

The Industry's Unseen Talent

Voice Performers Find Rewards in Off-Camera Work

By Ryan Bornheimer

Rudy Gaskins, commercial director and CEO of Push Creative, an advertising production agency in New York, describes voice-over artists—the performers who give vocal life to characters and provide narration for TV shows, movies and commercials—as the oxygen of the media industry.

"[Voice-over] keeps everything going," Mr. Gaskins said. "It drives all the media all the time. But if you ask the average person what a voice-over is, they can't tell you."

That may not come as a big surprise. The voices pouring through the media on a daily basis are so ubiquitous it's easy to forget just how significant a good voice-over can be. But without the glamour associated with on-camera talent, the voice-over industry presents performers with unique challenges in achieving success and respect. And voice actors, like most entertainment professionals, are rushing to keep up in a rapidly evolving arena of increased competition and technological innovation.

Bill Ratner can attest to that. He



SOUNDING OFF Joan Baker, author of "Secrets of Voice-Over Success," says initiative and persistence pay dividends.

On Location at Broadway Sound, NYC

has worked as a voice-over actor for more than 25 years, performing in everything from animated strips to movie trailers.



Bill Ratner

Mr. Ratner has even tasted his own small slice of fame. Flint,

proved to be one of the most popular characters on the show. He even portrayed the character in a short bit on a recent episode of "Family Guy"—a sure sign of pop culture cachet. And last year Mr. Ratner participated in a videotaped conversation with co-star Mary McDonald-Lewis for the DVD release of the first season of "G.I. Joe."

The greatest change Mr. Ratner said he has seen during his career has been a general growth in the number of performers vying for jobs. And while the expansion of media options, including video games and a continually growing cable market, has afforded voice talent

more avenues of work, he said the increase in competition offsets the media growth.

"The news is out about voice-overs within the performance community," Mr. Ratner said. "When I started out, there were probably 1,500 people competing for jobs in L.A. There's probably like 12,000 to 15,000 today."

Those numbers may be a reflection of the current trend toward a more naturalistic voice quality for voice-over work.

Gary Owens, one of the most prolific voice talents of the past 50 years and perhaps most famous as the celebrated voice of the 1960s show "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In," said there's now a market for virtually any kind of voice.

"When I got into the business, it was mainly big-voiced people," Mr. Owens said. "But it's transmogrified over the years where almost any voice is a winner. You can sound like the guy next door or the guy at the garage."

This may be because the industry has seen the benefits of employing specific voice talents to reach a specific audience.

"People are going for teenage or early 20s voices when that's the demo that they're trying to reach, and allowing the syntax of those demographic cultures to come through versus looking for someone who simply has great diction and articulates," Mr. Gaskins said.

Some have also pointed to a recent swell in celebrity voices offering their services for ad campaigns and voice-over work.

"They can make a ton of money at it," Mr. Ratner said. "For what

I could get 698 bucks [for doing], Michael Douglas could make a quarter of a million dollars, which is literally what happens."

Voicebank.com offers an indication of the playing field voice actors are now facing. The Web site, which offers sound reels for agencies looking to cast voice performers, showcases work from unknown talent right alongside celebrity voices.

But Joan Baker, who has worked as a voice talent for 14 years and recently wrote a book called "Secrets of Voice-Over Success," said that while there has been an increase in the use of celebrity voices, it has not had a tremendous effect on lesser-known performers.



"As far as scale talent, it does eat into that but not to the point where it's astronomical, because celebrities can get millions of dollars for what they do and not everyone has that kind of budget," Ms. Baker said.

But she added that one outgrowth of celebrity voice-overs has been an increase in use of celebrity "prototypes."

Ms. Baker is a prime example of the tenacious spirit it takes to cut out a niche in the voice-over industry, which many say has been slow to employ performers other than older white men. She said that when she started out she pursued one network relentlessly for three years after being told that the industry simply didn't hire women. Among her voice credits, Ms. Baker has now been working steadily for that network for eight years.

One major innovation that arrived on the scene within the past 10 years has been the increased use of integrated services digital network, or ISDN, an enhanced phone transmission line that allows talent to record their work from anywhere in the world in studio

comparable sound quality and transmit it to clients. That has allowed actors a degree of freedom unheard of just a short time ago.



Keith David

"Six or seven years ago, I would do a number of sessions a day, driving around like a UPS driver. Today, it's really relatively rare that I go out," Mr. Ratner said.

Keith David, an established voice and on-camera actor, said he enjoys this recent change in the process because he doesn't have to "dress for success." Mr. David, who narrated Ken Burns' documentary series "Jazz" and has appeared in numerous films such as "Platoon" and "There's Something About Mary," is in the process of building a studio in his home.

"Depending on who the client is, they may want to be hands-on," Mr. David said. "They want to see you in the studio, rather than just hear you over the fiber-optics system. But eventually I'd like to do things from my home."

Some performers prefer the benefits of working in a studio. Mr. Owens said the entire studio recording process is what makes his job so pleasurable.

"I always enjoy just the art of conversation that comes with going to the studio," he said. "And I think if you're spending too much time at your home, it gets a little isolationistic for the most part. And I enjoy the business. There's just a conviviality about it that is nice."

The future of voice acting may lie in the business arena rather than the recording studio. According to Mr. David, new

contract negotiations by the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists with Hollywood producers will soon be under way, with voice performers hoping to acquire a larger piece of the financial pie that comes from lucrative voice campaigns on numerous media fronts.

"Everyone is making money off the use of the actor's instrument. We should be able to participate as well," Mr. David said. "There's certainly enough to go around. We just want a fair playing ground."

The negotiation process may prove to be a delicate one. Mr. Ratner said a 2000 strike actually hurt voice performers, despite the \$700 million contract they ultimately acquired.

"I would say that out of the \$700 million, at least \$100 [million] to \$200 million is now going to regional ad agencies that are hiring local announcers and actors," Mr. Ratner said, adding that this is because agencies learned during the strike to go outside the union system for talent and have continued to do so.

Ultimately, voice actors tend to agree that the responsibility for navigating the current industry landscape rests squarely on the shoulders of the performer. Like

anyone pursuing the acting profession, the desire to work must come from an inner passion to perform and a practical approach to the industry.



"You have to be a business person and be very persistent in getting yourself out there," Ms. Baker said, "because the more your name is out there the more people start to know you, trust you and ultimately request you."

