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PRESENTATION SKILLS

Loud and clear: the message sent by your voice

Business people and politicians are using voice analysis to assess and improve their public speaking, writes **Kim Thomas**

I am sitting in an office in Covent Garden having my voice recorded. I talk for two minutes on four topics: a happy memory, a sad memory, something that makes me angry and a neutral work-related topic.

The reason? I am about to have my voice analysed, and expressing these feelings provides a balanced view of the voice's emotional content.

Voice coaching, once the preserve of actors, is now commonly used by politicians and business people. A badly delivered speech can have a devastating impact on the public image of a politician, as David Davis's speech at the Conservative party conference last month demonstrated. For chief executives, too,

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an unconvincing speech can damage the company's standing with employees, customers or investors. When we have finished, the man who has been listening to me, Alastair Grant of presentation analysts Grant Pearson Brown, sends the recording to Branka Zei, a Swiss psychologist who specialises in linguistics. Using software, Ms Zei measures the recording against an "ideal" voice, whose values of pitch, articulation and fluency,

among other things are derived by analysing the voices of hundreds of good speakers. Mr Grant receives a report on the results and, armed with that information he and his colleagues coach me to use my voice more effectively.

Voice coaching can work wonders with the most uninspiring speaker. Liz Banks, managing director of Skill Studio, a presentation consultancy, says most of the company's clients suffer from a lack of confidence about speaking in public. Like GPB, Skill Studio offers coaching in presentation and vocal techniques and instant feedback on a speaker's performance.

"The two main things we look for are speed and clarity," says Ms Banks. "It's amazing how often people have never thought about slowing down – there are no pauses and there's no time for you to take in what they've just said".

Skill Studio uses techniques form the stage, including work on posture and breathing, says Ms Banks. "When people start, they gulp breath into the top of the chest and breathe through the mouth, so they'll be quite tense around their throat and their neck, which obviously puts a strain on the voice."

So what does my analysis show? GPB's report compares my voice with the reference speaker on eight different metrics, assesses my image as a speaker and even gives a brief description of my personality traits.

The good news is that my median pitch is 158.25Hz., compared with the standard reference for a woman of 200Hz – another way of saying that my voice is quite deep. "Deeper voices carry more authority than high pitched voices," says Mr Grant. My loudness level and loudness range are "optimal".

On the other hand, my modulation is poor – I do not vary my pitch much, which means I have a monotonous voice. My articulation is also not clear enough, because I sometimes have difficulty pronouncing the letter "r". Lastly, I use "disfluencies" meaning that I overuse terms such as "um" and "er". The best news is that my "vocal indicators" point to a "balanced personality with no clear tendency towards introversion or extraversion".

If Mr Grant were to work with me further, he would get me to read from a script and pause after each phrase. The idea is that when you are tempted to say "um", you simply remain quiet: "If people are comfortable with silence, then they don't have to put in those filler words." To counteract the monotony, he would ask me to imagine myself telling a story to a child, as this naturally makes people vary their pitch.

For most of us, the idea of having weakness of speech laid bare is daunting. For those bold enough to try it, though, voice analysis offers the chance of compelling performance on the podium.