

Millions Listen When She Speaks

By James O. Clifford
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Joan Kenley sometimes talks to herself, but that's understandable. After all, millions of people listen to her.

Among other things, Kenley is the ubiquitous voice of Voice Mail, Pacific Bell's computerized answering service that more businesses are turning to instead of human operators.

She might also tell you how much to drop in a pay phone.

When you pick up the phone at a hotel, Kenley could be on the other end. She's the voice of Guest Messaging, a hotel chain service similar to Voice Mail. Or you might hear her rattling off the prices at computerized grocery store checkout counters.

"I guess I have recorded hundreds of thousands of words," said Kenley, whose voice is becoming familiar to even more people. PacBell in October brought the Voice Mail service to home phones under the name "The Message Center."

"I'm even the English-speaking voice on some pay phones in Japan," said Kenley, who is also the voice on software designer Northern Telecom's Meridian Mail and the interstate long distance voice for many companies, including Michigan and Ohio Bell.

"I think people who work with my voice would get tired of it, but they actually love it," said Kenley, who lives in Oakland.

One reason her voice is so popular is that the melody "stays consistent, which allows sound technicians to mix old tapes with new ones," Kenley said in an interview.

If there is a criticism of her voice, it's that "it's too real."

"People sometimes start talking to my automated voice, but I consider that a compliment."

Not just another pretty voice — Joan Kenley of Oakland, CA is the ubiquitous voice of Voice Mail, Pacific Bell's computerized answering service that more businesses are turning to instead of human operators.

She even does it herself.

Kenley said she was checking into a hotel recently "and when I picked up the house phone I ended up talking to myself. It's rather pleasantly strange."

Kenley has done price-voicing for 50 grocery store chains. The automated service sounds out the cost of an item when it is passed over the checkout machine.

"My uncle in Cleveland was leaving a checkout where I say 'thank you' and he answered, 'You're welcome, Joan.'" she said.

Kenley's career includes voice coaching and acting, with guest parts in shows that have ranged from "The Honeymooners" to a revival of "Call

Me Madam" with Ethel Merman.

She is also a voice-over artist who has narrated ads for leading corporations, including Coca-Cola Co. and General Motors Corp.'s Chevrolet division.

But don't get the idea that Kenley is just another pretty voice.

She earned a Ph.D in psychology and is the author of "Voice Power, A Breakthrough Method to Enhance Your Speaking Voice," published by Henry Holt & Co.

Kenley said her big break came 10 years ago when she was contacted by University of California professor Forrest Mozer, who developed a way to put the human voice on a computer chip. Mozer felt the best way for humans to "interface" with computers would be vocally.

"He said he wanted a voice that was warm, but not too sexy," Kenley recalled. "Now my voice is everywhere — elevators, airplanes, even talking alarm clocks."

National Semiconductor Corp., a computer electronics company that pioneered the talking checkout counter, had high standards for its device.

"They wanted a voice that wasn't too perky or too saccharine or too monotonous," Kenley said. "They didn't want a voice that was threatening, or that clerks would go crazy listening to."

Kenley says her work is "a kind of immortality."

"A hundred years from now, I'll be long gone. But my voice will still be going out into the stratosphere saying, 'Two dollars and fifty cents, please.'"

— This article appeared nation-wide in hundreds of newspapers. —