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From Chapter 15, Frequently Asked Questions...

THE SOUND OF THE RECORDED VOICE

I'm generally quite confident about my voice. However, when I hear my recorded voice played back, I always get really embarrassed and I think, "That doesn't sound like me, does it?!" My voice sounds so different, so strange—not at all like what I remember or expect. Why is that? What do you think is the problem?

The million-dollar question! First of all, there is *no problem*.

One of the great challenges for most people seems to be getting used to and accepting the sound of their own voice played back. This is a bizarre phenomenon with a surprisingly simple explanation.

We are largely creatures

of habit. If we are very used to something, it takes time for us to adapt to something else. This is true for the sound of your voice as well.

How you hear the natural sound of your voice is a mixture of *inner and outer hearing*. That basically means a mix of sound being projected out and then received back from the outside into your ears (outer hearing)—and sound being bone-conducted inside your skull to your ears (inner hearing). Try talking or singing while blocking your ears completely. You'll find that you can still hear yourself. This is your inner hearing.

You are the only person who will ever hear the inside resonance of your voice. Therefore, what you perceive to be your voice sound is not entirely identical with the pure outer sound that other people hear. The sound that they hear—or in the case of a recording, the sound that is being played back—is how you really sound to the outside world.

The reason why you don't like this sound is *not* because it is no good. You don't like it because *it is not what you are* used to *hearing* and so you don't entirely recognize it.

There is only one thing to do: get used to it! Learn to love and accept your sound. Record yourself and play it back till you finally become used to the sound and comfortable with it. Practice your speeches with a recorder running. Even better, video yourself. You can then work on body language and expressions as well. Most people are freaked out when they watch themselves on video the first couple of times. The first time I saw myself on a video recording, I cried!

Trust me: it does get easier with time. And remember, as always, you are your own worst critic. Work on improving the things that you don't like or that don't seem to work for you, but don't be too hard on yourself.

An additional factor could also be that we tend to have sound pictures in our heads of how we *would like* to sound. While this is not a bad thing because it can help us develop sound and style, it does tend to slightly blur our immediate perception. When we hear ourselves played back, our perfect picture cracks a little bit. I find that is true with dialects and accents too. I, for instance, didn't grow up in the States and spent most of my life in Europe, mainly in Denmark and Britain. I clearly have a Danish or at least non-British or non-American accent—but I no longer hear that. I would swear that I sound British or American, although, realistically, I know that I really don't!

This brings me to the last, cruel point—the truth—the awful fact that ultimately a recording never lies. You can of course get it treated, but nothing escapes the recording. Like an unfortunate photograph, an awkward recording is one dreadful moment forever captured for you to cringe over.

So practice, get feedback, but most of all get used to your own natural sound. If you don't already, learn to love your sound because, yes, I'm afraid you do sound "like that"—sorry. But I'm sure it's not half bad anyway.

IMAGE

How important is image?

First, let's distinguish between image and looks. Image is about style and includes personality or how that personality is coming across or being presented to the world.

Looks do not necessarily reflect somebody's personality. Looks are more on the surface—clothes, grooming, etc. A look can be created. A personality . . . well, that's a little bit more comprehensive. You could argue that a look *says or indicates something about the personality*—but it's just an assumption. You can't be sure to read somebody correctly by their look. It could be a "uniform," or the person could have made a conscious choice to dress a certain way for reasons unknown to you. However, most people would probably not think that far when considering first impressions.

You've heard the expression that you can't judge a book by its cover? Well, I'm an author, and as much as I tend to agree with that statement, I also know that it is not entirely true. It might be true that you can't *really* judge a book by its cover—*but most people do*. It's a fact. One of the first things taught in any book-marketing seminar is that the cover of your book is everything. It can make or break your book. Interesting—I wonder if it's the same with people? We discussed first impressions, dressing the part, etc. earlier. Ultimately, I think that the *degree of importance* very much depends on your exact area of work. The amount of emphasis on image and looks varies. If, for instance, you are a distinguished scientist—the best in your field, people may forgive you for looking like the bag lady (or man) under the bridge (no offense to the bag lady, by the way). It might even add credibility to your "mad scientist" image. (Just an example—none of the scientists I know look like bag people or are madder than average.)

That aside, it is certainly no secret that in most areas of the *entertainment industry* not just image but also “good looks” (according to the commonly perceived definition) are extremely important. There seems to be a general consensus that if you look good, you will get more and better work and that generally you have a greater chance of *commercial* success if your looks are, shall we say, commercially pleasing. Unfortunately, I can’t really argue with that. What I can’t argue with either is the tendency for this attitude to spread into other industries as well.

It’s safe to say that today’s society is *extremely* visually based, no matter what kind of job you have. I’d even go as far as to say that we are bordering on obsession. Most people kind of think that it shouldn’t be like this—but we all recognize that it is. We tend to accept and also to feed the notion that good looks are the be-all and end-all of our existence. (Ah, the glorious superficiality of the twenty-first century.)

So, yes, image is important. A strong image that includes a good look is your best bet anytime.

What that image should be, though, is largely open to interpretation.

There are so many aspects that determine whether an image works or not. It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain an image long-term if that image conflicts with the person behind it. Therefore the task is to develop a persona that works in harmony with both the individual and the outside world. As a professional performer you are, whether you like it or not, a public figure. This kind of status gives rise to certain rules. They come with the territory. So you have to deal with that.

You have to consider that the entertainment and speaking industries are exactly that: industries. There is competition, and sometimes big money is involved. Whoever works with you will want to see sales and profits, and so will you. So be smart about it.

As much as personal taste comes into it, so do trends and clever, up-to date

marketing. Maybe you don't like to dress up. Well, do you want the gig or not? Speaking isn't the first job in the world to require some sort of "uniform." I'm sure it won't kill you. I'm sure your personality is big enough to outshine a suit anytime.

Ultimately, it's up to you as a performer and perhaps public figure to decide what works best for you. You must determine how best to incorporate all the necessary aspects of being a commercial commodity while, at the same time, upholding personal integrity. You need to find a healthy and fulfilling balance between the two. This is very important if you are going to be successful in all meanings of the word and if you are going to fully appreciate that success and continue to enjoy your work.

I would really like to think that *ultimately the personality aspect is more important than any given look*. But I know that first impressions count and that people don't necessarily spot my (wonderful, winning) personality within the first thirty seconds of meeting me. They do, however, have plenty of time to judge my appearance and make an assumption about my personality based upon it. And most likely, they will. If that assumption—true or false—goes against their grain, chances are that they may not want to hear what I have to say. Bummer!