



## **Giving Depth to Words**

I've been struck many times, while listening to Radio or TV commercials, various forms of narration or in the classes I teach, how many voice actors deliver their words with awesome articulation and precise projection, but detached delivery. They're quite adept at lifting the words off the page effortlessly, but fail to take the opportunity to color words or phrases with the appropriate attitude or emotion. They sometimes forget to use their acting abilities to give depth and dimension to the words they speak.

In voice acting, all our emotions and attitudes come through our voice. People can't see our eyes or our body language like they can on stage or in film. The slightest nuance in the tone of our voice can convey myriad feelings; non-verbal utterances can convey even more. But there are so many places in copy where we can really give the words the depth they need by feeling the words we're saying and injecting emotion into them.

An example that came up in one of my classes occurred when we were working on a spot for a regional hospital, and one word that kept occurring was "hope." Ask yourself: what does hope sound like? When you say the word just by itself, out of context, you tend to naturally say it on a down note. Hope. One word, spoken with a period after it. But think about what hope means. Hope means to cherish a desire with anticipation, to wish for something, with some amount of expectation. It could be something you long for that's realistic or unrealistic. It's an attitude or feeling that could be attainable. And in the context of a hospital, and the feelings it evokes in potentially life-threatening situations, it's a word with a very powerful meaning.

So in this context, hope is an uplifting concept.. It always has been. So it's literally a word we need to lift, because the attitude is a positive one. When we say this word, we need to have hope in our heart in order to have hope in our voice. In a spot or narration for a hospital, or any medical facility, the word "hope" needs to be infused with compassion and total sincerity.

On the other end of the spectrum, I hear the word “pain” a lot in copy, and I hear it thrown away. But this is another opportunity to inject the appropriate emotional note. When you’re talking about pain, and you’re a sympathetic or empathetic person, when you say the word “pain” you should be wincing a bit. A listener can hear it in your voice. Want a great example of how the sound of *one word* can provoke an emotional response? Think about this: How many times have you called someone you know, *and just by the tone of one word they use to answer the phone*—“Hello”—you can tell if everything’s cool or something’s amiss. It’ll provoke you to either say, “Hi, how’re ya doin’?” or “Are you okay?” If one word can get that kind of response, just think of how thousands of your other spoken words and phrases are perceived.

There are innumerable words that you can color and give depth to whenever you come across them. These words are loaded with attitudes and emotions. Don’t throw away the opportunity to infuse these words with the appropriate color, feeling and attitude. When you say the word “excitement” or “exciting,” deliver it with an exclamation point! (An exclamation point is the only punctuation mark I know that literally connotes an emotion—excitement!) When you talk about how a particular company cares, “care” should be delivered with concern and compassion. Whether they’re nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs, don’t throw these words away! For voice actors, words are easy to say and lift off the page effortlessly, but the listener needs to hear some thought and feeling behind those words. When you really start thinking about them, words are easy to bring to life when you say them with the appropriate feeling or attitude. Here are just a few examples:

Friendly, elegant, patriotic, confident, sultry, scary, stiff, sensual, helpful, funny, concern, evil, tiring, appetizing, sad, cautionary, breathless, wacky, tough, delicious, carefree, perky, nervous, stuffy, mellow, heroic, magical, cute, bored, sly, exciting.

In my classes, I have my students say these (and many other) words with their accompanying meaning (and sound), and also have them say them with their opposite meaning (and sound). It’s funny to say “friendly” in an angry tone. It’s funny to say “confident” in a wimpy way! And when you do this exercise, it becomes clear that, as voice actors, when we speak, we’re painting a picture for the listener, compensating for the fact that they can’t see us saying what we’re saying.

A lot of the copy you get as a voice actor will not be chock-a-block with words and phrases that you'll be able to get behind emotionally. There's not much emotion in "2.9% APR financing for 60 months on all vehicles in stock." But the next time you *do* get some copy to perform that has any kind of thoughtful theme, sit with those words for a minute. Feel the emotion behind the copy. Find the emotional resonance behind the words you're saying. I guarantee you that you'll start performing turning those two-dimensional words on the page—into three dimensions.

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