

## What about an Accent?

By Judith Filek—President,  
Impact Communications, Inc.

People enjoy accents, as long as they understand them. In fact, there is a certain allure to an accent, whether it is a foreign or regional accent. However, if people struggle to understand you and focus on what you have just said, versus what you are currently saying, your accent or diction presents a problem. In addition, it may affect whether people can work effectively with you by phone.

Anytime someone hears a voice on the telephone; they conjure up an image of the person on the other end of the line. Hopefully, the image created says that the speaker is confident, knowledgeable, sincere and trustworthy. But perception is reality. If people do not hear that in the person's voice, their perception will be negative. Diction dramatically affects whether people respond positively to a speaker. Consider the message that your diction communicates. Would someone say that you are well-spoken?

Good articulation takes work and a commitment to pause long enough so that the lips, teeth and tongue can work in harmony. Speaking quickly works against polished articulation. On the other hand, no one wants to listen to a person who sounds stilted and dim-witted due to over-pronouncing. One should aim for fluency, saying the all syllables in the words and placing the correct emphasis on each word. The question is how to do it.

First, you will need a tape recorder, some printed materials from work or from newspapers to use for practice exercises and a mirror. You will also need to listen to newscasters since they routinely have stellar diction. Maxwell Maltz in his book, *Psycho-Cybernetics* says it takes three weeks to change a habit. Correcting your diction issues may take longer, depending on the severity of your issue and how often you practice. It may also be necessary for you to work with a communication's coach on a one-on-one basis.

Week One:

Work on Individual Words

Since fluency depends on saying words correctly, week one should be spent practicing pronouncing individual words and mimicking the melody and stress patterns of clear American speech. To practice, read any list of one or two syllable words into your tape recorder. Play it back and listen for any words that were **not** said clearly. You may notice that you have trouble only with particular sounds.

Also, when you are practicing, pay attention to whether both lips move and how much you open your mouth by looking in a mirror. Vowels, *a, e, I, o, u* and *y*, are said with an **open** mouth, i.e. *go, father, anxious, peas, let, cup, pay, will, and turn*, in contrast to consonants, like *spring, trick, play, and grain* that are said with a closed mouth. The tricky part is noticing that some vowels are said at the front of the mouth on the tip of the tongue, while others are said in middle of the mouth or even in the back of the mouth.

Front	Middle	Back
need	turn	noon
miss	early	put
end	doctor	obey
map	honest	saw
dance	love	park

Moreover, the consonants of *P, B, M, and W* require that both lips move equally (i.e. *pop, bubble, mom, wow*).

Week Two:

Work on Short phrases

Once you enunciate individual words correctly, the next step is to put words together in short phrases so that they sound smooth and melodious to the ear. As people put phrases together, it is easy to forget to say all the syllables in a word or to have your tongue in an incorrect position. To practice, tape yourself saying short sentences that stress both

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long and short vowel sounds. If you routinely incorrectly say, for example, the **d**, **t** or **l** sound, make sure to incorporate sentences that allow you to work on the problem. The following is a list of some short phrases:

1. Can I have **half** a sandwich?
2. I am working on a **speech**.
3. I **miss** being home.
4. Let me stand up.
5. Can you **turn** on the air conditioning?
6. The drum turned Tom off.

Another good idea in Week Two is to practice some tongue twisters. Say them as fast as you can without losing diction. Good sources for tongue twisters are the Doctor Seuss Books. Other examples are the following:

- Toy boat
- Fast, fluffy finches
- Bibbity, bobbity boo
- Silly Sally sitting by the seashore

Week Three:

Work on Inflection  
and Stress in Full Paragraphs

Obviously, the goal is fluency and vocal variety. In Week Three, one should work on reading longer passages of work related materials into the tape recorder. When the tape is played back, pay attention to any words or phrases that you found difficult to say correctly. Notice how often you are pausing and how many words within each sentence you are emphasizing. No one enjoys listening to some-

one with a monotone voice. Also, make sure you are reading the materials slow enough for people to take notes and slow enough for you to be able to bring emotion into your voice.

Polishing your diction takes real commitment. It takes working at it day in and day out and over and over again during the day. The payoff, however, will be worth your efforts. The more confident you are that you are speaking clearly, the more comfortable you will feel as a communicator.

*Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. When you have to have impact phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.*