

# Transistorized tongues are wagging

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## Toes gave push to success

As Andy Rooney might say, have you ever wondered who that lady in the box at the Safeway store is?

You know, the disembodied female voice that delivers the disheartening news that your pork chops, herbal shampoo and kiwi toothpaste, with tax, come to \$14.99?

She is Joan Kenley—former summer stock actress with big dreams: onetime floozy blonde on Jackie Gleason's "The Honeymooners;" frequently heard but rarely seen "voiceover" on TV ads; a woman who now discloses the secret of her success.

To speak well, she said, she learned to use her toes.

The National Semiconductor Corp. electronics firm, which mentions nothing about toes, defines Ms. Kenley simply as "a San Francisco voice talent."

Not just any voice talent, mind you. A company like Semiconductor doesn't put just anybody in a million-dollar box that talks to (as the pamphlets proclaim) "bridge the gap between machine and man."

Finding the Joan-in-the-Box was a bit like searching for Cinderella. Throughout the land, scores of candidates were auditioned, tested on oscilloscopes, scored by scientists.

Ms. Kenley's "glass" tongue fit.

Her voice has a low, warm, motherly "middle America" quality—just the voice, Semiconductor figured, to ask for money in dozens of grocery and department stores across the nation.

For the part, Ms. Kenley needed to perfect her oratorical delivery of numbers in groups of 10's, 20's, 30's and so on. These were then spliced, digitized and programmed into a tiny machine called a "Positalker" (though, when Ms. Kenley asks for too much, it can be referred to as a "Negatalker").

"My voice was simply the one out of dozens and dozens that matched [National Semiconductor's] psychological and vocal criteria."

So, Ms. Kenley's voice was converted into digital data and stored permanently in solid state memory chips.

That's the machine. Ms. Kenley—reached by telephone the other day in her Bay Area apartment—turns out to be a very



Joan Kenley: The face behind the voice

unprogrammed person, happy to speak for herself, quite freely and with an extensive vocabulary.

Unfortunately, however, those who query her usually tend to ask exactly the same first question: How does it feel to be heard from coast to coast? Doesn't she feel a bit exposed, like a centerfold?

The answer's always the same.

"I love it," she said. "It's like being ubiquitous, but in a way that doesn't take any time, energy or thought."

"And," she continued, "I keep getting calls from friends who say, 'I heard you today.' One of them said that in the year 2050, I'll be long gone but my voice will still be going out into the atmosphere."

But immortality isn't enough. Ms. Kenley is now embarking on a book-writing project. She says it's about using one's entire body to release the voice, which she learned to do driving a car in Washington 11 years ago.

"My voice used to get tense when I was doing voiceovers," she said. "It was like silent sabotage. Then, I was driving to do three voiceovers and two on-cameras, and my voice was tight and tired. I grabbed the steering wheel, pushed my feet . . . and out came—aeceouuuuh—deep sounds! And by the time I got to the studio, I sounded fine."

Now having earned her doctorate in the field of psychology, she said she understands it very well: If you think of anchoring the diaphragm and breathing process more in the pelvis, then you can actually

access the strength of your legs to calm your breathing and use your whole body as a sounding board."

## They're in stores... & helping disabled

- At a checkout counter, encoded groceries whiz past the laser eye. A customer mindlessly reaches for her checkbook. Then the disembodied voice breaks in.

*Five dollars and sixty-five cents, please.*

It startles the customer.

"You talking to me?" she asks the cashier.

The clerk simply smiles and points to a box, smaller than a cigarette carton. *Five dollars and sixty-five cents, please*, the box is saying.

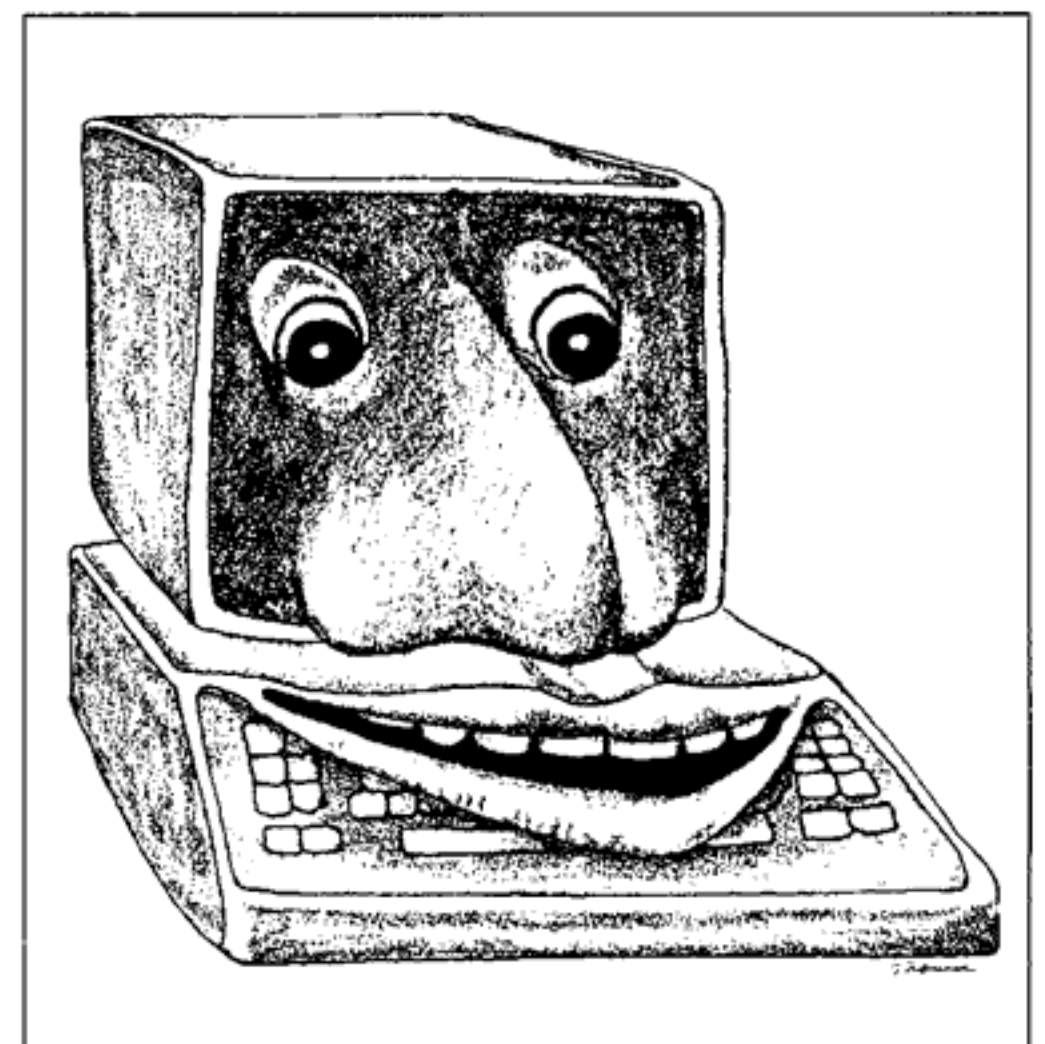
- From a Richmond office, a salesman dials directory assistance. On the other end, he hears tapping on a keyboard. He is certain this is the tapping of a real woman; she says "wait a minute" realistically enough.

But then another voice comes on. Now he isn't certain he's dealing with a human being at all. *The number is five-five-five, one-two*, she—or it—says. *Five-five-five, one...*

- At a school nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, a teen-ager, whose mouth muscles are so paralyzed by cerebral palsy that he can utter no more than five consonants, delivers his first oral book report to classmates.

They understand every word of it.

He smiles. At last—the tragic bottleneck is broken.



Staff graphics by Luther N. Trower