

The Perfect Voice

'Gee, that sounds nice, familiar — that's me!'

By Brandy Tuzon

Often referred to as the kaleidoscopic voice and the voice of choice, she is simply known to many as the voice behind Voice Mail.

For three years Joan Kenley has been working with Pacific Bell as the voice for industrial Voice Mail and most recently for The Message Center, introduced to Bay Area homes last September.

Like thousands of others, Kenley hears her voice in elevators, cash registers, toys, clocks (the talking car didn't go over too well with consumers), and pay phones. "Sometimes I think, gee, that sounds nice - familiar - that's me!"

But Kenley has not always been a digitized voice on the other end of a telephone line, nor is that her only claim to fame.

She's also a practicing psychologist; she maintains an active practice in vocal development; she's an author and an actress.

Kenley began acting when she was 7 years old, playing lead roles in school productions. During high school, she played major roles in community theatre productions and even tried her hand at directing.

At Denison University in Ohio, Kenley majored in theater and minored in psychology. Two days after graduation, she was in New York City, ready to "become an actress."

"I had a good deal of success," the 40-something Kenley recalls.

Kenley cites her role as the princess in "Call Me Madam" with Ethel Merman as one of the highlights of her acting career.

She also had a feature role in "Double Trouble," an episode of "The Honeymooners". "Jackie Gleason and Art Carney were terrific performers to have rubbed elbows with," she says.

Shortly after her stint on national television, Kenley became the president of Showcom, her own communications company. At the time, she was the youngest

woman to head a major industrial communication company stemming from New York.

Kenley moved to the West Coast for a job on a children's bilingual television show. She then moved into voice-over marketing. Working with companies such as Breuner's, Emporium-Capwell and Visa, Kenley quickly became one of San Francisco's top female voice-overs.

"It was during that time that people began to ask me to teach voice and my voice practice began," says Kenley.

Background for life

"I began to see that there were more interesting things to learn about human nature, the voice, and its connections to the body," says Kenley, who obtained her Ph.D. in psychology in 1983.

Her studies led to the background work that became the book "Voice Power."

"The more you write about something, the more you know about it," she says.

"Working with thousands of clients to get the background made the picture clear and complete to me: when you change someone's voice, you really change their life as well."

Kenley points out that if a person sounds like a little girl or a scared teen-ager, that's the message that comes across.

"We sometimes take on the sounds of our parents and region. Our voice may not be who we are. That may inhibit the full message of our identity."

Kenley feels that if there is nothing physiologically wrong with the throat and voice mechanism, anybody can change their voice and go from OK to wonderful. This can be accomplished by developing what she calls the BodyVoice - a method which stresses the importance of breathing and relaxation of the entire body.

"Your emotions affect how your voice sounds and holds you back," Kenley says.

"You never see a person with a beautiful voice who is not relaxed."

Her clients range from mothers to businessmen. "All walks of life — that makes it interesting and colorful for me," Kenley says.

Since its release in fall 1988, Kenley's book has stirred up a lot of interest. As a result, she gives lectures, seminars and master classes, along with some private consultations.

The short, blonde Kenley says that from the sound of her "authoritative, defined and positive" voice, many people who know her only over the telephone picture her as tall and brunette.

"It appears there is a cultural conclusion that short blondes have different kinds of voices."

Voice perfection

In 1988 Pacific Bell chose Kenley as its voice.

"An agency knew of my work in the computer-chip-digitized market grocery store voice-overs during the '80s and submitted my voice tape," says Kenley.

"We wanted a warm voice, one that was neither too sweet nor too harsh," says Kris Kenworthy, the product manager for The Message Center, who was instrumental in Kenley's selection. "Joan's voice corresponded perfectly to our needs."

"Since I'm a professionally trained voice person, I can make my voice match perfectly even years later," says Kenley.

When Kenley is not working at her San Francisco office two days a week, she can be found working at home, which she shares with her husband and stepson.

"You know, I thought I was going to be known as an award-winning actress — a Tony or an Oscar — but here I am, the Queen of Digitized Voices."