

Find Your Voice Dr Sadhana Nayak guides you on how to speak so that you are heard

Occasion

The conference room of a hotshot ad agency.

Agenda

To brainstorm on creative ideas for a valued client's new product... As the conference gains momentum, one of the trainee copy-writers can feel an incredibly good idea shaping up in her head. After some hesitation, she clears her throat and squeaks, er, speaks, "Sir, may I..."

Nobody hears her.

She tries again, but her apologetic voice is lost among the stentorian, high-decibel ones in the room. Before long, a mediocre idea wins the vote.

Lesson

If you want to succeed, stand up and be heard.

Statistics show that listeners take in only about 7 per cent of information from the language you use. The rest they absorb from your tone, modulation, pitch and voice quality. If you sound shrill, nasal, hoarse or meek, their interest in what you are saying quickly wanes.

Women have an especially hard time being heard. Research shows that people will listen to a man's words. But when a woman speaks, they first observe how she looks and sounds before they start paying attention to the content of her speech. Worse, when women are nervous, their pitch tends to rise. Dr Joyce Brothers, an American psychologist, says that having a high-pitched or weak voice can cost a woman her promotion.

Train Those Vocal Cords

Here are some dos and don'ts of power speaking.

Dos

- ✦ Drink three litres of water daily. It keeps the vocal cords moist. Water is to the vocal cord what lubricant is to an engine.
- ✦ Learn how to breathe. Practise breathing right down to and from your abdomen.
- ✦ Develop a slow, legato style of speaking with appropriate pauses.
- ✦ Keep your spine erect.

- ✦ Do vocal workouts regularly, if you are a professional voice user.

Don'ts

- ✦ Don't repeatedly clear your throat. It's like constantly scratching dry skin.
- ✦ Avoid shouting, excessive talking, speaking over background noise.
- ✦ Avoid smoking; it irritates the throat membranes.
- ✦ Avoid spicy, oily foods as acid reflux damages the lining of your vocal cords.
- ✦ just like you won't walk on a sprained ankle, don't speak when your voice is tired or your throat is hurting.

Get Help

If your voice is making you suffer, or you're in the communications business - such as TV news reading - consult a voice communication consultant, who will give you a series of graded exercises based on a computer analysis of your unique voice needs. You'll learn to align the spine and body, breathe correctly, develop the right intonation and make full use of your jaw, lips, tongue and throat while speaking.

And you don't have to fly abroad to consult a professional - voice clinics and voice medicine centres are now in India, too.

Here's to a new, more confident you!

The author is a voice & ENT specialist and a voice communication consultant

Women's Day Special: An Expert Speaks

If you do not use your voice to convey your feelings, you diminish your chances of persuading or moving your audience members. "Too often, people who speak with enthusiasm and energy in a one-on-one situation take on a whole new persona in front of an audience," says David J. Dempsey, a trial attorney, communications expert and author. "The way you use your voice to project power is essential to being persuasive," says Dempsey, author of 'Legally Speaking: 40 Powerful Presentation Principles Lawyers Need to Know'. He notes that many presenters focus so much on the detail and accuracy of what they're presenting, that they fail to use their voices effectively, thereby often sounding mechanical and monotonous.