

Speak up and Stand Out: Maximize your Female Voice

by Cyndi Maxey, MA, CSP

Most of my female clients agree that women have a harder time than men presenting to groups. When I ask why, they say, “Women can be even more dynamic than men, but they say too much, too fast, and they sound weak.” Specifically they mention -

Unpleasant vocal qualities – whiny, high pitched, hard to hear, and sibilant - that undermine the content.

Content that is delivered too quickly and with too much detail, often written out in script form, and taking too long to deliver.

What can women do? Here are some practical practices to start today:

To maximize your female voice –

1. Get honest feedback. If people you trust say your voice is high-pitched or soft, they are probably right! Work with a vocal coach. Record your voice often. Note: One female executive mentioned lowering her speaking pitch by nearly half an octave throughout the course of her career. That kind of attention takes awareness and work!
2. Make sure you are breathing correctly! If you sing, you know how to breathe correctly. If you don't sing, you may want to take singing lessons or join a church or community choir to gain awareness of all the tones and nuances of your voice.
3. Use a microphone when it's available. Never say “no” when one is offered. A “mic” gives power, especially if the acoustics are poor or the group size is 50 or more.
4. Always use your “standing voice.” Even if you're seated in a boardroom to present, use your “standing voice”, which means sitting up straight to support your breathing and projecting your volume so even those at the end of the table hear you easily.

To escape the “detail” trap –

1. Think and write in “three's” as opposed to lists of 10 and 12. Preview to the audience that three key points are to come and review them when you're done.

2. When you give examples, make them colorful and easy to remember so that you can look out rather than down at your notes. Stories and examples allow you to do this.
3. The audience learns from and remembers poignant examples, and visuals or at least examples that paint a visual picture. They want an experience to remember, not detail to forget.
4. Practice your opening aloud so that it is tight and clear, allowing you to provide important documentation as you go.

As one executive female mentioned, “While women may have more empathy with some audiences, we like speakers of both genders who are able to connect and speak extemporaneously. No matter how experienced we are, if we sound insecure, our message suffers.”

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Cyndi Maxey is the author of six books on communication, including Speak UP! A Woman's Guide to Presenting Like a Pro (St. Martin's Press/NYC) coauthored with Kevin E. O'Connor. Learn more at www.cyndimaxey.com.