells them.

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