

Hearing Voices!

Use characters, personas, puppets and animal sounds to boost your vocal variety.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM

Everyone agrees that more vocal variety in speeches is preferable. But how does one add more vocal variety? What are the best ways to vary your tone, pitch, cadence, volume, inflection and intonation? There is a long list of strategies and ideas you can draw from.

Storytelling and Characters

Many Toastmasters use storytelling to stretch their vocal skills. One reason stories can be fertile ground for vocal variety is that they are often full of characters. You can exaggerate each character's voice. One character may have a high and squeaky voice while another's voice might be low and sinister.

By first creating different physical characteristics—such as posture and presence—for each character, speakers tap into the corresponding voices for such physical manifestations of their characters.

Talking With Your Hands

Some members have improved their vocal variety by giving puppet shows, using finger puppets or hand puppets where each one not only looks but also sounds different. In entertaining puppet shows, the little characters feature different styles of speaking and varying accents, and they use different registers to distinguish themselves from each other and help the story along.

A Family of Sounds

A great vehicle for showcasing vocal variety is a speech describing an



Linda Henley-Smith uses puppets in her education session at the 2011 International Convention.

inter-generational family dinner where kids, parents and grandparents interact. Think of a family reunion or a holiday meal. Kids' voices are usually higher; grandparents may speak more deliberately or with traces of an accent if they originally came from another country.

We all have interesting characters in our families. Part of what makes them interesting is their manner of speaking: their vocal stylings, vocabulary and unique way of expressing themselves.

Practice Personas

Creating a new persona can be fun and liberating. Just like wearing a costume at Halloween can free us up to act beyond our usual comfort zone and inhibitions, dressing in a persona's costume similarly frees you to embrace vocal variety where you might otherwise demur.

"When you connect with a persona, people connect with you!" says Leona Hamel, DTM, a member of the Les Toastmasters Passionnés (Passionate Toastmasters) in Granby, Quebec, Canada.

Many years ago she created a character for one of her speeches: the romantic

LouLou L'amour. Recalling the experience, she says she used a sensual French voice to mesmerize her audience with the "language of love" as she baked chocolate chip cookies. Dressing the part further helped her deviate from her usual vocal patterns, exaggerate her voice and infuse her words with passion.

Little did she know at the time that this character would have "legs" and return every few years for other Toastmasters events. She's now working on a book based on this character. *C'est la vie!*

To expand my vocal variety, I once became an evangelical preacher, the Very Right Reverend Verbal T. Toastmaster. I used an accent drawn from America's Deep South, elongated my vowels and spoke in rhyme (and even in tongues) when I told audiences "I aaaaaam the veeeeeeery Riiiiight Rev-verrr-rend Verbal Teeeeee Toastmasterrrr!" Dressing the part with a yellow silk robe and a tambourine at my side helped me stay in character.

Who Will You Be Today?

For your next speech, think about becoming a boardwalk barker or a



racetrack announcer or a newscaster with pronounced elocution.

Consider Toastmasters 1994 World Champion of Public Speaking Morgan McArthur. What did he do after winning that title? He spent \$2,000 to attend a two-week course on how to become an auctioneer. Already gifted with an ability to mimic voices and sounds, McArthur says, “I am a huge believer in the power and essential nature of using your instrument to be more impactful, powerful and versatile. And I always like to expand the tools in my toolkit.”

Auctioneering helped McArthur with enunciation as he compressed his words while speeding up his delivery. “Auctioneers have an ongoing conversa-

To expand my vocal variety, I once became an evangelical preacher, the Very Right Reverend Verbal T. Toastmaster.

tion with bidders,” he says. “Their conversation is a hybrid between speaking and singing.”

McArthur learned how to generate his voice deep down from his diaphragm, not his throat. “If your jugular veins are bulging, you’re pushing from the wrong place,” he says.

Try it for yourself. How fast can you say the following sentence: “I’m bidding a dollar, now would you bid me two?”

Scene and Heard

A great way to invoke vocal variety is to re-create a scene from your favorite play or movie and share it with your audience within your speech. Some go Shakespearean. Others prefer more current content. I once performed a scene from the movie *Pulp Fiction* where I played John Travolta’s character and my fellow Toastmaster played Samuel L. Jackson’s character.

Veteran member Andrew Margrave, DTM, of Speakers Corner Club in Silver

Spring, Maryland, re-created an opera scene.

“I impersonated three characters from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, speaking (not singing) the lines,” he says. “Don’s character was baritone, the statue Il Commendatore and the servant Leporello were both basses. I impersonated the baritone with an unnatural baritone inflection. I differentiated between the bass characters by using a quicker, more detached articulation for one.”

“Practice, practice, practice until it’s like a Pavlovian reflex!” Margrave counsels. “It has to make sense to your voice.”

Exploring the Animal Kingdom

Animals have their own unique sounds.

Write a speech with dogs or cats in it, lions or tigers, egrets or even a parakeet with an

attitude. You might write about your visit to a zoo. Whether you give us the animals’ native sounds or anthropomorphize and let your animals speak your native tongue with their own (animal) accent, variety will ensue.

McArthur, who has a degree in veterinary medicine, has been known to make the sounds of dogs, hogs and galloping horses in his speeches. He recommends the book *Mouth Sounds* by Fred Newman.

All The World’s A Stage

Consider giving a speech about sounds heard off-screen in a movie theatre: whispering, loud cell phone conversations, judgmental snipes about how others are dressed, opinions about the actors and special effects, and more.

A speech incorporating sounds heard at a flea market, a farmer’s market or at an international airport terminal, or backstage at a playhouse or the opera house, would also allow for various sounds, accents and even languages.

You might describe a recent networking event you attended and conversations with the various characters you encountered: the loud salesperson, the whisperer, the question-asker, the sultry-voiced hostess, the ill-mannered student, the boastful businessperson, the bellicose lawyer, etc. Give us dialogue with vocal variety.

I once heard a Toastmaster open up his pocket address book and, using its contents, give a reading full of drama, pauses, bold declarative statements, rhetorical questions and different accents, about his friends, colleagues and contacts in the address book.

“Going for Big”

Remember to practice your various voices. Lisa Safran, an improv expert and presentation coach in San Rafael, California, recommends the technique “Six Voices in 60 Seconds”: “Set a timer for 10-second intervals and each 10 seconds speak as if you are a completely different character,” says Safran. “In order to find your natural voice and one that has variety, go first for extremes and then dial it back. One of my acting teachers taught us that it was all about going for big, and then reigning it in.”

To get the most out of the vocal variety assignment in the *Competent Communication* manual (Project 6), try exploring exaggeration. For many, vocal variety doesn’t come naturally. Through the process of deliberately exaggerating the voices in your speech, you are forced out of your comfortable vocal registry and pushed to explore extremes, often with comedic effect. Let go of your inhibitions. Stretch those vocal chords and remember, variety is the spice of life. ■

CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, is a past district governor, professional speaker and founder of www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com. He is a member of Evening Stars and Lakeview Toastmasters club, both in the San Francisco Bay Area.