

Can the way you talk hold the key to health, wealth and happiness?

Rebecca Ley went to a voice coach to find out

“Changing your voice can change your life,” says Steve Hudson, a former actor and professional voice coach. He claims that the way we talk holds the key to wealth, health and happiness and that he can teach anybody the secrets of success. “Your voice is the most important tool you possess,” he says. “Without a confident voice you don’t impress. You might have lots of interesting points to make, but, if you don’t express them in the right way, nobody is going to listen.”

This sounded pretty good to me. I’m 27 and I work on the Times Magazine, and I’ve begun to realize how important talking is to my job. From doing interviews to negotiating with agents, or even pitching ideas in features meetings, it’s important, crucial even, that I sound confident. But, as I’m naturally soft-spoken this can be a tall order. So when I heard about Hudson’s work, I was intrigued enough to book a session.

You’ve probably never heard of Hudson, but you will have heard his voice. Remember the Old Spice advertisement: all splashing surf, pounding music and Seventies naffness? The voiceover made its stick in your mind as it intoned: ‘It’s the mark of a man.’ That was Hudson. So was the sexy whisper on the Black Magic advert asking: ‘Who knows the secret of the Black Magic box?’ He’s made a career out of having a voice you can’t ignore.

But Hudson’s mission is not just getting people to have more gravitas, he also has a health message. “Most people never think about the health of their voice or how to use it properly, but it’s often crucial to their livelihood,” he says. It’s not just opera singers. About one third of the labour force are in professions in which their voice is the primary tool. But few of us consider the best ways to use it or to care for it.

As a result, millions suffer from voice strain developed after using their voices excessively or inappropriately. We live in a frenetic world. We work and play hard, with our ears glued to our mobile phone. We end up learning to talk much too quickly, wearing our voices out.” To minimise the risk of voice strain, Hudson,

In good voice

Here are seven tips for saving your voice:

- Drink plenty of fluids, particularly water. Dry vocal cords are particularly prone to irritation. The three most important times to drink water are first thing in the morning, just before speaking for long periods, and after exercise. A minimum of eight glasses a day is recommended, more if you are physically very active.

- Limit caffeine (drinks such as coffee, tea and colas) to two cups a day. Caffeine, because its diuretic effect can dehydrate the throat and vocal cords. Alcohol is also drying and should be used sparingly.

- Avoid late-night eating. This can result in acid reflux from the stomach spilling into your larynx, causing hoarseness. Telltale signs are bad breath (especially first thing) and a sour taste.

- Tensing or training your neck can affect sound production in the throat. So do not cradle the phone between the head and shoulder for extended lengths of time. And if you easily get stressed, and have muscle tension in the neck, investigate what you can do to manage this.

- Avoid forced whispering, yelling or using an unnatural voice. If you want to speak more loudly, learn how to project your voice properly

- Avoid excessive throat clearing – this irritates the throat. Sip water or swallow instead. If throat clearing is persistent, see your doctor about what may be causing it.

58, who is craggily handsome with thick, grey hair and broad shoulders – he was once considered for the role of James Bond, but Roger Moore got the job – has developed a technique called the Hudson Voice Technique.

There are seven elements to this technique, he tells me. One of them involves what to do at the end of a sentence. First, you should drop in tone at the end of a sentence, unless it’s a question. This implies authority and certainly in what you’re saying. Secondly, you need to pause (for two beats) at the end of every sentence before “energizing” the beginning of the next. Another main tenet of the Hudson Voice Technique is inserting “mental commas” into what you’re saying. Basically this means pausing a lot, in all sorts of places you’ve never imagined. You are also supposed to learn to read and speak slowly. Much, much more slowly than feels natural. Finally, speak softly and inject your voice with enthusiasm.

It sounds relatively straightforward but just try combining it all at once: it’s a bit like trying to rub your stomach and pat your head at the same time. Still, I persevered. After my first session with Hudson, every night for a fortnight I stood in front of my mirror trying to inject my voice with energy and enthusiasm: most of the time I sounded like a demented Butlins Red Coat. And my boyfriend became rather annoyed with me inserting mental commas every time I asked for a cup of tea.

The psychology of making an impact with your voice is far more important and subtle than most of us recognize. After all, the words that you speak account for only 7 per cent of the perceived impact of your message, while your tone of voice counts for 38 per cent.

One study this year, published in the journal *Hormones and Behaviour*, shows that women prefer men with deeper voices, while a separate study published in *Animal Behaviour* in 2003 suggests that men judged women with the most attractive voices as the best looking.

Yet Hudson says that it isn’t just the tone of your voice that affects how others see you. More important are the pace and intonation, but the crucial thing is the ability to manipulate your voice at will. What’s more, he insists that anyone can achieve this level of mastery.

I’m a bit doubtful when I return for a second session. I certainly don’t feel as if I’ve made much progress. But when Hudson records me talking, I concentrate on remembering all the principles of the Hudson Voice Technique. He then plays a recording from the first session, before playing back my improved version.

I’m surprised by the change. In the first, I sound bored, as if I’m rushing to the end of every sentence. In the second, I sound more calm and confident. Obviously pleased with my look of surprise, Hudson smiles before saying in this deep, soothing way: “There you see. That’s better. I’d much rather be a well-spoken tramp than a mumbling millionaire.”

For more information call 0208 455 1666 and visit: www.voicemaster-international.com

Exercising cords

These exercises will ensure that your voice is properly warmed up, meaning that it sounds its best: relaxed and free.

First, use your fingertips to massage your face, lips and throat – this relaxes tension. Then hum an “M” sound gently up and down your voice range to start the vocal warm-up. Then sing a series of sounds with M and then a vowel, such as “Mmmeee, Mmmay, Mmmah, Mmmoe, Mmmoo” on one note, and then repeat, moving up and down the scale.

Check your breathing; remember to relax your tummy muscles outwards as you breathe in.

MEDIA VIEW BEN DOWELL

Beep toughens up

So the BBC is wrangling with Equity over daytime off-peak repeat programmes. And directors are also attempting to win secondary payments, to the annoyance of commercial companies but also to the immense chagrin of the Corporation.

So what is behind all this? One simple fact, one suspects: the Beep is shaping itself as a leaner, faster, meaner organisation. Just ask Greg Dyke.

He is a commercial man by instinct, guided this time by the Government's rather robust insistence that the Corporation makes cuts in order to save £1.2 billion by 2007 and increases the amount of cash spent on content and services from 76 to 85 per cent next years. Annual revenue from the license fee is hanging around the £2.3 billion mark.

So it needs to compete, to attract as much co-production as possible and keep the cost of repeating programmes to the bare minimum. In short, commercialisation and public service - the two subjects of Dyke's forthcoming MacTaggart lecture - must go hand in hand.

With the promise of more cash to dram and the refocusing of money into programming, there is good news. But it is a troubling time, particularly for those performers who have worked a lot in the last 20 to 30 years but whose output has tailed off. One actor fitting that description, a household name who asked not to be identified, put the wranglings rather more succinctly: "My feeling is that it is a case of smash and grab by the BBC and every actor I know feels the same way.

"The fact that the BBC wants more repeats does not surprise me. The real reason though, is that people are turning off American imports like Kojak and Columbo in droves."

Another actor in the same position even said he thought Dyke was given the job to prepare the Corporation for either privatisation or subscription funding.



Wired for sound - Steve Hudson, creator of the Hudson Voice Technique and voiceover artist.

The Power of Persuasion

'It's how you say it'

Anna Swan meets Steve Hudson of Voice Master International, who trains leading corporations and BBC & SKY reporters and presenters and voiceover artists.

Voiceovers can prove a very lucrative



The art of Voice - Training at the Singapore Media Academy

The voice is arguably the most persuasive selling tool we possess, communicating not only personality, but also knowledge. And we can all improve our voices, even to the level of a professional voiceover. "There is no such thing as a natural reader," says Steve Hudson of Voice Master International, "but almost anyone can be taught."

In a burgeoning industry with worldwide audiences, the opportunities for voiceovers have never been so widespread. Yet many of these jobs are filled by amateurs.

Voice Master has licensed partners in India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Africa and the USA

To a consummate professional like Hudson this is anathema: "There should be no compromise on quality. Too many TV channels, such as Discovery, re-voice their brilliant documentaries with untrained voices, which is ludicrous."

Hudson believes there are only two categories of voiceovers: good and bad. "At the top end of the market, we have the best voiceovers and best commercials in the world, but at the lower end, proper training is virtually non-existent.

"Without it you are unprofessional. Most actors will pick it up with experience, but at drama school they're not taught to read to the split-second."

Hudson trained at the National Theatre and began his show business career as a stunt man. He is also an actor, radio presenter, and veteran voiceover artist.

You may remember him as the Black Magic Man and the voice of Old Spice, but Hudson's self-effacing claim to stardom was the audition for James Bond when he got down to the last three, but lost by an eyebrow to Roger Moore.

Hudson created the Hudson Voice Technique based on his experience as international trainer for 3M Company and Xerox (London and Washington DC) and his training at the Royal National Theatre.

Hudson set up Voice Master

International fifteen years ago and as a pioneer of the Hudson Voice Technique he passionately believes in technique over content:

"Any producer who hires an untrained voiceover is cheating his client because viewers should retain 85% of the information. This can drop to 43% if an untrained voiceover is used.

This also applies to corporate presentations. The key elements are timing, tone, correct emphasis

and networking and persistence are essential, but the results are worth it: "In the last two months, four of my students have got jobs on TV, and many others are now working regularly."

Fees vary - as a newcomer be prepared to negotiate - but once you are established, you can expect to earn between £500 and £3000 per hour for TV commercials, up to £200 for a radio commercial.

English is the most widely spoken language in the commercial world, and now that Received Pronunciation is no longer a prerequisite, there is work for every kind of voice:

"There is still a snob value in the English accent abroad. In the pages of *The Stage* and elsewhere there are numerous adverts for voiceover courses, but remember none of these companies in the UK or America teach a technique.

"To become a professional, you need a specific technique. But even then practice is vital because you are changing your speech pattern which you have been developing for years, so the Hudson Voice Technique most become second nature."

Hudson concludes: "The voice is a musical instrument, and, like a violin, we cannot expect to play a concerto without refining our technique. We must learn to play all the notes and also learn when to slow down and use silence and pause for impact.

Everyone who uses their voice professionally will benefit from the Hudson Voice Technique, including politicians, barristers and corporate staff. The Hudson Voice Technique has been accredited by the Law Society for CPD training.

"If you seriously want to be more persuasive and confident or earn extra money as a voiceover, the Hudson Voice Technique is essential.

and not being afraid to use your imagination: "Would you say 'paradise' and 'public lavatory' in the same tone? Of course not. It's all about analysing specific words and exploiting the right emotion," he adds.

After over 20 years in the business Hudson's technique has been finely honed through experience, and it is the essence of this experience that he instills into his classes.

His in-depth course explores the seven key elements needed in professional communication.

This can now be achieved with the Hudson Voice Technique home study course, which can also be downloaded from their website, or by joining a Master Class at his London base.

The student then practices every day at home for up to two weeks, or until the technique is ingrained, then returns to the studio to be assessed.

Only then can a demo CD be successfully recorded, working on scripts tailored to the individual. "At this stage, I guarantee that 99 per cent of my students can voice a corporate video correctly. With commercials it's slightly different because you need to your analytical and emotional skills, and this comes with experience."