



The Customer Communicator **Web Extra**



Vocal techniques: How to take care of your most important tool

If your job requires you to use your voice for six to eight hours a day, you should consider yourself a voice professional.

Using your voice in a professional manner is an effort that requires concentration. You need to make sure that you are continuously breathing and talking as you exhale. "When you sing, you take a breath and sing with that breath. You do this automatically," says speech coach Sandra McKnight. "But when people talk, they don't do it. Some people gasp and others hold their breath while talking. If you do that for long periods of time, you'll tire out your voice." Learning to use your breath while speaking will help you to properly apply your vocal chords instead relying on your throat.

Because your vocal mechanism operates much like any other muscle in your body, you need to give it frequent rest breaks. McKnight suggests quick, five-minute breaks whenever possible. During these brief breaks, do head and shoulder rolls and stretch your jaw. For example, tilt your head as far back as is comfortable, then gently open your mouth, letting your jaw drop in a relaxed manner. Hold the position for 10 seconds. Gently lower your chin and return your head to a forward-facing position while allowing your mouth to close naturally. Your jaw should feel more relaxed.

McKnight also offers the following suggestions for a better phone presentation:

- Avoid trailing off at the end of sentences.
- Avoid talking too fast. Try to average 140 words per minute.

- If you have a high-pitched voice, work on lowering your tone. "People prefer to listen to lower, more resonant voices than high voices," she says. "It's more soothing to their ears."
- Create vocal variety by increasing your pitch on certain words. "Speech melody creates the sense of friendliness and liltiness to the voice," McKnight says. "People who speak in a monotone voice come across as unfriendly."
- Develop your onstage persona. "When you're on the telephone, it's a vocal stage. Pretend that you're talking to a friend who you really like," she says. "Be an actor and project your positive emotions onto that person, whoever it might be."
- Remember, your emotions affect the way you sound. If you're caught in an interaction that leaves you upset or stressed, take a moment to release your emotions before going on to another call. "If it's really bad, then on your next break write on a 3x5 index card how you feel about that customer — no holds barred. Then stick that card in a box. It's a physical act that helps to center you so you can go on with your day," McKnight says.
- Be aware of your diction. Enunciating clearly is especially important when dealing with elderly customers who may have difficulty hearing.

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