

How to be a Voiceover Professional Or at Least Act Like One

The Screen Actors Guild session fee for voicing a television commercial is around \$400. When Robert Mitchum boasted the benefits of beef for the National Beef Council or James Earl Jones touted Texaco, they likely earned \$75,000 or more per spot. Making money doesn't make you professional, being professional makes you money. The following information about "how to be a pro" comes from 15 years of performing voice over, half a dozen voice courses, several related books and articles, and interviews with voice talent, teachers, agents, and recording engineers.

The main message in this article is, To become a pro, act like one. Fake it till you make it. When you behave like a professional voice performer, the people hiring you will respect you and act accordingly.

Succeed before, during, and after recording:

Take care of your "tools" --your body, mind and voice. Get regular exercise and adequate rest, drink plenty of fluids, use proper breathing techniques, maintain good posture, and speak in your normal/optimal pitch range. Practice as much and as often as possible. Do daily vocal warm ups. Exercise your articulators --lips, tongue and soft palette-- with some of the many drills available. For example, over-articulate while repeating: "Good Blood, Bad Blood" and "Red Leather, Yellow Leather." Collect and practice diction drills for every speech sound. Get professional training.

Things to avoid:

- Diuretics such as alcohol or caffeine
- Drastic temperature changes Air pollution (dust, fumes, etc.)
- Excessive force such as yelling or screaming
- Using or forcing an inappropriate pitch
- Speaking with tension
- Speaking over noise
- Dairy products which cause excessive mucous
- Clearing your throat -try humming into a light cough
- Drinking cold fluids before a performance
- Eating a big meal right before working
- Using throat sprays to cover pain

When you go into a recording session: bring your own water, a marked script and a pencil with eraser. Do not wear rustling clothes or jangling jewelry. You may be in close quarters with others in the booth so, bathe to avoid becoming noxious. Use an unscented deodorant and don't wear perfume or cologne --your boothmate may be allergic. Always let the recording engineer adjust the microphone for you. Listen to yourself through headphones to find the sweet spot on the mic. Be willing to speak up if you need direction, a break, or headset volume adjustments.

Be gracious. After your session, thank everyone involved. Remind them of your availability for fixes.

Send a follow-up thank you card to the client, the studio and your agent. Selling yourself and getting more work is mostly about building and maintaining relationships. Be someone people want to have around.

Nuggets from an 8-week VO workshop from Larry Moss at UCLA:

- Make a commitment to your audience
- Focus on the thought you are trying to convey
- Be totally involved
- Develop a mental state that helps you create a feeling of reality and honesty
- Be prepared to make choices about pitch, volume, rate, rhythm, and vocal quality
- Make your delivery clear, simple and straightforward
- Learn as much as you can about the intended audience
- Owning your dialect allows you to be spontaneous
- Get a personality bypass -- become the character and let the dialect come from the personality
- Overstress clarity to gain a sense of purpose and to facilitate changing to the proper mode of delivery
- Be on the journey without trying to accomplish an end
- Feelings need to show on your face in order to show up in your voice

- Being in character can free up your natural impulses to be inhibited
- Talk in phrases, not word by word
- Understand the copy and let the meaning determine pitch variation
- When you stress a word, the pitch goes higher
- Get rid of your built-in critic
- Extreme characters need proper motivation
- Gain involvement by creating imaginary lead-ins and after-life —use gestures, ad-lib, chuckle or sigh
- Remove the pressure of having to perform
- Be out there with your best self of the moment - weaknesses and all
- You must be willing to risk total failure
- Celebrate your own uniqueness
- You are interesting all by yourself without doing anything
- The people you deal with have the same insecurities as you
- Know that you know what you are doing
- Enter the studio like you are a star --friendly and loving
- Take an attitude of always being in training
- Talk to yourself aloud to unlock the hidden treasures inside
- Make the time and a fertile, disciplined effort to excel

Assorted expert tips on Being or Becoming a Pro:

Brian Collins, actor - It's a combination of things: Integrity. You keep your word, show up on time, and are sober, rested and ready to go. Preparation. Get the script in advance and mark it for emphasis. More pre-production leads to less production time.

Laurel Murray, actor, voice teacher - Continue to market yourself until your exposure branches out through agents in several cities. You'll find yourself reaching new plateaus, such as: more jobs without having to audition, getting more referrals, and having your income based on your craft without too many side jobs. It's important to have the confidence to know you can do it and experience the satisfaction that brings.

Lani Minella, actor - Don't make a tape until it's real. Find a way to get real experience for a genuine demo reel. Try DramaLogue for leads on volunteer projects and student productions. You must have the ability to take directions and translate directions into results. Search for new avenues for marketing. Persistence pays off.

Jeff Prentice, announcer & production manager at FM98-KiFM - Enjoy what you are doing, be happy and show it. No matter what the situation is, make the best

of it. Take time to polish your work and get it right. Make sure you are happy with your delivery as well as meeting the client's needs.

Bill Coe, owner of Digitrax audio studio - A quality that distinguishes a pro is the ability to take direction and even anticipate the client's needs —it is part raw talent and part acquired skill. You know when someone has it within a couple of reads. They give a flat first read, you give direction then they see what you want and drive it home. Be willing to acknowledge and work toward your strengths. You are not perfect for every part. Don't force the fit. A natural read is almost always better. During casting, it is very important to demonstrate your ability to take direction.

Carol Shamon-Freitas, agent - Materials --the quality of the tape. It's even more important than a photo and resume. Be versatile and demonstrate it. Use lots of short spots, don't try accents if you can't do them. It's a hard market to break into, but once you do, you'll keep working. Have acting ability. You need to be an actor as well as have a good voice.

Professional voice work basically boils down to three things: attitude, preparation and delivery. Believe you can do it. Work diligently toward being ready to do it. Then, to quote a famous advertising slogan, just do it.

Recommended Reading

Alburger, James, *The Art of Voice Acting*, Boston, Focal Press, 1998

Blu, Susan, *Word of Mouth*, Los Angeles, Pomegranate Press, 1992

Cooper, Morton, *Change Your Voice, Change Your Life*, N.Y. MacMillan Publishing Co., 1984

Cooper, Morton, *Winning With Your Voice*, Hollywood, Florida, Fell Publishing, Inc., 1990

Eisenson, Jon, *Voice and Diction*, N.Y. MacMillan Publishing Co., 1979

Glass, Lillian, *Talk To Win*, New York, Putnam Books, 1987

Jacobi, Henry, *Building Your Best Voice*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1982

Karshner, Roger, *You Said A Mouthful (Tongue Twisters)*, Los Angeles, Dramaline Publications, 1993

A great source for books about voice is the Samuel French Bookstore in Hollywood. (800) 8 ACT NOW. They also carry tapes by David Alan Stern teaching dialects and accents.

Jim Staylor is an award-winning writer of TV news, magazine shows, commercials, promotional videos, and training tapes. Staylor provides writing, producing, and talent services in Southern California through Staylor-Made Communications. (800) 711-6699 - jim@staylor-made.com

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