

THE TRIBUNE *Final Edition*



Telephone's voice of choice

By Martin Snapp
The Tribune

The next time you phone your girlfriend, the voice on the other end of the line might be Joan Kenley's.

Of course, the same thing could happen if you phone your boyfriend, too.

Or the next time you call a Sheraton Hotel.

Or the next time you're in the checkout line at a Safeway supermarket.

Kenley - aka "The Kaleidoscopic Voice" - is the voice of Voice Mail, the computerized answering service that more and more business are turning to instead of human operators.

grocery store chains in other parts of the country are using talking checkout machines. My friend heard it and said, 'Hey, I know that voice!' It's a friend of mine!' And the checker got mad and said, 'No you don't! It's not a real person! It's just a computer.'"

Kenley hasn't always been in this line of work. A Ph.D. in psychology and author of "Voice Power," she has been a voice coach for local politicians (though she won't say who), corporate CEOs and media types, including Channel 4's Jerry Graham and Channel 44's Edwina Moore, and KOIT's Vickie Jenkins.

Before that, she was a professional actress who performed in well-known musicals, films and television shows.

Kenley is also a commercial voice-over artist who has narrated ads for Macy's, Visa, Emporium, Citicorp, Chevrolet, and Coca-Cola, among others.

But all that changed 10 years ago when she got a call from a University of California at Berkeley astrophysics professor named Forrest Mozer, who invented the electronic process that eventually became Voice Mail. "He said he wanted a voice that was warm, but not *too* sexy," she says. "I told him I could play anything, even that. Now my voice is everywhere - elevators, airplanes, even talking alarm clocks."

And she gets fan mail, too. A woman in Miami said, "I think you're a blonde with short, wavy hair, sort of like Erma Bombeck." And a man in Canada was moved to write a poem:

I'm in love with a voice, and I hadn't a choice

But to fall for the rest of her, too.

But there isn't a place where we'll meet face to face

So till then I'll just have to make do.

Now she's saying to me I should press eight and three,

So I do and she tells me 'Goodbye.'

Was it something I said? Oh I wish I were dead.

If I've lost her I'm sure I will die!"

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— Joan Kenley

And starting this month, Pac Bell takes this service to home phones under the name "The Message Center."

"It's kind of bizarre," says Kenley, a longtime Montclair resident. "Last week I was checking into a Sheraton, and when I picked up the house phone I ended up talking to myself.

"And a few weeks ago a friend of mine got into a fight with a Safeway checker in Los Angeles, just because of me. They haven't installed them up here yet, but Safeways and other