

Talking Money

Producing Professional Voice-overs At Home

Part 2: we discuss the sort of studio setup you need for voice-over work, and how you can start promoting and selling your services.

JASON BERMINGHAM

Last month, I explored the different creative 'hats' you need to wear as a self-producing voice-over artist. I'll follow that up this month with advice on what studio setup you need (for details on that side of things, see the 'Gearing Up' box), and on getting yourself established as a money-making professional (the focus of the rest of the article). In summary, you first need to establish a 'voice identity', then produce a demo, build a web site, sharpen those communication skills and promote yourself. Finally, you need to figure out how to keep your hard-earned clients coming back with more work...

Your Voice Identity

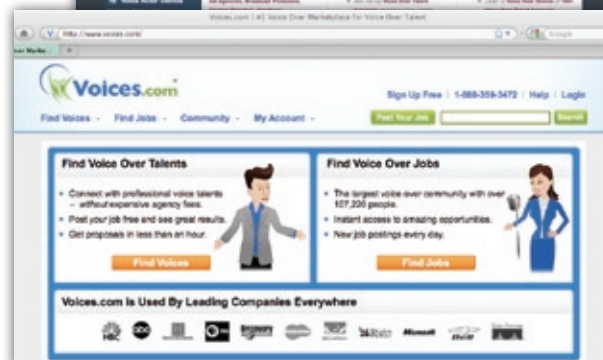
Do you have a great voice? Good for you... but if you have a *unique* voice, that's far more likely to earn you money in this business. Determining your voice identity is the most important decision you'll make, so spend a few hours exploring www.voices.com and www.voice123.com,

and listen to the artists featured there. They sound like the voices you hear on TV and radio. That's not surprising, because they often are those voices. Most are working from home for less money than you'd imagine, and to compete with them you'll need to offer something different.

Your identity doesn't have to be just about the voice, though. If you're a musician, why not market yourself as a voice-over artist who can also

If you want to hear some of the most successful voice actors, try visiting www.voicebank.net, which lists only the agency-represented cream of the industry; or try www.voices.com to get a taste of the sort of professional artists with whom you'll be competing from the outset.

produce soundtracks; a one-stop shop for clients who need voice and music. If you're fluent in a foreign language, you could sell yourself as being multilingual to draw the attention of production houses developing projects for the international market. A non-native English speaker could promote their accent, a doctor might specialise in medical narrations... and so on. You need to



build an identity based on what you do best, and on what sets you apart from the crowd.

This isn't to say that you must pursue work in only one area. I built my own voice identity in São Paulo, Brazil, as a native speaker of American English. Few other Americans were doing voice-overs in the city, and I was able to find work recording industrial videos for Brazilian companies, case studies for ad agencies, educational material for language schools, and other projects that demanded a native speaker. As studios got to know me, they started offering me different jobs: radio imaging, movie trailers, dubbing, and even Portuguese-language work. When clients feel comfortable working with you, they'll probably give you a shot at other jobs, even if they have little to do with the voice identity you've chosen.

Build Your Web Site

When you've settled on an identity, you'll need a web site to act as your calling card and résumé. Building web sites is easy: my wife and I built ours using the drag-and-drop software at www.wix.com, and there are many such services. Alternatively, build a site on YouTube but feature audio instead of video; or on MySpace, and feature voice-over demos instead of music. If you pay for an online service such as voices.com or voice123.com, you can also build a personal page there. Or you can hire a professional web designer to build a web site that's viewable on all browsers and platforms (including smartphones!).

However you build it, make the domain



Keep it simple: the web site of the author's wife is clean, uncluttered, and spells out the voice identity it's selling — as well as offering immediate access to all information, including demos, in a single click.

name easy to remember, and make it reflect what you do. For instance, my wife markets her voice-over services through a web site called *A Brazilian Voice* (www.abrazilianvoice.com, above) giving clients an idea of who she is and what she does before they've even looked at the site. A simple .com domain name may seem expensive, and it might seem like the best names have been taken, but they're easy to remember and will be taken seriously.

Similarly, the site's content should be simple and straightforward, covering relevant information about yourself and your home studio, as well as a demo and contact information — with all essential information only one click away. Try to avoid bells and whistles: your voice is the only noise a prospective client wants to hear. Many voice-over books caution against putting a picture of yourself on your web

site, arguing that you sell your voice, not your image, and that a client might think you have the wrong age, race, or look for the part, but I disagree. A good picture featured discreetly on your site serves as a 'handshake', and it's easier to build a relationship when people have some idea of who you are.

Prepare Your Demo

An audio demo should be the centrepiece of your web site, as it's this that demonstrates to potential clients your voice identity, and enables them to decide if you're right for the job. The demo is of such importance that entire workshops are given on the subject, and studios charge anywhere from US\$100 to \$1000 to record and produce one. This fee normally includes providing the scripts, recording and editing performances, and then adding production

»

» music and sound effects to reproduce what we hear on TV and radio. Most voice-over books discuss demos at length, and the best is *The Art of Voice Acting* by James R Alburger. You'll save yourself money and frustration by reading this before creating your demo.

A standard demo runs from 30-60 seconds, or up to a minute and a half for long-form narration, and today, most working professionals feature their demos online as 16-bit, 44.1 kHz MP3 files. One

benefit of the online demo is that you can update the material regularly. Another is that you can break your demo into sections, making it easier for agents and clients to find exactly what they're looking for. Voice-over sites commonly feature MP3s labelled 'Commercial', 'Industrial', 'Phone Prompts', and so on. Just make sure that the presentation of your demos reflects your voice identity. For instance, if you're pursuing voice-over for English as a Second Language (ESL) material, »

Tips From The Top: Pat Fraley

Pat Fraley has been performing and teaching for 37 years, and lives and works in Studio City, California. He has created voices for over 4000 characters, placing him among the all-time top 10 voice actors to be cast in animated TV shows; and as a teacher, he's guided countless performers into voice-over careers. I asked Pat to offer would-be voice-over artists some advice.

How has the voice-over industry changed since you entered the business?

"I started doing voice-over work in 1974. When I began doing cartoon voices in LA, there were only about 20 of us who could supply three distinctly different voices on a half-hour show, over and over. At that time, radio commercials were flourishing. Now, radio is nearly dead, but games and audio books need lots of voice-over talent and both seem to be recession-proof. The greatest change is the amount of work available, the amount of talent available for the work, and the almighty Internet, which gives so much access for performers around the world to voice-over opportunities. One final thought: the style of announcing, narrating, and performing has changed. Technology has improved to the point where we can hear nuance, and the listener no longer is interested in being spoken at. They want to be spoken to."

Are there any do's and don'ts for producing a demo in today's market?

"There are no rules, only notions. I just helped Scott Burns, a talent up in Seattle, construct his character demo. He broke so many rules. He did impressions, did a 'concept-story demo', went long, and actually finished the demo doing mime! Great stuff.

"I'd encourage everyone not to use library music. Look for evocative music. No one has ever had legal problems from using music on a demo *[although they could do, if publishing that demo to the world! — Ed]*.

"Also, since we don't have the constraints of advertisers (time, money, client interference), we should be creating snippets for our demos that are better written than copywriters can manage. With commercial demos, create snippets that sound like they were pulled from

TV commercials, inasmuch as they are not wall-to-wall music and talking. Let a little air go through them, and add some sound effects representing the 'pictures' for which we are supplying the voice. Try to keep the demo less than a minute in length.



"Finally, the average time spent listening to a demo or an audition is seven seconds — so grab them in the first five seconds. That way you may get a whopping 10 or 15 seconds of a buyer listening to your efforts!"

Can you recommend any marketing tricks for voice-over talent on a limited budget?

"It's all about establishing and maintaining loyal relationships. Thank-you notes, showing genuine interest in what the client or buyer is doing and in their journeys, thoughtfulness — nothing beats these kinds of efforts. It's effective and inexpensive, but it takes time. After all, the returning customer leads to job-to-job work, which leads to a career."

How do you see the voice-over industry changing, and how can an artist prepare?

"I think more and more work will be available by working the Internet 'cloud'. The savvy performer is at working auditions and casting opportunities via the Internet, the better. Performers should be on top of communication trends and the means by which they can supply recordings. They should get skilled at performance and will need to be versatile. I know of a talent who is making US\$300,000 a year living in South Africa. He has Google tags coming to him that yield voice-over requests from all sorts of sources, even Craig's List in Portugal. He is very skilled at doing a mid-Atlantic dialect so he can supply voice-over jobs for the European and Asian markets, and not sound like a Yank or a Brit. I'm sure he's chained to his computer, but that's his journey!"

» **W** www.patfraley.com.

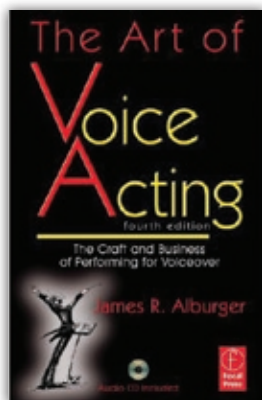
» it would be a good idea to feature an ESL Training demo ahead of any others.

Spend time listening to the demos on www.voicebank.net, which only showcases agency-represented talent, and you'll notice that they highlight communication more than production — so when working on your own demo, focus on making a connection with the listener. Get some honest feedback from people familiar with the voice-over business: your goal is to find work, not to impress your mom or earn 'likes' on Facebook!

If you find 'faking it' difficult, you could try finding work first. I began my career by spreading the word in São Paulo that I was available to record in American English. Despite my lack of experience, jobs trickled in, largely because I charged little or nothing. Instead, I asked for copies of the recordings, which grew into a patchwork demo, and later into three or four separate demos. As the demos improved, more work came in, and within a few years voice-over work became my primary source of income.

Promotion

Once you've found your voice identity, built a web site, and produced a demo, you're finally ready to start promoting yourself.



Some useful further reading in advance of producing your demo: James R Alburger's *Voice Acting, The Craft And Business Of Performing Voiceover*.

Start, if you can, by offering your services to people who know you. If you ran a music studio before, let people know you do voice-over now, too. If you have friends who run businesses, offer to record a better phone message for their answering

services. Spend an hour each day on the Internet looking for jobs that fit your profile. Visit sites such as www.freelancer.com, www.elance.com, and www.craigslist.com.

Consider investing in online advertising through Google Ads (choose very specific keywords and markets, though, or you'll pay for the clicks of curious competitors instead of prospective clients.) Cherry pick one or two auditions to send out each day.

Voice-over artist and teacher Pat Fraley (see the 'Tips From The Top' box) believes the single most important auditioning skill is rapid performance-oriented text analysis. "If you can't find the story in each and every audition," he says, "you can't realise it." Get to the heart of the copy and bring your character to life, just as if you were recording for a fee. Even if you don't get the job, you'll hone your skills and hopefully impress the

client enough to remember your name. Finally, I'd suggest *against* watermarking your auditions. Beeps and other audio artifacts are distracting, and show a lack of trust. If you suspect your audition might be used without your consent, simply fade it out before the final seconds.

Communicating With Clients

When doing business over the Internet, the words you write are the clothes you wear, and sending a sloppy email is like showing up for a job interview in dirty jeans and a wrinkled shirt. This business is about words and communication, so pay as much attention to editing your email as you do to editing your audio files. Check for spelling and grammar errors, avoid trendy abbreviations, capitalise words correctly, and make sure your tone is professional and polite. These rules apply whether using email or sending out missives on Facebook, Twitter, Skype, MSN, or other social media.

After you land a job, get a full job description from the client, and make sure you go over everything in writing before you record. Ask them to send a reference for the type of voice-over they expect, and if they'd like to take part in the session via a service like Skype, or phone patch. You want to be easy to work with and keep your client happy, but also to make sure that the client values your time — so make sure you're clear about your fee and when you will deliver the recording, and let the client

»

Gearing Up

Recording voice-overs requires a similar setup to that a home-recording musician might use, but there are a few differences...

The Recording Space: Voices can be exposed, and noise is always bad: there's little scope for 'creative use' of noise, or effects to hide noise, as there may be in some music genres. If any kind of noise sends your meters higher than -40dB when your mouth is shut, find a new place to record, or better-isolate the place you've chosen.

A great-sounding live room for strings or drums probably isn't great for spoken-word recordings. Voice-over work should sound intimate, and intimacy is best achieved by removing the sound of the room from your recordings. You might be surprised by which spaces work well. A walk-in wardrobe makes a superb voice-over recording booth, for example: lacking windows and lined with clothing, these are normally quiet and dry-sounding environments. A table-top voice-over booth is another good, low-cost and portable option. You need four sound-absorbing foam panels and a roll of duct tape. Sit two panels on end, and

a third panel behind them so that the edges touch, then place the fourth on top, making sure the backs of all the panels are facing out, and, finally, seal the edges together with duct tape. Place your mic inside this box, on top of a table, and speak into the open end. It's simple, and it may not look glamorous — but it's both affordable and effective. For a sturdier build, glue each foam panel to a piece of plywood, and then screw the plywood pieces together. Better yet, check out Harlan Hogan's Porta-Booth Pro (www.voiceoveressentials.com).

My own recording booth (pictured) sits in the corner of a 2.5 x 1.9 x 2.6m (LxWxH) room. We started by gluing 625mm x 625mm x 8mm sound-absorbing foam panels to the wall and



ceiling. We then stacked four Auralex LENRD bass traps in the corner. Lastly, we hung multiple layers of sound-absorbing blankets from hooks mounted to the ceiling. Made from polyester fibre quilted into heavy-duty fabric, these blankets reduce noise and reflections but are also easily removable and storable. A hanging blanket or polyester quilt serves the same purpose. Note that one side of my booth can be left open, since I have bookshelves on the opposite wall which help to break up any reflections.

Microphones: A sturdy, low-cost dynamic mic makes for a tempting first-choice in voice-over work, but professional voice-over recordings require a more sensitive mic with a more extended frequency response, making condenser mics the top choice. An exception is the ribbon mic, which typically exhibits plenty of

»

» know how much you charge for corrections. Few people realise that recording, editing, and delivering a five-minute voice-over can take a full hour or more. Some voice-over professionals will record a few corrections for free, but charge an additional 50 percent if the entire script has to be recorded again, because of changes to the text or the job description; others are happy to deliver a second recording at no extra cost.

When discussing fees, first determine where and for how long your recording will be used. If you're recording a corporate web presentation or an in-house training video, the period of usage may be indefinite. However, if you're recording a TV or radio spot, the client should be able to specify three-month, six-month, or one-year broadcast rights. Demanding a formal contract is a good way to scare a client away — especially for the kind of work you find posted on the Internet — and getting this information by email is all you should need. This is a benefit of pursuing agency representation: an agency will handle contractual and payment details, giving you more time to focus on what you do best.

A good source for voice-over payment information is www.edgestudio.com. Go to the home page and click on Career Center, then follow the left-hand column

down to Rate Card, where you'll find a list of suggested rates for jobs of all kinds. You'll even find advice on how much to charge for editing and other services offered by the owners of home studios. Most payments are handled 'net 30', meaning you get paid 30 days after you deliver the invoice. This system gives production houses and

"An audio demo should be the centrepiece of your web site, as it's this that demonstrates your voice identity."

agencies enough time to get paid by their own clients before passing on your share to you. When you record locally, payment is often handled via cheque or bank deposit, but when you record nationally or internationally, Paypal is commonly used.

Delivering the audio files themselves is best accomplished through a file-sharing service. Professional studios often include a page on their web sites where clients can log in with a password and download audio files directly. Taking clients to your web site each time they need to retrieve a job not only makes the process easy, but also keeps

your brand in their mind.

My wife and I subscribe to www.yousendit.com: a basic version of this service is available for free, but the paid monthly plan offers benefits that help clients retrieve their files more quickly. The services at www.soundcloud.com and www.dropbox.com are also popular.

Again, remember that this is all part of your public image, so try to stay away from services that make clients wait before downloading, or that splash tacky ads across clients' computer screens.

Also, avoid sending audio

files as attachments, unless requested to do so: a link to a file-sharing web site arrives quickly, keeps your email out of spam folders, and lets clients download files when and where they choose. When copying and pasting a file-sharing link into your email message, make sure that the link is active. That means both that the client can click on the link, rather than having to cut and paste it into a browser, and that it is linking to the right URL! It's easy to make errors with spurious spaces at the end of cut-and-pasted URLs, and you need to remember that services like

Gearing Up

» detail, but with a pleasing smoothness, and has been rising in popularity. Omni mics are more tolerant of plosives, but they'll pick up more of the room noise. A figure-of-eight mic (including most ribbon models) will pick up room noise from its rear, but is excellent at rejecting sound from the side. Cardioid and figure-of-eight mics exhibit proximity bass boost, a useful perk, which is often responsible for adding that familiar, rich 'announcer' sound to recordings.

There's no 'perfect' voice-over mic — the best mic for me might not be the best one for my wife, for example. But it should be possible to get a good quality all-rounder that offers professional-quality results. If possible, test a mic before buying, and if you do any voice-over work in production houses, jot down the gear you see there, and talk to colleagues about swapping mics from time to time so that you can test



others out. You'll soon find what works best for you. Today, my wife and I usually record with a Neumann TLM 103, which serves us both very well. We also use an Audio-Technica AT4047 SV, which sounds lovely, and captures less sibilance than the TLM103. For a more in-your-face sound, I tend to plug in a Sennheiser MKH416 shotgun mic, which is something of a standard for movie trailers and TV promos, and occasionally

I might use an Electrovoice RE20 dynamic mic. Classic studio stalwarts like the Neumann U87 and U47 are popular. It's worth mentioning that, as with singers, female vocals seem to be a little more sensitive to mic choice.

Monitoring & Audio Interface

The critical frequency range is all about the voice, so you're not going to need huge amounts of bass from your speakers, or a great response

at ridiculously high frequencies: if you have a monitoring setup that's suitable for music, you'll have one that works for voice-over. If starting fresh, I'd suggest choosing good near-field monitors that are as small as the room allows. As with music production, most 'hi-fi' or multimedia speakers are out of the question, as they'll colour the sound. Similarly, you need to buy headphones that are designed for monitoring rather than for music enjoyment. We tend to edit our voice-over work using Sennheiser HD280 Pro headphones, which have a closed, circumaural design that reduces outside noise. In the booth, we wear AKG K240 studio headphones, which have a semi-open, circumaural design that allows us to hear our voice better when recording. If in doubt, have a read of the feature on choosing studio headphones, back in *SOS* January 2010 (www.soundonsound.com/sos/jan10/articles/studioheadphones.htm).

Finally, you may not be mixing a multitrack music production, but you're still doing critical listening, and you can't rely on your computer's headphone jack to monitor professional audio any more than you can rely on its mic jack for professional recording. You still need a decent quality audio interface and preamp. Any of the current crop of 24-bit USB or Firewire interfaces

www.dropbox.com might take a while to upload the file before your client can download it. Request to be notified when the client opens the email or follow up by telephone to make sure the job has arrived. If you are using a paid file-sharing service, you can also log in to see if anybody has downloaded the file posted at the link. Finally, if you're going to compress files into .zip or .rar formats before they're uploaded, check that the resulting files can be opened and aren't corrupt, and never compress the audio itself: your clients' download time will be slightly longer for uncompressed audio, but the quality will be uncompromised.

Brush Up & Follow Up

That, in a nutshell, is it. It's a combination of artistry, business acumen and diligence, but with a good attitude and persistence, it really is possible to make money in this business. I'll leave you with two final pieces of advice: always stay on top of your game, and try to keep clients coming back.

By the former, I mean that you should keep up to speed with changes in the industry, keep active, read voice-over books and subscribe to relevant content on the web. Three books I highly

recommend, in addition to others I've mentioned in this series, are *Critical Listening Skills For Audio Professionals* by F Alton Everest, the *Broadcast Voice Handbook* by Ann S Utterback, and *How to Read Copy* by Adrian Cronauer. I'd also suggest subscribing to the articles sent out by voice-overextra.com.

By the latter, I mean that it's easier to get work from clients you've worked with before. The best way to keep clients coming back is to build a reputation for quality and dependability, to never promise more than you can deliver, and always to deliver more than your clients expect. But it doesn't hurt to keep yourself in their minds by sending out occasional news bulletins of your own, and maybe personalised Christmas cards too, and by visiting their Facebook and Twitter accounts, sending words of congratulations when appropriate — anything to keep you in view without becoming a pest.

Jason Bermingham (www.jasonbermingham.com) and Simone Kliass (www.abrazilianvoice.com) record for clients around the globe from the comfort of their own home in São Paulo, Brazil. ■■■

by the likes of Yamaha, Focusrite, M-Audio and Presonus should be up to the task — but there's no need to fork out for lots of input and output channels and other functionality that you aren't going to use. In time, you might want to invest in a nicer preamp, but aim for something that's not overly coloured — and remember that the mic and the room will make far more difference to the quality of your results.

Of course, if you opt for a USB mic, you might be able to record without a separate interface. That's fine in principle, but beware that even though USB mics have come on in leaps and bounds since the early days, even the best USB mic is only likely to be as good as an average condenser, and many of them lack critical features such as headphone monitoring of computer backing tracks. They can also suffer from digital 'whine', so be careful if you choose to travel that road!

Computer & Software

Recording voice-over performances requires far less computer processing power than modern music production jobs, and any off-the-shelf computer purchased in recent years is likely to be able to get the job done. The same's true of software, where it's



perfectly possible to keep costs down. My wife and I use a Sony Vaio laptop running Adobe Audition 3.0 on Windows Vista, and this simple setup gets the job done just fine — but we started our business with the free version of WavePad Sound Editor (www.nch.com.au).

SOUND ON SOUND

The World's Best Recording Technology Magazine

This article was originally published in
Sound On Sound magazine, **July 2011 edition**.



Sound On Sound, Media House, Trafalgar Way, Bar Hill, Cambridge, CB23 8SQ, United Kingdom

Email: subscribe@soundonsound.com

Tel: +44 (0) 1954 789888 Fax: +44 (0) 1954 789895

Subscribe & Save Money!

Visit our subscriptions page at www.soundonsound.com

All contents copyright © SOS Publications Group and/or its licensors, 1985-2011. All rights reserved.

The contents of this article are subject to worldwide copyright protection and reproduction in whole or part, whether mechanical or electronic, is expressly forbidden without the prior written consent of the Publishers. Great care has been taken to ensure accuracy in the preparation of this article but neither Sound On Sound Limited nor the publishers can be held responsible for its contents. The views expressed are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the publishers.