

How Not to Mumble

By Doris Drucker

Listening is one of the basic skills that's indispensable for a successful career. Perhaps that's why so many training seminars teach it. If one doesn't listen, one doesn't get the message that the speaker wants and is trying to convey. But what are we to do if we listen but can't hear the speaker?

In informal conversations—for instance between a salesperson and a customer—in which there are no amplifiers or other electronic aides, inaudible speech is just noise. It's certainly not information.

In many such situations, the speaker tends to put the blame on the listener, when, in fact, speaking-to-be-heard is becoming a lost art. We have turned to a world of low-voice mumblers “in the misdirected pursuit of realism,” as the *London Economist* recently put it.

There are explanations. One is our regression from a civil into an uncivil society. “I speak the way I want to. If they can't hear me, let them get a hearing aid.”

Another explanation might be the pervasive attitude of why bother? What with mikes, amplifiers, voice-activated computers, voice synthesizers, and so forth, there's no need for anybody except actors and other performing artists to cultivate the art of speaking.

In our fixation on Communications with a capital C, audible speech is no longer considered a valuable asset. Prospective public speakers are taught how to stand, what body language to use, and how to handle such visuals as overhead projections, easel presentations, PowerPoint slides, and computer-generated graphics. But they're taught only a minimum, if any, of the oratorical skills practiced by speakers of earlier generations.

In a clearing in the woods of the Green Mountains of Vermont there is a stone marker with an engraving commemorating that “on July 7 and 8 in the year 1840, Daniel Webster spoke at this

place to 15,000 people.” Without a mike! It's hard to imagine now. Of course, similar to his contemporary teachers, preachers, and politicians, Webster was trained as an orator. These days, theological schools have courses teaching how to preach, but colleges that prepare students for careers in teaching typically don't have such courses.

Speaking comes naturally to us. We learn our first words before we are one year old, and the results are so gratifying: *Ma-Ma* or *Da-Da* come running when we say the words. Consequently, we develop an enormous ego—an ego that tells us as we grow up that we speak perfectly well and that it's always the other person's problem, not ours, when he or she doesn't understand. In fact, the subjective

judgment of the people we talk to is the only feedback we can expect. There is no objective standard for voice output comparable to the reading chart that optometrists use, or to the acoustic measurements that detect deviation from the norm in people with a hearing impairment.

Most speakers have no idea how they sound to others. They don't get the reflection of their own voices, and hearing oneself on a tape is almost always an unpleasant surprise. Haven't you said, “Do I really sound like that?”

Without objective feedback, improving one's vocal output doesn't seem necessary at all. For public speakers, there is at least the supply-and-demand response from the people by whom they are engaged to speak. If they don't deliver what the audience pays for, they won't be asked to speak again, their contracts won't be renewed, and they certainly won't be recommended to other organizations. Most of the time, however,

there's no such direct performance evaluation. Sloppy or inaudible speech may be deplored, but neither is rarely regarded as a negative. Employers and employees are wrong to disregard the problem.

Consider the average voicemail message: “This is Joan (or Bill) from the mumble, mumble, mumble company. We'd like to talk to your export manager about our mumble, mumble, mumble. Please call back as soon as possible, our number is (real fast) mumble, mumble, mumble, and our email is mumble, mumble, mumble. Have a nice day.”

If I have to replay a recording at least twice to dig out the message or number or name hidden in the mumbled words, my annoyance grows by the minute. I don't really blame Joan or Bill. They're undoubtedly familiar with their company's name, telephone number, and so forth, so they can rattle them off at top speed, probably without even moving their lips. But I do get angry at the company that allows imperfect, often undecipherable messages to go out under its name. My initial reaction is that they probably also have imperfect customer service or products.

Our perception of what are an acceptable voice volume and diction has to change. As baby boomers age, their hearing (and seeing) are going to deteriorate. Case in point: Newspapers, which traditionally have printed in 9-point font, are considering going up to 10-point or higher. They don't say that 9-point is large enough and if people can't read it, let them get new glasses. Likewise, isn't it about time we recognized that “Get a hearing aid” isn't the appropriate response to inaudible messages and that it's up to speakers to make the transfer of information successful? The burden is on them, not on the listeners.

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