

DANDRIDGE ENTERTAINMENT

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ARTICLE

Voicing Opinions, Tips for Breaking Into Voiceover:

As legend has it, in 1965 Hollywood an agent invited his on-camera talent to stop by and record script pages into a simple tape recorder, the sounds of traffic on Hollywood and Vine flowing through the windows of a small talent agency in the upper floors of the Taft Building. The agent was doing it as a favor for a friend who needed to voice an advertisement. It's a safe bet the agent had no idea he was fanning the spark of what would become a multimillion-dollar industry: the voiceover business. Now, as computer and Internet technology make it easier to record, edit, and send sound files from anywhere in the world in a matter of moments, the voiceover talent pool is getting deeper and the business more competitive.

Voiceovers, Not Leftovers

According to Paul Doherty, a voiceover agent at Cunningham, Escott, Dipene in Los Angeles, the voice-acting and announcing field is no longer a second option for struggling actors. It's a highly competitive career path that requires an actor's full attention and ambition. "Voiceover is not a para-career," he says. "We live in a realistic world, and we know that people get into acting to appear on film and television. But voiceover has developed into a nationwide market? a market that demands that smart talent invest in their careers, build their own websites, promote themselves, and keep up on their training."

Fortunately, according to Doherty, the industry is hungry for actors who can inhabit a character via voice. "There is still some work for straight announcers, but more than 90 percent of the professionals getting cast now are actors," says the agent. "The work requires that level of training. Voice acting is about more than just sound. It's about having point of view, not just a great voice. You may have a grand piano in your house, but can you play it? Not necessarily. You need to be trained. You've got to have the read. If you don't have that, what difference does your voice make? It's an acquired skill."

Voices of Course

Voiceover acting is an ability usually best learned from voiceover courses and coaches. Peter Rofe is a professional teacher at PDR Voiceover Coaching in New York City, who started eight years ago and now coaches, often one-on-one. He also runs group voiceover classes, presents extended workshops, produces demo reels, and runs a full-service recording studio. He says classes can vary depending on an actor's experience. "For some students, I reserve private coaching, especially if they're experienced, working actors," he says. "But classes might work better for beginners, because it helps to watch other people work."

Rofe has watched as the industry evolved over the past eight years. "The business dramatically changed because of technology. The Internet and MP3s now allow artists and agencies to send voiceover files all over the world in moments," he says. "You no longer have to work in the city that hires the voice talent. You can record anything anywhere off of emailed scripts and return the work as an MP3 file." Another change in the business has been client needs. "Style trends change what the marketplace wants," Rofe says. "The hot trend right now is natural, real-person, testimonial reads. Casting directors and ad agencies aren't necessarily even looking for perfect, proper English. They're often in the market for something earthy and urban on occasion. The big booming voice announcers are becoming prehistoric." However, sounding unpracticed can take a lot of study.

As Rofe conducts his courses and coaching, he often sees aspiring voiceover artists making mistakes in marketing. "They fail to present themselves professionally. Maybe they cut corners on their CD demo design, or they don't send out material consistently," he observes. "Even experienced professionals make the mistake of not employing ongoing training. Consider voiceover skill as a muscle, and if a muscle isn't flexed, it atrophies. We can always get better at what we do."

Casting director Huck Liggett of Voicecasters in Burbank agrees that laziness is often the voiceover actor's primary enemy. "There's room for new talent, if you're prepared and if you've done your homework," he says. "The career is not something you can do on a whim. You must take it seriously. Some people are just inherently lazy and think things will come to them easily, and some actors think that voiceover is just another form of acting. But, working on a microphone is unlike any other sort of acting you might do." This applies to even the most experienced actors. "Even celebrities have to learn the techniques," he says. "It takes time and effort to learn microphone technique, take direction, work with the script, mark copy, etc." Voicecasters is in its 30th year of casting voiceover actors for all media, including commercials, industrial films, video games, and animation.

As for how he's seen his field change, Liggett mentions that the Internet has had a big impact. Some advertising clients were not initially receptive to the idea of casting their projects online, but, he says, those clients are now changing their attitude. "The industry is undergoing a correction now," he says. "We lost some clients not too long ago during the advent of computer casting. Those clients are coming back now and realizing the advantages of new methods. To be competitive, they realize they need to take the time to deal with this technology. Some people are hesitant about it, but once they realize the ease of it, they make the change. It will settle in to benefit everyone." Still, he laments that the cyberspace invasion is allowing less interpersonal contact among talent, agents, casting services, and directors. However, he acknowledges that there are also a lot more agencies and casting outlets popping up, because it's easier to get recorded, known, and recognized now through computers. *Saying the Magic Words*

"In terms of new talent looking to break in now, with the advent of online casting and demos, there is access for people across the United States as opposed to the big cities," Liggett says. "A lot of people are accessing information online or through periodicals. They can solicit themselves to the agencies directly." New York-based voice agent Charles Rosen agrees with his West Coast casting comrade. Just as in on-camera acting, voice work has its set protocols for accessing work. "The most effective way to break into the business is to go through a licensed agent," Rosen says, "but they should only take that step when they are ready. I see too many people that aren't trained or coached. They try to do too many kinds of voices as opposed to sticking to what they might do best."

Another common mistake actors make is not knowing how to market themselves. "They need to watch and know different kinds of programming at different times of day. They need to familiarize themselves with varying styles of presentation," he advises. "Actors need to work with a coach and take a series of classes ranging from eight weeks to 20 weeks. You really need to dive into it fully and surround yourself with professional actors that make a living in the field. Train with people that know the business and the necessary skills."

Rosen's self-titled agency was founded in 1988 after its founder spent 10 years on Madison Avenue casting voice- and on-camera talent for ad agencies. He now reps talent for TV, radio, animation, and industrial. "Part of an agent's job [in voiceover] is to match the talent with the unique challenges of each media," he says. "TV or radio will demand a different style than an industrial film. But, there's a larger talent pool to choose from now, as there is a big crossover between the New York and L.A. markets. Now, more than ever, you need a good agent to represent you."

So how does Rosen locate the talent he represents? Is his door open to new, aspiring voice talent? "Through my years of sourcing talent, I developed relationships with clients," he says. "But I find talent through managers and CDs mailed to me. When I receive a CD demo reel, I listen to it. I make notes on it, and I start a file on that individual in the computer. I note their voice quality and their age range. Are they more of an announcer type? More of a character type? Would they be better used in industrials?"

Doherty uses a different approach to keep the door open to new voices. "We have, for the last two years, stated a preference that we'd like to receive your portfolio by email as an MP3 file. That way it gets listened to almost immediately. If I want to respond to the talent, I can respond to them immediately," he says. "Everything gets listened to as quickly as possible, but we're not in the business of critiquing. So, if we're not interested, we won't call you. If we are interested, we'll have them come in here to our studios and audition."

But the demo is one thing; working in the trenches is another. Says Doherty, "You don't know how someone works until you watch and listen to them work."

From the Artist's Mouth

"As new talent, you should try to find your individual style," says Rosen. "You have to stand out from the crowd. If you're a talented actor, but you can't compete with a celebrity voice, you have to find a unique approach. Now celebrities are doing this work more and more. So your average actor needs to have an identity?a choice that makes you special."

This is not to say you need to be famous to find work in the field. Like many people, veteran voice actor Jennifer Hale got her start behind the scenes. "When I was a teenager, I got a job as a PA, which I would recommend to any actor," she says. "I was working in an audio studio, and I would get to watch an occasional radio commercial. I just watched and learned from the pros as much as possible." By the time she moved to Los Angeles, she'd done enough local radio and TV ads to put together a volume of work. "It took me a couple of years to figure out that I could do voice work here," she says. "I scraped together everything I had and paid to have a professional demo done."

According to Hale there are lucrative career options in voiceover. "When I first came to show business, my ambitions were twofold: music and acting," she says. "Like many other actors, I pictured myself in movies and television. I had no idea of the massive voiceover world that was out there." In addition to countless commercials, Hale has flourished in animation, lending her voice to *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Spider-Man*, *Totally Spies*, and the Star Wars?-based video game *Knights of the Old Republic*. Her home studio was completed in 2004, and she puts her ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) capability to work, sending her voice work to studios across the country.

For aspiring voice actors, Hale recommends taking top-level classes for at least 18 months before even attempting to do a first demo. "The learning curve for that first year is huge," she explains. "And, an important part of that year is the time it takes to wrap your brain around a new skill. It takes time to develop muscle memory, until you get to a point in which your creativity can kick in. But you have to take the time to get good at the basic skills first."

Of course, there is always the exception, like the on-camera actor who came upon voice work by accident and managed to blend into the industry without significant voice training. Andre Ware, a Los Angeles?-based actor and voice performer, has appeared as a guest on several one-hour network dramas and in films, including *Die Hard With a Vengeance*. But he has also flourished in voiceover, appearing in national commercials for AARP, McDonalds, and the U.S. Army, and in animated productions such as *As Told by Ginger*, *Blue Demon*, and *Marvel Comics' The Ultimate Avengers* as Nick Fury. His video game voice credits include *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: The Fallen*, *Ground Control*, and *Star Wars: X-Wing Alliance*. Never formally trained in voice work, he says he hadn't even thought about doing voiceover work while breaking into acting in New York. When Ware was cast in an on-camera PSA for Liz Claiborne, the director liked his voice and asked him if he would mind doing the voiceover for the spot. "Up until that point, my commercial agent never thought about sending me out for voiceovers," Ware says. "After that first job, the agent started sending me out like crazy. But I had no special training. Digital Network) capability to work, sending her voice work to studios across the country.

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Ware explains that those trials included a key lesson early in his voice career. While preparing to do a commercial, he was running the lines in his head, eyes closed, trying to internalize them by using his on-camera acting skills. "When the director saw that, she asked me, 'How can you get a feel for the copy without looking at it? You don't want to use your on-camera techniques here. Never take your eyes off the copy. Everything you need is there on the page.'"

After learning those kind of on-the-job essentials, Ware needed to find his voice. "I was always careful to watch everything around me and to listen to other professionals. I was always looking to bend an ear and talk with other voiceover actors," he says. "While my career came down to fate, learning, training, and networking will always improve your odds of breaking into voiceover." BSW

? Be patient. Most voice actors need at least a year's training before seeking employment.

? Brand yourself by discovering what characterization or style best suits your abilities.

? Don't waste your money on creating a demo reel until you're properly prepared with training or coaching.

? Before seeking representation, find out how an agency prefers to receive a reel?whether by CD, online MP3, or the like.

? Familiarize yourself with current Internet and audio technology. You need to know what an ISDN line is, how to create MP3s, and the like.

By John Scott Lewinski