

An Rx for Key Vocal Issues

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.

Susan works as a technical support person for a large corporation. Her days are spent answering up to forty or fifty phone calls each day. In her annual review, Susan's new supervisor told her, after listening to some of her calls, her voice doesn't sound warm or friendly. Susan was told to work on this and to report back on her progress within the next 90 days. Susan was shocked with the feedback and didn't know what to do to remedy the situation. In fact, she even went back to her boss for guidance. All her boss could say was, "Try putting a smile in your voice." Many of us who work on the phones are told to correct vocal problems, and, like Susan, we don't know what to do when problems occur.

There are six vocal issues that people use to assess your voice. Ultimately, these vocal factors determine whether or not people will trust you. If any of these six issues are particularly annoying, callers feel uneasy about the individual on the other end of the line. In fact, some hang up and dial-in again; others ask to speak to a supervisor. It is not enough to think only about what you say. You must also think about how you say it. The six vocal issues that callers assess reps on are:

- Volume
- Speed
- Clarity
- Pitch
- Uptalk
- Tone

Unless it is a congenital issue, any vocal issue really can be fixed by pausing and breathing, but first you have to recognize that a problem exists.

Volume: If callers frequently ask you to speak up, you should know you have an issue with volume. By pausing and breathing, you can raise the volume of your voice. We hear our voice reverberating through "gray matter and skull." It can sound plenty loud to us, but, to those with hearing problems or to those working in noisy environments, it is bothersome. Practice taping your voice while consciously speaking louder and see what kind of feedback you get from your caller. In addition, put the microphone of the head set closer to your mouth- and keep it there. If the volume is too loud, your customers will let you know.

Speed: You will know you have an issue with speed if people frequently ask you to repeat what you have said. Callers need time to digest your recommendations. They need time to see if ideas make sense to them. The quick fix for issues with speed is simply to insert more pauses. For example, make sure to pause at the end of each statement or at the end of each sentence. Record some of your calls and play them back to get feedback on whether or not you actually are pausing. Many of us think we are pausing, but, in actuality, we are not.

Clarity: You will know you have an issue with clarity if people frequently say, "What did you say?" If you speak quickly, undoubtedly, you will have an issue with clarity. The lips, teeth and tongue won't be in the right position for clear enunciation. You will also hear lots of non-words, "ums" and "ahs." If you are pausing, you will have the breath to say all of the syllables in each word without feeling rushed. You will also have time to think and thus eliminate any "filler words" that come when you are thinking out loud. To assess whether clarity is an issue or to practice enunciating, review your outbound voice messages before sending them.

Pitch: If someone asks to speak to your mother when you are at home, you will know that your pitch is too high, and the perception is that you are a child. The pitch of your voice should be varied. If it is always in the low range, callers can see you as annoyed with them. To correct a problem with pitch, take a pause and a breath and then emphasize your idea. Practice singing in the shower or in your church choir to expand the range of your

Continued on page 2

voice. Your pitch should never be monotonous.

Uptalk: Uptalk is a frequent issue with people who work on phones. It means that statements end as if in a question. Customers find it is condescending for you to be constantly checking with them after each statement. To determine if this is an issue, get feedback. If it is a problem, practice taping your explanations of a process or procedure and pause right before completing your statements so that you can consciously end on a downward tone.

Tone: Your tone can sound strident if you aren't taking enough pauses and breaths. Tone can also be affected by whether or not you are smiling. When you smile, your voice will sound warmer. Keep a mirror by your phone and watch your facial expression when talking to a customer.

Your voice is your calling card with your customer. It is worth the extra effort to think about how that voice sounds. By paying attention to your voice, you insure that your customer, as well as your supervisor, will find you sincere and friendly.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.