

Tips for the Well-Dressed Voice

When you walk into a room full of strangers two things happen simultaneously. You get noticed AND the mental stop watches click on. In approximately three seconds you are evaluated: ranked and rated on your appearance (dress), body language (demeanor) and when you open your mouth, your voice.

While most are aware of 'the look' test, many are unaware of *how much* voice quality contributes to creating those vital first impressions. Your voice or 'vocal image' speaks louder than any words you may utter.

Is your voice in harmony with your Look?

Listen to yourself speaking

Record at least 3 minutes of yourself talking aloud in the most unselfconscious way possible.

As a topic starter try imagining yourself as someone who knows very little about you and who has the potential to advance a project you are passionate about. If you were them you'd ask questions to find out more. You'd want to know the background, what you hoped to do, why it was important, what you needed to go forward, what hindered rather than helped and so on. Decide on two or three questions, enough to keep you going, and then push *record*.

When you play the recording back listen carefully.

- How is the pitch? Is it high, low, or monotone? Does it rise on the ends of sentences?
- How is the speed? Slow? Fast? Average? Variable? Is it unusual in anyway? Does it support the subject?
- What's the tone like? Soft and warm? Upbeat? Vibrant? Harsh? Grating or shrill?
- Are there stresses or beats in your speech? Are they natural and in harmony with your subject matter?
- Do you pause to add emphasis or simply to take another breath?
- Can you hear yourself using habitual fillers (um, err, like)?
- Check your pronunciation. Is 't' sounding like a 'd'? Are the ends of your words sounded?

- For example those words ending in 'ing', are they being said fully or are they truncated? Is the 'k' in 'ask' present?
- How is your articulation? Can you hear yourself clearly and understand what you are saying or do you have to work at it?
- Now listen to the words or vocabulary you've chosen.
- Does it match the topic and the context? A formal setting requires considered language.
- The words you use and the manner in which you say them need to be congruent or in harmony with the occasion. Poor word choice creates disharmony which can lead to doubt or confusion in the minds of your listeners about who you really are.

Tips for improving voice quality

- Listen to good speakers and presenters. Analyse what elements are working together well to create a pleasurable listening experience. Is it pace? The way they pronounce their words? Is it vocabulary? Try what you've heard for yourself.
- Give yourself plenty of reading aloud practice. Choose a variety of texts to stretch yourself and record the results.
- If you commute by yourself use your car for speech drills like tongue twisters or fluency practice (speaking for a minute on a topic without hesitation, deviation or repetition).
- Go to a voice coach or speech teacher. If you have challenges like a heavy accent or other deeply ingrained vocal habits you can't shift by yourself, get professional help. If you're aiming for leadership this is important. Your voice needs to mirror your intentions. Don't allow yourself to be limited by something you can change.

For more on vocal image and exercises to improve your speech quality visit write-out-loud.com