

Making a Voice-Over Demo

By Peter Edmund Haydu

A voice-over demo is to voice-over work what your resume is to your on-camera or stage work: it introduces you to those who can hire you. Unlike your resume, a voice demo is also your audition for the job, and, as such, it is less a recitation of credits than an actual demonstration of your abilities and your range. Often, in fact, producers are not interested in seeing a resume; they only care about what they hear.

Producers, like most of us, are interested in getting the best results possible for the least effort and expense. This means that they are more likely to cast from their own files than by going through a casting director or putting out a casting call. If you have a demo on file with a producer, you are ahead of the field (although still behind talent who have already worked with the producer).

Selecting Material for the Demo

You can take three approaches in selecting material for a demo.

The first approach is to record material that shows off your range but which you have not actually performed professionally. This material may come from copy you kept from auditions, copy you got in a class or workshop, or copy you transcribed from radio or television commercials. If you don't have much experience and you don't have copies of your past work on hand, this approach is to your advantage. Record material that demonstrates what you are capable of, whether or not you have had a chance to do it for someone else. The major disadvantage of this approach is the expense of making a demo from scratch. Even if it has cost you nothing to get the material, you will need more studio time, probably a director, and possibly some kind of setting for your material—music or sound effects.

The second approach is to put together a demo made up of selected material you have already performed for clients. This approach is easier and less expensive. In addition, the production values are likely to be those of professional producers. The problem is that you may not have enough copies of work you have done to give a true picture of your abilities. It's a good idea to ask for copies of everything you do at or right after the job, but producers are not always willing or able to supply them. To strengthen your chance of getting a copy, bring a DAT tape or CD and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the recording session. Still, respect the fact that, for various reasons, they might not be able to send a copy to you.

The third approach, which will work for most people, combines the first two approaches: use representative material you have on hand, and add new copy as needed.

Your recording is a demo, not a complete performance or made up of complete performances. It is nothing more than small samples of your work, intended to demonstrate your abilities to

someone who wants to find talent quickly and easily. Include 12 to 15 short clips, not full 30-second or 60-second commercials. Place your strongest pieces at the beginning and arrange the clips so that each piece contrasts with the one before and the one after. Producers and casting directors want demos that are two to two-and-a-half minutes long; give them what they want. If you choose to make your demo longer than that, be sure you have extremely various and entertaining material—and know that the listener may shut the demo off before hearing every piece.

General Purpose vs. Specialized Demos

The two basic types of voice-over work are narration and commercial. Unless you plan to specialize in one area, make a general-purpose demo that includes both narration and commercial material.

Narration demos are devoted to fairly straight, non-character voice-overs, such as commercial bank spots, industrial spokesperson, or public television or radio narration. Whatever the purpose of your narration, whether for industrial, commercial, or other use, include only straight material—and only a few samples. If you have a special facility for some jargon or another—e.g., legalese or techno-babble—include a short example. If you are fluent in a foreign language or accent, you might mention the fact in your cover letter or in follow-up phone calls, but it's a waste of time to include it on a demo that will be heard by producers who rarely need those special skills.

Commercial demos give you a chance to show a greater range—of characters, emotions, and accents. It is a good idea to include a short narration piece even in a commercial demo, because there is a great deal of announcer work available in this field.

Whether you make a general-purpose demo or a specialized one, resist the urge to throw in everything you can do. Give a sampling that whets the producer's appetite. Do what you do well and show variety, but don't overextend yourself with characters, accents, or dramatic situations that may not show off your best work. Often, a client may not know exactly what he or she wants for a particular project; it's your job to let the producer know that you can respond to the demands of the situation.

Where to Make Your Demo

It is tempting to think you can make your demo on your very expensive home recording equipment. Without overstating the point, this is almost always a bad idea. Your homemade recording will be cheaper to produce, of course, but it will sound cheaper, too. Unless your home system can produce broadcast-quality recordings, your demo will sound inferior to a studio-produced demo. You will also lack the support that is available to you at a studio: equipment that makes it possible to edit your selections together seamlessly, objective and professional direction, an

available supply of copy, an up-to-date library of sound-effects and music, and experienced personnel who can help you put everything together.

A fair number of studios in the Boston area spend most of their time producing industrial and commercial projects for major advertising agencies and corporate clients. There is always some down time at any studio, however, and, rather than allow their facilities and personnel to remain idle, studios will book even so poor a client (relative to their usual trade) as talent. Many studios offer talent packages that include studio time, a master (from which all your demos will be made), and a number of dubs (or copies) to start you off. These packages are frequently very reasonable, especially compared to the prices the studios charge their regular clients, but call around to find out exactly what is being offered for how much. Studios can be found listed in two chapters of *The Source*: “Professional Services and Supplies” (under “Recording Studios”) and “Audio, Film, and Video Producers.” You can also look in the telephone book under “Recording Service—Sound and Video.” Ask other performers for recommendations.

Questions to Ask the Studio

- Will they provide copy, direction, and a bed of music or sound effects as well as studio time? Or, at the other extreme, do they only edit from the material you provide?
- What does each service cost? Studio time? Extras? The dubs (and in what quantity)? Packaging of the dubs (boxes, labels)?
- Do they offer a talent package? If so, what does it include, and how much does it cost? (Do you need everything that’s included? If you don’t, is the package still worth it?)

Using Your Demo

Once you go to the trouble and expense of creating a demo, what do you do with it? Your demo is like your resume in that it is your calling card to those you hope will hire you. Like your resume, most of your demos will end up in someone’s circular file, but some of your demos will be heard. If you get only a few jobs because of the demos, you will recover your investment.

Where you send your demo depends on what sort of voice work you intend to do. Certainly include all of the local casting direc-

tors and most of the production companies and independent producers and directors in the area. If you are interested in commercials, also send your demo to those advertising agencies that cast directly. If you want to do industrials, add those corporations that do in-house production.

Before sending a demo, call to verify that the company casts voice talent directly. There’s no point in sending a demo if the company always uses a casting agency. Also, make sure you have the name(s) of the people who make those casting decisions.

Follow up your submission with a quick phone call to find out if your demo was received and, more important, listened to. People in this field move around frequently, so check in periodically to ensure that whoever currently makes casting decisions has access to your material.

The names of prospective employers may be obtained from *The Source*, trade publications, the phone book, or one of the following unions or associations (although there may be restrictions on the distribution of information to non-members):

- AFTRA/SAG maintains a list of signatories to union codes. www.aftra.org or www.sag.org
- Media Communications Association-International (formerly the International Television Association) has chapters for Boston, Providence, and Central New England. Its membership lists also include both signatory and non-signatory producers. www.mca-i.org
- New England Film.com has an online directory of film and video professionals, including many independent producers and directors.
- Massachusetts Interactive Media Council includes many film/video producers and interactive Web-site design companies as members. Web audio is a growing market for voice talent.

Voice-over work can be satisfying, rewarding, and fun, and producers are always looking for new talent. Don’t expect it to happen right away, but if you lay the groundwork properly and you have the requisite skills, voice-over work can become a fine supplement to your other performance work—or even a full-time career.

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