Your Vocal Image

by Candice M. Coleman, PhD

Just as the clothes you decide to wear gives others an impression of who you are and how you feel about yourself, so does your voice. It’s an important part of your appearance—your “image.” What does your voice sound like? Is it high, thin, shrill? Or maybe flat, dull and sloppy?

It has been said that how we say something is 5 times more important than what we say. Your voice directly affects the way people react to you. It can mean the difference between getting a specific job—or not. Research indicates that people with identifiable accents are less likely to be given jobs which are considered high prestige or have high public contact.

Your voice can influence whether you’re taken seriously—or not. If you sound like a little girl, you’ll often be treated that way.

It may also determine if you’re considered intelligent—or not. People equate sloppy speech with sloppy thinking.

When people find out that I’m a voice coach (among other things), they’ll frequently confess that they don’t like their voices. They’ll ask me if it’s really possible to make significant changes in tone, accent, etc. The answer is “yes,” although there are very few quick fixes. You’ve been talking the way you do for a long time and it can be hard changing habits of a lifetime.

However, there ARE some things that you can do today to have a more effective voice.

First, reduce as much stress and tension as possible. We carry a lot of tension in our shoulders and necks and of course, that’s where the voice is produced. You probably know many exercises to reduce stress, but may...
not think of using them to improve your voice. Try it and notice how much better you feel and sound.

Second, make certain that you’re breathing efficiently and effectively. A voice that’s thin or screechy or that’s graveling out at the bottom isn’t being supported by the breath.

When you inhale, it’s like you’re filling up a balloon, your rib cage and stomach area should expand. When you exhale or speak, the air goes out of the balloon and your rib cage and stomach get smaller. Don’t just fill the upper part of your lungs with air. That’s like filling the gas tank only part way and expecting to go the full distance.

Third, make sure that you develop crisp, clear articulation without over-articulating. If people can’t understand what you’re saying they won’t be able to appreciate your ideas.

Remember the tongue twisters we chanted as children? Well, they can help your articulation as an adult. Keep repeating them as you increase the speed.
They will inevitably fall apart, but that’s okay. Start again and try to go a bit faster the next time. Look for a book of tongue twisters to help you work on all the sounds or go to www.uebersetztzung.at/twister/en.htm.

Finally, use more vocal variety. You can change the quality, rate, volume, and pitch of your voice to add interest and keep your listeners engaged.

Your rate should be conversational as well as connected to the content. Some speakers try to add energy by speaking so quickly that they are almost unintelligible. If the words can’t be understood, what’s the point???

If you know that you’re a “rusher,” practice speaking VERRRRRRYYYY slowly, even “painfully” slow. Then when you begin to speed up during a conversation or presentation, you may get faster, but you’re less likely to rush.

Make certain that your volume is appropriate to the content and the environment. The volume you use to speak to 2 people in a small office will be different than what you use to speak to 20 people in a conference room or 200 people in an auditorium.

Pitch is the easiest way to add variety. It’s the highness or lowness of the voice. Some people use only 3–4 notes when they speak. We call them monotone. You should use a range of at least 8 notes.

Try reading the newspaper using a LOT of pitch range. Really go “over the top.” It will sound silly, but keep working at it. As you get used to hearing yourself speaking with a greater range of notes, it will become easier to use them in everyday speech. Just as you won’t speak as slowly as you practiced in the previous exercise, you’ll tone down your range as well, while still keeping some of the increased variety.

This is just a taste of voice work, but you can already begin to put these ideas and exercises into practice to improve your vocal image. No one has a “perfect” voice and significant improvement can seem to take a very long time. But, remember, you’re breaking habits of a lifetime and it’s worth it. So, say what you mean and say it WELL!

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