

Vocal Techniques: Keep People Attentive & Listening

How we say the words we choose is just about as important as the words themselves. Our voice is a powerful instrument that can motivate the troops or lull them to sleep. There is a huge difference between presenting and persuading. Your voice is a complete arsenal of persuasive techniques in and of itself. For example, you can say the same thing but mean five different things, depending on the tone of your voice. You can say “Thank you” laden with sarcasm, love, hate, anger, humor, or surprise, just by changing the tone and inflection of your voice.

Peter Blanck, in his research, found that judges communicated their bias and attitudes by the tone of their voice. The juries in California were twice as likely to convict trial defendants when the judges already knew the defendants had a record and prior convictions. The law simply states that the judge cannot share this private information with the jurors. Researchers found that when the judge gave the instructions to the jury, his words and tone of voice lacked warmth, patience, and tolerance.

You can change your rate of speech, your vocal fillers (um, uh, ah), the volume, pitch, inflection, emphasis, and even the pauses that you use. You can keep an audience listening with both ears and with full energy, rendering them absolutely spellbound because of the power of your voice.

Your voice is who you are. It is your trademark and your calling card. Your voice must exude energy, confidence, and conviction. We tend to judge others by their voice: confident, nervous, relaxed, energized, tired, weak, strong. If you sound unsure and timid, your ability to persuade will falter. Persuasive voices have great volume, varied emphases, good articulation, and a pleasing pitch. Master Persuaders use vocal variety and frequently vary their pace.

The good news is, you can change many characteristics of your voice. Tape your voice. What does it project? Your voice must be interesting and easy to listen to in order to help, rather than hinder, your ability to persuade. Does your voice work for you or against you?

Emphasis

Watch what happens when you place emphasis on different words in this sentence.

I didn't know he stole the car.
I **didn't** know he stole the car.
I didn't **know** he stole the car.
I didn't know **he** stole the car.
I didn't know he **stole** the car.
I didn't know he stole the **car**.

The exact same words form sentences of completely different meaning every time you change the emphasis to a different word. Emphasis brings your main point to the

audience's attention. You are able to highlight and stress the more important issues throughout your presentation with proper use of emphasis.

Pace

Pace refers to how quickly you speak. Mehrabian and Williams found that people who spoke faster, louder, and more fluently as well as those who varied their vocal frequency and intensity were perceived as more persuasive than those who did not.

Speeches delivered at fast speeds are more persuasive than those of slow or moderate speeds, because persuaders who speak faster appear more competent and knowledgeable. At these faster rates, receivers are not able to mentally engage in counter-arguing.

Pace and speed is also important to keep and capture attention. We can think three times faster than we can speak. We have all had conversations and were able to listen while thinking of other things. When we speak faster, we can keep attention longer. There is less time for our audience's mind to wander. Studies show that we generally like faster speakers and find them more interesting. Most speakers average 120-180 words per minute. But there is no ideal speed. Roosevelt spoke 110 words per minute while Kennedy raced along at 180 words per minute. A persuasive speaker will speak fast enough to excite and energize the mood of the audience but will be able to slow his or her pace down to create a mood of anticipation.

To counteract boredom, use your basic pace most of the time, and vary it in one of two ways from time to time. Slow your pace down when you wish to appear thoughtful or when you want to give people the impression that you are working through a process of induction or deduction, even as you are speaking. Slow your pace down when you have something particularly important or serious to say, and when you wish to show great respect. Increase your pace when you want to create excitement and energy.

Vocal fillers

Fillers can destroy your presentation, hurt your credibility, and annoy your audience. Most people feel they don't have a problem with this, and most of them are wrong. You would be amazed when you tape yourself what words you use to fill in space during a speech. Fillers are not acceptable and need to be eliminated from all speech. Vocal fillers include the common "um," "er," and "uh." Some people have their own idiosyncratic way of filling in the silence between ideas that makes them uncomfortable. Some repeat the first two or three words of a sentence until their brain catches up and they decide what they're going to say. Others might say, "Okay" at the end of every sentence, as if they're checking audience comprehension.

Pitch

The pitch is the highness or lowness of the speaker's voice. Low is best. In our culture, deeper voices are generally interpreted as reflecting authority and strength, for both men and women. In addition, a deeper voice is stereotypically considered to be more believable, indicative of an individual's sincerity and trustworthiness. Many speakers actually practice lowering their voices because of the benefits of a lower pitch. Some

speakers even drink hot water or tea before they speak, a technique which creates a lower sounding voice.

Remembering to employ variety in your speaking is a constant challenge, but it is of paramount importance. If you are not an engaging speaker, you will not be persuasive. You can help people remain alert and attentive while you speak if the pitch of your voice rises and falls. There are two main reasons why this strategy works. First of all, the varying pitches will prevent your voice from sounding monotonous. Secondly, the varying inflections can help emphasize a particular word.

Volume

Obviously you're not going to be very persuasive if no one can hear you. You've probably experienced the aggravation of straining and struggling to hear a speaker. Before your presentation, see if you can test the room to ensure you can be heard from all parts of the room. Also, test to see if you're going to need amplification. If you will, be sure this equipment is available and setup prior to beginning. Certainly, the converse is also true in this case: Be sure you are not yelling or shouting at your audience. This understandably is just as aggravating, or even more so, as struggling to be able to hear.

Raising your voice for impact or dramatic effect is not as effective as *lowering* your voice. The technique can work, but you must be very careful about how you use it. Additionally, people who keep a calm and steady voice in emotional moments are often considered more credible and competent.

Articulation

Clearly articulate every sentence, phrase, and word. This means your speech is clear and coherent, which will convey competence. When your articulation gets sloppy, it suggests lack of education and laziness. Consider how lawyers, doctors, supervisors, lobbyists, and the like **MUST** be articulate if they are to survive professionally. Good articulation conveys competence, experience, and credibility. Another practical reason to have good articulation is simply because it is so much easier to follow. As previously discussed, people will comply with you more if you are easy to understand.

Pauses

Treat your pauses like gold. Well-timed pauses attract attention to a particular part of your presentation, give others time to tune in and process your message, and help you gain poise and confidence if you're rattled. Use intentional pauses for the points you intend to drive home. Not only does a pause increase comprehension, but it also helps you highlight important points. Use pauses to create attention, emphasis, and mood.

A carefully planned pause usually comes *before* the point you want to highlight. It is a common mistake to not hold the pause long enough. Be sure you allow enough of a pause that the full effect will be felt. When you do this, the audience anticipates and listens closely to what you will say next. They can tell something important is about to happen. This strategy is made even more effective when you combine it with pitch strategies: Be sure that as you come to the pause, your pitch is high, thereby building

suspense and giving momentum to what will follow. Inflecting your pitch downward will defeat the purpose, providing a feeling of resolution instead of suspension.

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