Finding the Right Sound for a Project

Whether you use audio to sell cheese, catheters, or to warn the world about epidemics, there's an effective process for creating the right sound for your audience. I start each project with some detective work.

I'm a high-tech "messenger" -- I do voiceovers and podcasts for a wide range of clients who want their message delivered with impact.

Case Study

Let's say my client needs a voice for an animated presentation showing how a new-fangled system does lickety-split medical transcriptions. Not the sexiest assignment -- but that's why it's a good example. Since I've been chosen to be the client's audio messenger I discuss goals of the copy, the target audience, how and where the piece will be used, tech considerations, etc. In this case the client knows that he wants a lot of "enthusiasm" but beyond that doesn't give much information about his expectations.

Digging deeper, I glean that the piece is for a kiosk at a trade show booth. I'lll be given a storyboard. Good. Now I know some key things: It's a sales piece, and the people seeing it are likely unfamiliar with the product, but probably know something about medical devices and systems if they're attending the trade show. With the storyboard I can also "see"; what I'm selling. These clues tell me:

The tone could be more upbeat with a bigger "smile" and lots of energy to compensate for somewhat dry material that has to be interesting (hence, "enthusiastic";

Clear enunciation is critically important for brand name and technical terms;

Pacing needs to keep the piece moving for people who will be overloaded with info but need to remain engaged for the length of the piece (about 5 minutes); and

Pauses between sections are critical so that the animator can more easily time the animation to the voice (in this case).

Dry Run

With this in mind, I record and send a sample for approval to the client in MP3 format before I begin the job: I offer to have the client "direct" me while I record so that he can give immediate feedback rather than doing retake after retake in a vacuum.

Once More, With Less Feeling

Before the session I'm sent a final copy with words in bold that the client wants emphasized. Fair enough - the client is clearer about what he hears in his head.

We do the session in no time - I record while he listens via muted speakerphone (an inexpensive alternative to a phone patch if your client is willing) and we make only minor copy changes (for "ear-friendliness") I edit out the takes he doesn't want, and presto. I send a finished, clean audio file to the animator. Easy, right?

Except, when the client hears the approved v/o in the context of the animation, he doesn't like the added emphasis provided in bold after all. So I re-record a few offending sections "to time" (now that the animation is complete) and all is right with the world.

One challenge is to maintain consistent audio levels and overall room sound and vocal tone quality when retakes are requested, sometimes weeks after a job is "complete." I also make sure I do retakes after vocally warming up so there's not a difference in pitch.

I accomplish this by using the same mic as I did for the original job, keeping a reference file for matching, and giving a good listen before sending off a new file.

It's all very subjective, this business of hearing - so I avoid client frustration by trusting my instincts, getting as much info up front as possible and then "acting" accordingly.

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