

## **Finding Your Voice**

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A client played her opening introduction for her soon-to-be-released podcast.

"Wow, that doesn't sound a thing like you," was my response.

We laughed, and she admitted that her colleagues had also said she was coming across a bit staid--so unlike the energetic, fun-loving realtor that was currently chuckling ruefully in front of me. And the question to ask is why? Why is it so hard just to speak in one's own voice?

### **The Miconception: Professional = Stiff and Impersonal**

It's an easy mistake to make. I made it when I first started speaking as a sales rep. I was all excited to be Giving Presentations. I got to be in front of an audience! Wearing a business suit! And sound authoritative and stuff! Wow! How cool was I!

I shudder to think how those first presentations came across. See, I thought I was supposed to sound like those guys from those 80s power Wall Street movies--technical, stiff, knowledgeable, perfect. I was less concerned with getting through to my customers than I was with the presentation going perfectly. I wanted them to think I was perfect, and therefore they would believe that my product was just as good. Making a mistake in my smooth presentation was tantamount to failure--because if I made a mistake, that meant that I wasn't representing the product well, so it must be an imperfect product, right? And of course, the only reason people wouldn't warm to me would be because I made a mistake, right?

[shaking head] Sound about right? A recipe for an informative but dull-as-dirt presentation, yes? Yes.

### **The Fear: They Won't Like Me**

The client admitted that her fear in sounding like herself was that some people wouldn't like her. She thought that she had to come across as generic and vanilla to appeal to the largest audience. If she was herself, laughing and sarcastic, she feared putting some people off and [gasp!] coming across as unprofessional.

Well, yeah, that's true. If you speak in your own authentic voice, if you laugh and make jokes, if you make mistakes and start your sentences over, then some people might not like you.

News flash:

### **SOME PEOPLE MIGHT NOT LIKE YOU, ANYWAY!**

Don't you want it to be for the right reason--that they dislike the actual you rather than the fake, whitewashed you? And do you really want to do business with people that chose to dislike you if you laughed or made a mistake? Chances are you wouldn't end up doing business with them, anyway.

This brings to mind a young man I once dated. When I came by his house to hang out and watch the game one Sunday afternoon, he answered the door wearing a sports jersey. Now, if you know me, you know that I'm not a huge sports fan. Geek, yes. BSG fan, yes. Firefly or Babylon 5? I'm all over them. Sports? Well, I like to watch the Cubbies, but that's about it. I'll watch sports to be social, but I'll bring my laptop and check my blogroll during.

So I raised an eyebrow and began to tease him about the jersey. He explained, "Well, I wasn't going to wear it, but then my sister pointed out that this is who I am. I watch sports. I have team jerseys, and I wear them. She said, 'She's going to find out who you are sooner or later; you might as well be honest about it now.'"

What excellent advice! People are going to find out who you really are and what you really care about sooner or later, so you might as well be honest about who you are now.

### **Passion is a Magnet**

And the truth is that what is really captivating to people, what will engage them and have them hanging on your every word is your passion. If you love what you do and just can't shut up about it, your presentation or podcast will be effective. It might not be perfect, but passion covers a wealth of flaws.

- Passion is what gets people leaning forward in their seats and writing down questions.
- Passion is what makes them click "subscribe" instead of just listening to one show.
- Passion is what compels them to email their friends a link saying, "Dude, you've gotta check this out!"
- Passion is engaging.

Of course, you need to have good content, but if you don't love your content and can't wait to share it with others... well, you might want to rethink your content.

### **Finding Your Voice**

Are you nodding emphatically to everything I'm saying? Great! (If not, please email me; I love feedback!) So... how do you find your authentic voice? How do you just be you?

Yeah, it's harder than it sounds. When I started acting, the instructors always said, "Just be natural" in front of the camera. Well, my "natural" came across as really quiet and kind of angry. (I don't know why, but my non-smiling face on camera always seems a bit peeved, even when I'm not).

So here's an exercise to try. If you're finding your voice for live presentations, do this on video. If you're finding it for podcasting, make an audio recording. Give this a shot. Choose a topic you're passionate about and can talk about for 30 seconds. Yes, just 30 seconds. It can be mortgages, dog food, knitting, your last vacation, podcasting, whatever. Just something you care about and can talk about for 30 seconds.

Next, do three 30-second runs talking about that subject. LEAVE THE VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDER RUNNING STRAIGHT THROUGH ALL THREE RUNS WITHOUT PAUSING.

- 1) For the first run, talk in a manner you think is professional, the way you think you should be talking.
- 2) (Without pausing), for the second run, talk in a manner you think is waaaaay too crazy, too informal, too nutty.
- 3) (Without pausing), for the third run, talk in a manner you think is midway between the two.

If you have stutters in between the runs ("OK, um... this is the way too crazy one... oh, wait, hold on... um... gotta breathe here... gee, I'm really not sure what to do, but... here goes... wait... "), that's OK. Just leave it all in there.

Now comes the painful part. Play the recording for three trusted friends or advisors. Listen to their feedback without saying how you think you came across. Just shut up and listen. They can hear how you actually come across; you can't. Don't argue with them. Just listen.

You'll probably find that the three people give you similar feedback. They'll let you know which recording they like best and which person they'd rather listen to. Don't argue with them. Trust them. Listen to the adjectives they use to describe each run. Which one do you want to describe you? That is your real, authentic voice.

Go ahead, give it a try. I'll wait. :-)

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