

Speak up and call the shots

Can the way that you talk hold the key to health, wealth and happiness? **Rebecca Ley** went to a voice coach to find out

"Changing your voice can change your life," says **Steve Hudson**, a former actor and professional voice coach. He claims that the way we talk holds the key to wealth, health and happiness and that he can teach anybody the secrets of success. "Your voice is the most important tool you possess," he says. "Without a confident voice you don't impress. You might have lots of interesting points to make, but, if you don't express them in the right way, nobody is going to listen."

This sounded pretty good to me. I'm 27 and I work on the *Times Magazine*, and I've begun to realise how important talking is to my job. From doing interviews, to negotiating with agents, or even pitching ideas in features meetings, it's important, crucial even, that I sound confident. But, as I'm naturally soft-spoken this can be a tall order. So when I heard about Hudson's work, I was intrigued enough to book a session.

You've probably never heard of Hudson, but you will have heard his voice. Remember the Old Spice advertisement: all splashing surf, pounding music and Seventies naffness? The voiceover made it stick in your mind as it intoned: "It's the mark of a man." That was Hudson. So was the sexy whisper on the Black Magic advert asking: "Who knows the secret of the Black Magic box?" He's made a career out of having a voice you can't ignore.

But Hudson's mission is not just getting people to have more gravitas, he also has a health message. "Most people never think about the health of their voice or how to use it properly, but it's often crucial to their livelihood," he says. It's not just opera singers. About one third of the labour force are in professions in which the voice is the primary tool. But few of us consider the best ways to use it or to care for it.

"As a result, millions suffer from voice strain developed after using their voices excessively or inappropriately. We live in a frenetic world. We work and play hard, with our ears glued to our mobile phone. We end up learning to talk much too quickly, wearing our voices out."

To minimise the risk of voice strain, Hudson,

Exercising cords

These exercises will ensure that your voice is properly warmed up, meaning that it sounds its best: relaxed and free.

First, use your fingertips to massage your face, lips and throat — this relaxes tension. Then hum an "M" sound gently up and down your voice range to start the vocal warm-up. Then sing a series of sounds with M and then a vowel, such as "Mmmeee, Mmmay, Mmmah, Mmmoe, Mmmoo" on one note, and then repeat, moving up and down the scale.

Check your breathing; remember to relax your tummy muscles outwards as you breathe in.

In good voice

Here are seven tips for saving your voice:

- Drink plenty of fluids, particularly water. Dry vocal cords are particularly prone to irritation. The three most important times to drink water are first thing in the morning, just before speaking for long periods, and after exercise. A minimum of eight glasses a day is recommended, more if you are physically very active.

- Limit caffeine (drinks such as coffee, tea and colas) to two cups a day. Caffeine, because its diuretic effect can dehydrate the throat and vocal cords. Alcohol is also drying and should be used sparingly.

- Avoid late-night eating. This can result in acid reflux from the stomach spilling into your larynx, causing hoarseness. Telltale signs are bad breath (especially first thing) and a sour taste.

- Lensing or straining your neck can affect sound production in the throat. So do not cradle the phone between the head and shoulder for extended lengths of time. And if you easily get stressed, and have muscle tension in the neck, investigate what you can do to manage this.

- Avoid forced whispering, yelling or using an unnatural voice. If you want to speak more loudly, learn how to project your voice properly.

- Avoid excessive throat clearing — this irritates the throat. Sip water or swallow instead. If throat clearing is persistent, see your doctor about what may be causing it.

58, who is craggily handsome with thick, grey hair and broad shoulders — he was once considered for the role of James Bond but Roger Moore got the job — has developed a technique called PSR (professional sight reading).

There are three golden rules to PSR, he tells me. First, you should drop in tone at the end of a sentence, unless it's a question. This implies authority and certainty in what you're saying. Secondly, you need to pause (for two beats) at the end of every sentence before "energising" the beginning of the next. Another main tenet of the PSR method is inserting "mental commas" into what you're saying. Basically this means pausing a lot, in all sorts of places you've never imagined. You are also supposed to learn to read and speak slowly. Much, much more slowly than feels natural. Finally, speak softly and inject your voice with enthusiasm.

It sounds relatively straightforward but just try combining it all at once: it's a bit like trying to rub your stomach and pat your head at the same time. Still, I persevered. After my first session with Hudson, every night for a fortnight I stood in front of my mirror trying to inject my voice with energy and enthusiasm: most of the time I sounded like a demented Butlins Red Coat. And my boyfriend became rather annoyed with me inserting mental commas every time I asked for a cup of tea.

The psychology of making an impact with your voice is far more important and subtle than most of us recognise. After all, the words that you speak account for only 7 per cent of the perceived impact of your message, while your tone of voice counts for 38 per cent.

One study this year, published in the journal *Hormones and Behaviour*, shows that women prefer men with deeper voices, while a separate study published in *Animal Behaviour* in 2003 suggests that men judged women with the most attractive voices as the best looking.

Yet Hudson says that it isn't just the tone of your voice that affects how others see you. More important are pace and intonation, but the crucial thing is the ability to manipulate your voice at will. What's more, he insists that anyone can achieve this level of mastery.

I'm a bit doubtful when I return for a second session. I certainly don't feel as if I've made much progress. But when Hudson records me talking, I concentrate on remembering all the principles of PSR. He then plays a recording from the first session, before playing back my improved version.

I'm surprised by the change. In the first, I sound bored, as if I'm rushing to the end of every sentence. In the second, I sound more calm and confident. Obviously pleased with my look of surprise, Hudson smiles before saying in his deep, soothing way: "There you see. That's better. I'd much rather be a well-spoken tramp than a mumbling millionaire."

For more information call 020-8455 2211 and visit www.voicemaster.co.uk