



THE MEDIUM *is the message*

HOW YOU SPEAK SAYS A LOT ABOUT WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE. HERE: SOME STRAIGHT TALK ON VOICING THE RIGHT IMAGE.

BY CYNTHIA BROUSE

CELIA SANCHES, AN ATTRACTIVE, BRIGHT, 28-YEAR-OLD SECRETARY for a Toronto bank has such a sweet, soft voice that she is continually asked to repeat herself, especially on the telephone. She finds people's attention drifts when she speaks. "I'm not able to express all of what I want to say," says Sanches. "Now, rather than speak, I keep quiet."

Karyn Baker, a 27-year-old consultant with a non-profit mental health organization, was asked last June to act as master of ceremonies at her brother's wedding. "I'd never been to a wedding where a woman was the MC," admits Karyn. "I wasn't sure if I'd come across confidently and strong." She was already nervous about her speaking voice since she'd made a presentation at work and was told her speech was peppered with "um's" and "ah's."

Many women suffer setbacks — professionally and socially — because of voice problems. Their voices may be too soft or too loud, too fast or too slow, too high or too low. They may lack resonance, or their voices may be hoarse, squeaky, monotonous or just plain irritating. Minor annoyances, on the surface, but voice quality, delivery and articulation play an enormous role in communication. According to the exotic-sounding

Mehrabian Survey of Factors of First Impressions, only eight percent of our impact comes from what we say. Fifty-five percent is based on appearance — no surprise — but 37 percent of the impression we make is created by the way we speak, and we're judged on that basis in the first six to 12 seconds.

delivering the right voice

Few of us spend much time grooming our voices — and we should. Along with new roles in society and high-profile careers outside the home comes the need to speak with authority and women often have problems delivering the right voice.

The way we speak is usually determined early by the role models we imitate. And speech patterns and volume levels learned from Mom may ill-equip us for the lives we're leading.

"Mother may have been a housewife with a high, little, light voice," says former opera singer Christina Harvey, founder of Toronto's Voice Dynamics, a voice-training firm, and host of a phone-in radio program on voice problems. "But that's not going to work in a boardroom — it may say you are a light, ineffectual person." Volume, according to Harvey, is a common problem among female clients. "They say something in

a meeting and nobody notices. Then, minutes later somebody else comes up with the same idea and gets the credit for it."

who did you say you were?

Will learning to speak up give you more confidence? Or do you have to gain more confidence in order to learn to speak up? It's hard to tell which comes first—the personality or the voice. Often in the course of undergoing a major life change, a woman finds she's adjusted her manner of speaking dramatically. And a woman seeking to change her voice may also discard character traits she's discovered at the root of her speech habits.

Lack of self-assurance is reflected in many female voice patterns. Linguists note that women are more likely to use rising intonation at the ends of statements, making them sound like questions. The implicit message is "Am I okay? Do you like me? Is what I'm saying correct?"—hardly likely to inspire confidence in the listener. This need to be liked also drives many women to talk too fast—they see themselves as the entertainer, says Harvey. "They put all their thoughts into words, and it results in a lot of verbal garbage."

speaking like a lady

Even if you're reasonably confident, your voice may reflect roles you learned as a child. Opera singer Christine McMahon, who teaches a three-week course called "Training Your Voice/Taming Your Nerves" at Toronto's Learning Annex and who coaches privately, points out that little girls are often taught to be quiet and are discouraged from being loud or boisterous. "For a lot of women, speaking up means taking a more aggressive

stance, and it's difficult," says McMahon.

McMahon's classes deal with the connection between the mind, emotions and the physical body—the voice is a sort of bridge between them. She explains how emotional repression—men taught to hold in emotions, and women told that "ladies" don't say certain things—causes tension in the body and inhibits breathing, which in turn results in voices that are too high, too shallow, too soft or that sound like the person is strangling. "Unlocking the body will unlock the voice," says McMahon. "The emphasis is on getting in touch with where you feel blocks in the body and finding ways to open them up so that the voice can find a free and open channel for expression."

say it with feeling

McMahon uses breathing exercises to teach students that the entire human body is an instrument and the voice doesn't simply come from somewhere just behind the face. "Society is so cerebrally, rationally oriented that we have a lot of division between our head and our body, our head and our emotions," explains McMahon. "So we get cut off from the centre of the instrument."

Celia Sanches attended McMahon's class and was amazed to discover she had been holding her breath and trying to speak as she breathed in, instead of when she breathed out. As McMahon points out, breath is the energy of the voice: "When we hold our breath, we stop the energy flow of the body. The breathing exercises help us to let go of all the tension we normally have in our guts." Indeed, much of that tension comes from trying to "suck in" our stomachs to look thinner—a major preoccupation of modern

women. McMahon points to the "little Buddha bellies" of small children, who haven't yet learned to be tense, and encourages women to let go.

Alright, you say, but this is how I sound. If I spoke differently, it wouldn't be me—and I'm satisfied with me the way I am. But you're multi-faceted, and, just as you act differently in different settings, you can learn to speak differ-

message

ently when the occasion calls for it. Once you've found a new voice, you can put it on and take it off, just like your high heels.

the corporate voice

While voices help us to create a personal identity, they're crucial to company identities, too. Sometimes a company's image rests with the voice representing it. Harvey specializes in tailor-made programs for corporations. Her client list reads like *Canadian Business* magazine's top 500—big brokerage firms, telemarketing companies, computer sales offices, customer service departments. Using tape recorders, she lets clients hear for themselves what they're projecting. Often they're shocked at how quiet, girlish, monotonous, shy or garbled they sound. Then she "tricks or cajoles them into trying different sounds" on a second tape. One man repeated a story on tape with what he considered exaggerated emphasis—but the class agreed when the tape was played back that the new version sounded more "normal" than the first one. It turned out the man had made a pact with his wife that he would never raise his voice—and he was holding back to the point of being monotonous.

Next, Harvey provides exercises to relax and train the jaw and tongue, change resonance, regulate speed, add variety of pitch and improve enunciation. To eliminate "word whiskers"—verbal tics such as "um" and "ah"—she suggests clients put five cents in a jar for every whisker, the money to go to charity. "They find they don't get up to five dollars," says Harvey.

For Karyn Baker, Harvey's classes paid off—with dividends. Her stint as M.C. at her brother's wedding was an unqualified success. Guests complimented her on her presentation, wanting to know if her job called for a lot of public speaking. Said Baker, "People

continued on page 62

SPEAKING UP *where to go for help*

Where do you turn if you want help with your voice? It depends on what you want to accomplish. Courses and clubs like Dale Carnegie and Toastmasters International teach public speaking, presentation skills and even assertiveness and confidence building. But if you're after voice training specifically, they may not be the answer. Coaches such as Christina Harvey and Christine McMahon focus on the voice itself and its intimate connection with the personality. Their courses deal with the physical aspects of voice production and they use relaxation techniques similar to those taught in many college music and drama departments. They're intended for the average person who wants to speak more effectively in her job and social life. Try the Yellow Pages and the nearest college or university—there are only a few voice-training firms in Canada, but you may find singers or actors who provide individual coaching at an hourly rate. Cost will vary.

Harvey offers small-group evening courses at \$300 for 12 hours of instruction, or individual coaching at \$100 per hour. However, classes with a voice or acting student may be less.

continued from page 51
said that I was the only speaker they could really hear."

McMahon coaches groups of about 15 for three nights, and holds more intensive classes for students interested in advanced work. Her group exercises, designed to lessen inhibi-

message

tions, sound like a heavy-breathing prenatal class one minute, and the Indianapolis 500 the next. Students, wearing loose, comfortable clothing so they can lie on the floor, start out slightly embarrassed, but thanks to McMahon's relaxed, down-to-earth demeanor, soon get into the spirit of the class.

occupational hazards

Even if you've let go and unblocked your emotions, occupational hazards and behaviour can damage or change the quality of your voice. Christina Harvey sees aerobics instructors with unusually husky voices caused by shrieking over loud music. People who whisper a lot, such as pharmacists providing confidential information over the counter and people who sit closely

together in open-plan offices, can end up with chronically subdued speaking voices and even damaged vocal chords. Dry or polluted office air, cigarette smoke, heavy-equipment noise, excessive use of the telephone (especially if it causes a stiff neck) can all hurt your voice. If you suspect a chronic ailment underlies your inability to speak clearly or at the correct volume—vocal chord nodules or polyps, blocked nasal passages, spastic dysphonia (a vocal chord malfunction), allergies, hearing loss—see a doctor. Many hospitals have voice clinics.

the root of the problem

A growing number of foreign-born Canadians seek voice training of a special kind—they hope to eliminate an accent. In spite of the claims of some trainers, linguists stress that it's nearly impossible to drop an accent completely. But McMahon and Harvey point out that exercises can often relax the jaw and tongue enough to enable the speaker to form many new sounds. Schools with programs in English as a second language often include accent adjustment courses. Toronto-based speech therapist Christine Gandy coaches business people

—many of whom feel they've been blocked in some aspect of their careers because of their accents—to replace some of the sounds of their mother tongue with those common to the English language.

Your ethnic background may also have provided you with a home environment where family members were either exceptionally quiet or loud. But nationality may have little to do with it. Only you can determine the role models you imitate that have resulted in an inappropriate speech characteristic—and only you can decide if and when you want to change. Christina Harvey tells of a grandmother who came to her unwillingly because the woman's daughter-in-law didn't want her children to pick up their grandmother's speech patterns. She'd been forced to seek help, so her progress was limited.

Along with a new vocal style may come self discovery. But a word of caution: voice training is not without its risks. Christina Harvey has coached at least three women who first shed the voice characteristics that had impeded their business success—then shed their husbands. □