

BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

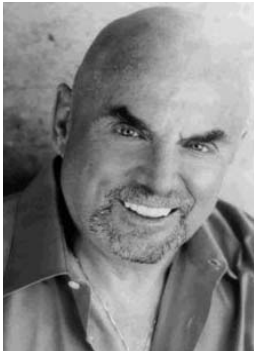
June 23 - 29, 2005

Price: \$2.95 (NY, NJ, CT, PA)
\$3.25 (Elsewhere)

Welcome to the World of Promos: It's Not Just Another Voiceover Gig

By Simi Horwitz

"If you want to do promos, take a course in it, create a good demo, get an agent, and don't give up your day job. It's a slow, long process!" The speaker is the Los Angeles based Don LaFontaine, who would surely know something about the subject. Indeed, he is a star in the world of promos—those ubiquitous voiceovers on television, promoting upcoming shows—and movie trailers (viewed as the gold standard of promos). In fact, LaFontaine has more than 4,000 movie trailers and tens of thousands of promos for all the major networks under his belt. And has just received Hollywood Reporter's Lifetime Achievement Award at its 34th annual Key Art Awards ceremony.



Don LaFontaine

"Sometimes you'll be selling different shows on the same spot, so the challenge is to move from one show to the next easily."

Who would imagine promos evoking that kind of hoopla? The fact is they are a self-contained art form (of sorts), requiring a set of skills that are distinct from any other kind of voiceover work. According to four voiceover artists, who have found their niche in the world of promos, they are specialists who face particular challenges on the job.

For starters, they have to have a clearly defined voice quality—and we're not simply talking about that authoritative mellifluous sound, although that may (or may not) help. Today's promo voice reflects the genre it's promoting.

"For TV drama, they usually like a heavier voice, with weight," explains LaFontaine. "For television comedy, it's a light and happy sound. Action programs are usually promoted by a voice, with a hard edge. Sometimes you'll be selling different shows on the same spot, so the challenge is to move from one show to the next easily. You may start out sounding sad and then end up sounding happy.

"If you're doing a movie trailer you want to give weight to what you're saying and remain true to the spirit of the movie," he stresses. "If it's a trailer for 'Bridges of Madison County,' the voice should have a romantic sound. With any movie trailer, you have to see yourself as a part of the movie, not someone advertising it. You're part of the process. A lot of careers are riding on it. It's your job to put seats in the theatre to justify your phony baloney existence."

His self-effacing cynicism aside, he makes it clear he is grateful to have gigs that "don't require too much work and can be very lucrative."

They are also a hell of a lot of fun, suggests Joan Baker of New York, who has just published a book on voiceovers, "Secrets of Voice-Over Success," and has done promo work for HBO, ESPN, and ABC News, among others. "I love to do promos," she says. "There's more of an opportunity to put your personality into a promo than a voiceover. Voiceovers require the art of subtlety. But in a promo, because you're competing with so many other noises in that promo"—e.g., music, dialogue from the narrative, for example—"you need a voice that can cut through all of that to get an audience to listen to you and then to watch the show you're promoting. With promos I can be authoritative or sexy and not seem

over-the-top."

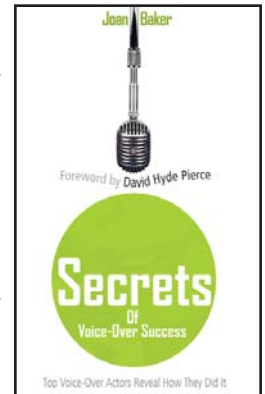
That said, there are prototypes for each genre, which function as guidelines for the voiceover artist, she points out. "Diane Sawyer is the prototype for the news program promo. Her voice is authoritative, proper, and genuine. You feel there is a genuine smile in Diane Sawyer's voice. Mary Hartman on 'E' is the prototype for the corporate crisp presence."

The Los Angeles based Joe Cipriano has created his own prototype for television comedy promos. He calls it his "money voice—the up tempo, high energy smile in voice." He intones one of his promos: "Sunday, it's all new 'Simpsons' on Fox, followed by 'King of the Hill.'" He offers another promo. "It's the final episode of 'Everybody Loves Raymond. CBS Monday."

Cipriano has served as the promo voice for the Fox Television comedies for 17 years and the CBS comedies for the past eight years, in addition to reading all the promos for the Food Network, among others.

Doing promos is not all fun and games. There are potential stumbling blocks, such as the precise timing that's required "to do narration between sounds on tape," Baker points out.

"Sometimes the script will indicate that there are seven seconds to say the line. You are saying the line in real time and your reading has to be perfectly timed. Sometimes we'll do the promo in



Joan Baker

a sound booth while watching the film on a monitor and listening to the music on a headset.”

Adds LaFontaine: “You need an internal clock, an instinctual feel when to speak.”

Interestingly, not all promo artists are actors. Cipriano, for example, was an on-air radio personality in the Washington D.C. area before he decided to pursue the voiceover game. Similarly, LaFontaine worked as a recording engineer for an advertising company when he got involved in voiceover work quite by accident. When an actor did not show up to read for a trailer, LaFontaine took his place and his voice was discovered and work started coming his way. Nonetheless, he did not go into the field full time for close to 20 years.

All agree that promos are a highly competitive profession and becoming more so. Admittedly, there are hundreds of outlets with cable and satellite today, says Joe Cipriano. “But at the same time, because of technology today you no longer have to be in New York or Los Angeles to do a promo. You can be virtually anywhere in the world.”



Joe Cipriano

Voice Jurisdiction

So, how many people are doing promos? Nailing down precise numbers is difficult. For starters, both the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA) represent them. If the spot is shot on videotape, AFTRA has jurisdiction; on film, it’s SAG. Clearly, many of the same actors appear—or, more precisely, their

voices can be heard—on both tape and film. Still, the Los Angeles based Cedering Fox, who co-chairs AFTRA’s promo chapter, speculates that approximately 120 voiceover artists do promos. The amount of money earned clearly varies with the number of promos one does and whether the promos are for national or local programs—not to mention the particulars of the individual’s contract.

Baker suggests that a very successful promo artist—one who does the promos for “The Today Show,” for example, may make \$350,000. Others who make a living at it, but on a more modest scale, may earn a high five figure income, she remarks.

Most promo work still goes to men, says Fox, who was told that she “made history on ABC by doing the promos for the morning talk shows, the afternoon soaps, the prime time shows, and the late night shows. I was told that I was the first woman to do what men have done for years. I was told I had the authority of a male voice and the warmth of a woman’s voice.

“Today, for the most part, women are relegated to doing promos for daytime television,” she continues. “This happened after nine eleven and I suspect that trend has something to do with the idea that voice of God—the voice of security—is believed to be a male voice.”

Since the competition for these gigs is keen, all agree the ability to do the job well and quickly is the key. “No more than two takes,” Cipriano says. “And don’t arrive with an attitude. Check your ego at the door. Come in with energy and have fun. It’s not brain surgery and it’s not acting on



Cedering Fox

Broadway either.” He adds, “It’s very important for people who are doing promos to know cultural trends. Be aware of what’s happening in pop culture and contemporary music. Don’t be labeled yesterday.”

LaFontaine concurs, “Never stop evolving. Maintain a youthful attitude and a willingness to adjust to what’s happening.” In other words, be conscious of the vocal styles that are being used and new developments in advertising, marketing, and promos.”

Baker, a former dancer, makes the point that one’s physical appearance is relevant, despite the fact that the voiceover artist is not seen on screen. “It is important to look like your voice, especially if you are not a sizzling personality,” she says. “Of course, this is more true for women than for men, more true for older women than younger women. An older man can look anyone he wants. An older woman—if it’s obvious that she’s 45 or 55—is going to turn them off, unless she’s really looking good.”

As a racially mixed performer, Baker has also encountered some racial stereotyping she says. “I’ve done the promos for black history month. They were looking for a black sound. My voice has a heaviness, but I don’t sound particularly anything. The producer kept hinting that she wanted me to sound more ‘black,’ but she couldn’t come out and say it. Finally, the engineer blurted it out, ‘Can’t you sound like a black woman with attitude?’ ”

The unfortunate experience notwithstanding, Baker continues to think promos are a great field with plenty of opportunity for those who “smart, savvy but not slick; and enjoy connecting with people. Everyone likes working with those who are fun and good-humored.” Baker’s been doing promos for 14 years.

For more information on getting started, finding classes, agents, and studios that produce demos, log onto to the Internet for a host of voice over guides.