

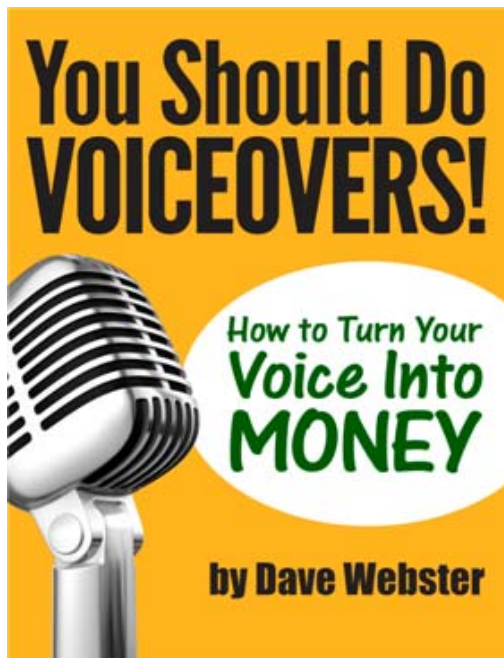
You Should Do VOICEOVERS!

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Chapter 1

The Best Job in the World?

VOICEOVER MAY VERY WELL be the best job in the world. The money is great, the hours are flexible, and it's an interesting way to use your creativity. Making a full-time living doing voiceovers is fantastic if you can make it happen, or you can work at it part time, supplementing your regular job or business with a few extra bucks now and then.

When I started out in the business back in the 1980s, I had no idea where to begin. Luckily I lived in an area that had options for voiceover training, and so I took some classes. This was great for learning how to do the work once I started auditioning and booking gigs, but for the most part I still had to figure out the business end on my own.

This book was written for people like 25-years-ago me, who want to become voice actors and need to know all the ins and outs of the voice-over *business* in addition to learning how to work behind the mic. So if you're looking into voiceovers, this book is your how-to manual. Should you make a demo tape right away? How do you get an agent? When should you join the union? I'll answer all of these questions and more, and I will also tell you about available resources to help you get started or move ahead to the next level.

Doing voiceovers is a great job, but make no mistake, becoming a successful voice actor and getting hired to do paid gigs takes diligent effort, professionalism, and a little luck to boot. It's a business, and if you want to get work and make money, you have to treat it that way. If you're just getting started, I'll show you how to learn your craft, get work, make a killer demo, find the right agent, etc. If you're already a working voice actor, you'll find plenty of information here that will help you run your business more effectively and make more money. For example, if you still haven't set up a high-quality home voiceover studio, you'll find a whole chapter on the subject here, and another chapter on using your own home

studio to make high-quality voice recordings. You'll also find plenty of useful advice on negotiating with clients, getting paid on time, and so on.

It's a competitive business

Voiceover is very competitive. The good news is that there are many more kinds of voiceover work available today than there were when I was first starting out. We had radio and TV commercials, non-broadcast "corporate/industrial" work (business videos and training programs, mostly), and some audiobooks, and that was pretty much it. If you lived in L.A. or were willing to move there, you could also become involved in animation and TV and feature documentary work.

Now everything has changed. These days, there's all kinds of new-media-based work, including Web audio, Flash demos, podcasts, computer games, and so on, and work in some of the existing areas—e.g., audiobooks—continues to grow. Plus, computer-based home recording technology and the Internet have made it possible to work anywhere, so you can still get work even if you don't live in or near a big city.

Despite the growth in types of voiceover work, the competition is still intense, and it's easy to see why. A lot of people want to do it, and who can blame them? The money is great if you charge appropriately for your services (lots more on this later), the hours are great, and it's just plain cool. The fact that there's a lot of competition doesn't mean you don't have a shot—if you have some acting ability, networking skills, professionalism, and a good work ethic, you can make money as a voice actor—but you still need to keep in mind that there are more people looking to do voiceovers than there is work available.

It's also true that there's a relatively small group of top voiceover pros who make tons of money, and if you're not already one of them, it can be very difficult to enter that top echelon. That doesn't mean it's impossible, though, and even if you don't make millions, you can still make decent full-time or part-time money. To help put things in perspective, keep in mind that everyone who has ever earned a living doing voiceovers had at one time never made any money at it. They all had to start somewhere, and they all managed to succeed, and if you put in the effort to learn your craft and become a professional, so can you.

The lifestyle

As appealing as some aspects of voiceover acting may sound, it isn't for everyone. In addition to talent and professionalism and a good work ethic, you also need a high tolerance for uncertainty. Even successful voice actors never know when they're going to work. You might work like crazy for a while, and then you might not work for weeks or even months at a time. You might wake up one day and get a booking call from your agent for a national TV commercial that pays thousands of dollars—or even tens of thousands—or you might bump along for months or years doing local radio spots and industrial gigs for a few hundred bucks a pop. You just never know.

To get an idea of what it's like working in voiceovers, check out the documentary film, *That Guy ... Who Was in That Thing*. It's about working film and TV actors who aren't big stars, but whom we've all seen in dozens of movies and TV shows. The whole film consists of interviews with these working actors, and they all talk about how tough it is to make a consistent living. I just watched it recently, and all I could think was, *it's exactly the same for voice actors*: it's all about the uncertainty.

Luckily, it's much easier to do voiceover work and have a job or run a business than it is with film and TV work. When you work on camera, you pretty much always have to show up somewhere in person. You have to go to casting agents' and producers' offices to audition, and of course when you do get work, you have to be at studios or on location sets all day. With voiceovers, you can do auditions and non-broadcast gigs from home. And even when you have to go to an agent's office to audition or a recording studio for a gig, it never takes all day. You might work for an hour or two—or three or four at most—and then you're done.

You'll still need a flexible situation so you can take off for a couple of hours or half a day on short notice to do auditions and gigs. Being a freelancer—graphic designer, copywriter, video editor, freelance accountant, and so on—is convenient, or any type of work that you can stop doing for an hour or so without too much trouble when you need to record. And if your freelance occupation puts you in touch with people who are in positions to hire voice talent, all the better. Otherwise, if you have a day job where your temporary absence during the workday won't cause problems and your boss is OK with it, then that can work, too.

One of the worst things you can do in this business is turn down a gig. It disappoints everybody—the client, your agent, and you—which is why a flexible situation is so important. If you work nine-to-five and your boss doesn't look kindly on your ditching work every time you need to go to an audition or a gig, you're going to have a hard time convincing an agent to take you on—or keep you. If you put yourself out there as a voice actor and then have to say “no” more than once in a great while, no one is going to care about your excuses, they're just going to be annoyed. They're going to wonder what you're even doing in this business, and they're going to remember that you're not reliable.

The timetable

The timetable for voiceover work can be very fast, so if you're serious about being a voice actor, you need to be available—sometimes on short notice—whenever you're needed. When your agent calls you in for an audition or sends you a script to record at home, typically you'll have at least a couple of days before the audition deadline. The actual gig often happens several days or a week after that, but it could be much sooner, like the next day or even the same day—or it might not happen for weeks or months. I've booked gigs months after auditioning, usually having assumed that I didn't get the job and forgotten all about it. Or your agent might call you one morning out of the blue asking how fast you can make

it in to XYZ studio to record a spot you didn't even audition for. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

Here's a good example of how unpredictable the voiceover business can be: As I write these words, it's a Sunday afternoon, and I'm expecting that my agent might call. This is extremely unusual—in fact, I don't think it's ever happened before in my 25 years in the business—but a client called my agent on Friday wanting me and one other actor to audition for a small local commercial job, and the client wanted to know if whichever actor they chose could do the gig that evening or over the weekend, recording at home.

I could have very reasonably said no, I couldn't do it until Monday, but I didn't have any major plans for the weekend, and so I said sure, I'd be happy to do it. This puts me in my agent's good graces, it makes the client happy, and it will make me several hundred bucks for an hour or so of work during a not-busy weekend. *Update:* I booked the gig and recorded at home with the client directing me over the phone, and the whole thing took about half an hour. And I ended up getting paid a couple *thousand* dollars instead of several hundred because they decided to run the spot regionally—in several markets—instead of just in one local market (more on how this works later). Not bad for a slow Sunday.

I've had clients call in a panic asking if I can record something immediately. If I'm not too busy, I do it—especially if it's something really short, like redoing a few lines of a script I recorded previously—and they are always very grateful. So if you're the type of person that loves to schedule your time and hates interruptions and surprises—or if you have a demanding job or business that requires your full-time day-to-day involvement—you might want to think twice about whether the voiceover business is right for you.

Dealing with rejection

Another important requirement for being a successful voice actor is the ability to deal with rejection in a positive way. When you're just starting out in the business and all you know is how many people have told you that you have a great voice and you should get into voiceovers, it can be very discouraging when you don't start booking gigs left and right. The cold fact is that the jobs you don't book will far outnumber the ones you do get. So if you submit every audition with visions of all the money you're going to make, you're going to end up very disappointed when you realize that you might book one job in ten if you're lucky.

Experienced pros know that the odds are against their booking any given job. They take the attitude that auditioning *is* their job; they do their best to nail the part and then forget about it.

The good and bad news about all the rejection you'll face as a voice actor is that no one is going to criticize your performances directly—usually. After you submit an audition, no one ever calls to tell you why you didn't get the job, and in most cases, it won't even be a matter of them not liking your read; you just won't be right for the project. Produc-

ers often have a specific type of voice and delivery in mind for a given role. If your voice isn't the one they're looking for, you're not going to get the job. More on this later.

Voiceover specialties

There are a number of voiceover specialties:

- Commercials
- Corporate/industrials
- Animation
- Audiobooks
- Promos and imaging (e.g., TV and radio station IDs and programming announcements)
- Video/computer game characters
- Web audio
- Voicemail prompts and telemarketing pitches

I'll describe each of these specialties in detail in Chapter 3: *Types of Voiceover Work*. There are many voice actors—especially in the major markets—who focus on specific areas of the business, e.g., promos, commercials, animation, and so on. Everyone's heard about the late, great Don LaFontaine, that “*In-a-worrld ...*” movie trailer guy who got paid thousands of dollars for each gig and rode around in a limo all day from studio to studio. Unfortunately, that type of situation is the exception, not the rule, and so when you're just getting started, and especially if you're not in a major market, such as L.A., New York, or Chicago, it's usually a good idea to be a generalist.

Even if you are in a major market, you'll probably want to start out doing a variety of types of voiceover gigs until you can do full-time commercial or animation or promo work or whatever you're interested in. Many voice actors—myself included—work as generalists throughout their careers. Over the past few months, for example, I've made money doing commercials, video narrations, and e-learning programs. Don't limit yourself until you're busy enough in a specialty niche—and can reasonably expect to stay busy for the foreseeable future—that you can afford to turn down work.

Who gets the work?

Voiceover professionals are actors first, and you do need some acting ability if you're going to succeed at bringing characters to life, even if you're just doing “straight announcer” jobs for radio commercials and video narrations. So if you have some acting experience, you're definitely ahead of the game, but you can learn these skills with training and practice. I'll talk about this more in Chapter 5: *How to Develop Your Skills*.

Men still get a bigger slice of the voiceover pie, although it's definitely shifting more toward female voices since I started out in the busi-

ness back in the 1980s. Men still do roughly three-quarters of the voiceovers you hear on radio and TV, give or take, so if you're a woman hoping to get into the business, you should know that you have this additional hurdle. Unfair? Definitely, but that's the way it is, and there's not a lot you can do about it except to be really good at what you do.

It's already a very competitive business, so it isn't as though any man can just start making a living doing voiceovers without working at it. No matter what your gender, you have to put in some effort if you want to succeed. If you learn your craft, practice regularly, network, and market yourself effectively, your odds of getting work and making money will increase dramatically.

Does age matter?

Your age doesn't really matter; it's how old you sound—or can sound convincingly—that determines how you're cast. For example, Yeardley Smith, who performs the voice of Lisa Simpson on *The Simpsons*, is a mature adult, but she's got that little-girl voice that makes her sound totally convincing as a nine-year-old. Being able to sound believable across a variety of ages is definitely an advantage, but it's not a necessity. For example, I tend to be cast for characters that are younger than my chronological age because I have a naturally younger sounding voice, but I can sound older, too. I generally don't get cast for older roles, but if I'm doing a gig and the producer suddenly decides that the character should sound older—or if they want to give the client that option—I can sound older. If you don't sound convincing as a different age, though, don't try to force it. It'll make you seem desperate; worse, producers will conclude that you don't even know your range. Do what you do well.

Although age doesn't always matter when it comes to how you sound, it does matter in how you're perceived by clients. Ageism definitely exists, and so it's a good idea not to reveal your age in any of your promo materials, websites, bios, and so on. It's also a good idea not to put your picture on your materials, your website, LinkedIn, and so on. If you look older or younger than you sound—or if your face simply doesn't match your voice for whatever reason—you can end up losing gigs as a result. People can't help making judgments about others based on what their faces look like, and you want to be evaluated based on how you sound, not how you look.

Celebrity voices

Celebrity sells, and over the past couple of decades, celebrity voices have become much more prevalent in commercials, for animated characters, on narration tracks for documentaries, and so on. Of course, big-time actors often have great acting skills and timing, but a lot of not-so-famous actors have these assets, too, so it's hard to understand why the big stars get so much more of the work, especially when you consider that they usually charge much higher fees than you or I would. Famous actors' names probably do enhance ticket sales for animated features, for example, but

there's no hard evidence as to whether celebrity voices in commercials increase sales of products.

People may very well react to a familiar voice on a subconscious level, even when they don't know whose voice it is. Also, product managers probably like having famous celebrities talking about their brands, even when most of the audience doesn't even recognize the voice they're hearing. Jeff Bridges's voice is very recognizable in all those Energizer battery spots, but I'd wager that relatively few people realize that James Spader has been the voice of Acura for several years now. He's got great acting skills, to be sure, but his voice isn't as recognizable as those of some other celebrities. I'm sure product managers also enjoy going to recording sessions and rubbing elbows with their celebrity voice actors. In any case, if it's a major national brand with a multimillion-dollar advertising budget, paying a premium for a well-known actor's voice is a drop in the bucket. Plus, no brand manager is ever going to get fired for not hiring a better actor if he or she uses a major movie star.

Celebrities also love working on popular animated shows like *The Simpsons*, which has featured everyone from Danny Devito to Donald Sutherland to the Rolling Stones to Sting. Big stars enjoy these shows as much as the rest of us, and guest-starring on an animated TV show doesn't carry the same stigma as doing commercials. Some reasonably well-known actors are even doing corporate/industrial work these days; oftentimes, a company will pay a celebrity spokesperson for the right to use their voice and/or likeness to promote the company's products and services at trade shows, press conferences, and other events.

Fortunately, even with celebrities doing more voiceovers, there's still room for those of us who are not famous. Also, as the use of all sorts of new media continues to grow, the need for professional voice talent grows along with it. Webinars, online demos, and even PowerPoint presentations are increasingly using professional voiceover talent. Fortunately, the talent budgets for these types of projects usually aren't big enough to interest major stars.

Where the work is

L.A., New York, and Chicago are the major centers of media production in the U.S., and Atlanta and Dallas are also significant markets for voiceover work. If you're in one of these places, you definitely have an advantage over others who hope to do voiceover work but live in the middle of nowhere. Even though anyone can work from their home studio or fly or drive to wherever they need to be, realistically, flying to L.A. or New York every time you need to audition or work is impractical at best. You're going to get called more often when agents and producers know you're local. So, depending on how committed you are to a career in voiceovers, you might want to consider moving to L.A. or New York once you get a little experience under your belt.

This doesn't mean you can't succeed in a smaller market. It's just that there's a lot more work in L.A., New York, and Chicago. The down-

side is that there's also a lot more competition. If you're just getting started and you live in Nashville or Portland or San Francisco, you're probably better off staying on your home turf at first to see how it goes. If things go well and you decide you want to go for it, you can always move to a bigger market later on.

Or not. There's no law that says you have to be where the lion's share of the work is. Plenty of voice actors make a decent full-time living in secondary markets. And of course, you don't have to do voiceovers full time at all. Plenty of people do it as a lucrative sideline. They make good money when the work comes, and they have regular jobs or businesses for their bread and butter. In fact, given that voiceover jobs can be so sporadic, it's really an advantage not to have to depend on it. On the other hand, when things do get busy, it's nice to have a flexible situation so you can take advantage of the extra work.

Jump right in

The purpose of this book is to help you get started as a professional voice-over actor. To this end, I recommend that you jump right in. Start reading copy out loud regularly, at least several times a week. That's what you'll be doing once you start working. Record and listen to your reads. There are several practice scripts in Chapter 16 and on our website, VoiceInto-Money.com, or just read anything out loud. There's useful practice material everywhere, including simply mimicking what you hear on the radio and TV.

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Chapter 2

How Much Money?

Rule #1: Never work for free

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN DOING voiceovers, you've no doubt heard about the money. You figure you've got what it takes, and you want in. Fair enough, but don't quit your day job just yet. It takes a while before enough money is coming in consistently that you don't have to work a regular job anymore. And that's assuming it happens at all. As discussed in the previous chapter, many professional voice actors never make a full-time living at it. They do it as a sideline—a commercial here, a video narration or game character there, for example. They make some extra cash and get bragging rights for being on the radio or TV, and they get to have their friends call up and say, “Hey, I just heard you on the radio!”

If it does happen for you—if you have the skills and professionalism and a little luck—the money can be amazing. There are voice actors who make well into six figures annually (hundreds of thousands) or even seven figures (millions!). Unfortunately, those million-dollar voices are the exceptions, not the rule, but even if you don't make enough to retire early and buy your own private island, doing voiceovers can still be a great deal. If you're charging for your services appropriately, whatever amount of time you spend will always be worth it.

Think in terms of what you make per hour when you do voiceovers instead of how much you're making on it per month or per year and you'll be a lot happier. For example, you might spend 15 minutes or half an hour recording a few lines for some company's product video and get paid \$200 or \$300 or more. And that's at a minimum. There are plenty of commercial gigs that could earn you thousands, or even tens of thousands of dollars, for an hour of work or less. If you work in a union com-

mercial that plays nationally, for example, you could be in for a spectacular payday. Might not happen every week, but it does happen.

Of course you also need to factor in all the time and money you'll need to spend developing your skills, setting up your home studio, getting an agent and clients, managing your business, and so on. A lot of this investment comes when you're just starting out. Once you're established and getting work, your investment will start paying off.

Never work for free

Given all the time and expense that goes into developing your skills, setting up your home studio, making a demo, cultivating clients, and auditioning for jobs, the trick is to maximize the amount of money you make for the time you spend doing actual voiceover work. With this in mind, always remember the first rule of voiceover: *Never work for free.*

Refusing non-paid work outright probably sounds odd if you're an actor who's accustomed to working in non-union theater productions and low-budget films, neither of which offer actors any meaningful income—or any income at all in many cases—but doing voiceovers is different from either.

Here's the difference: Unlike low-budget theater and films, voiceovers are almost always part of some money-making project or venture. Commercials are made to sell products and services, video games are made to sell to make a profit, and corporate videos are made to help companies conduct their business operations, and if they're making money, so should you. Experience is irrelevant. If you're good enough to get behind the mic, you're good enough to get paid. Therefore, I encourage you to say “no” to people who ask you to work for free.

No pay is just the beginning: Working for free not only doesn't make you any money, it also sets you up for all kinds of abuse. Most clients and producers are decent, ethical professionals, but I guarantee you that the ones who ask you to give away your services for free are not the kind of people you want to be involved with. If you agree to work for nothing, they're more likely to treat you poorly in other ways, e.g., being hyper-critical of your performance, demanding lots of retakes, and making you feel like crap in general. Unfortunately, these types of people are good at detecting inexperience and earnestness, and they get off on treating people badly. This doesn't mean you'll never have to deal with abusive producers if you are getting paid, but, well, at least you'll be getting paid.

“There'll be lots of paid work later if you'll do this one for free”: Oftentimes, clients will try to convince you to help them out for free by holding out the possibility of paid gigs later if you agree to do a freebie just this once. It's also very likely that, in almost every case, they are being less than honest. Producers who ask you to work for nothing now in all likelihood have no intention of paying you for future projects either, and why should they when they know that you—or some other equally desperate

voice actor—are willing to work for free? If they have an important project that warrants a talent budget, they're going to offer it to someone who knows the value of what they're selling. Or, more likely, they're just going to go trolling for someone else who's naive enough to believe them. Never work for free!

Charge a decent rate

If the first rule of voiceover is “never work for free,” the second rule is “always charge a decent rate for your efforts.” I know of people who've done voice gigs for \$5. That's not a typo; that's five dollars. In case you haven't heard of it, there's a website where people post services they're willing to perform for five dollars, and, yes, there are people there offering five-dollar voiceovers. We'll talk more later about the freelance and voice-casting websites and how to use them effectively (see Chapter 8: *How to Get Work*).

Admittedly, five dollars is extreme, and I cannot imagine that any five-dollar voiceover could possibly be anything close to usable quality. However, just the fact that anyone is willing to work for five bucks hurts our ability to charge professional rates; inevitably, a producer will attempt to use the fact that someone is offering to do voiceovers for five dollars to convince you—or someone else—to work cheap.

In a way, doing voiceovers for peanuts is worse than working for free. When people ask you to work for no pay, they have to at least acknowledge that they're asking you to give away something valuable for nothing. When someone offers you insultingly low money, they're not saying they'll pay you a reasonable rate next time if you'll work for next to nothing now; they're saying that's all they ever want to pay. They're basically saying that's all you're worth, and when you say “yes,” you're agreeing with them. And if you work on the cheap now, how do you imagine you'll get them to pay you a reasonable rate later on?

Quoting fees can be tricky because when a client gets a very low quote from one voice actor and a more reasonable one from another, they don't think about the likely differences in quality; they focus on the numbers, and you can't really blame them. They think, *Why is this actor charging ten times more than the other one?* They have no idea that the low-baller is probably an inexperienced amateur and that the other one's a seasoned pro. That's why it's up to us to educate them as to what professional voiceovers cost. So when a client says to you, “Oh, I heard about someone doing voiceovers for five dollars,” just treat it as exactly what it is: ridiculous. And if they persist in trying to advance the idea that \$5 or \$10 or \$20 is an appropriate fee for professional quality voiceover work, don't even waste your time. Wish them luck and move on.

This may sound counterintuitive, but it's actually good to lose some jobs from clients who can't or won't pay your fee; this means that it's less likely that your rates are too low. If you're charging appropriately for your services, you will lose some work, but the money you make on the gigs you do get will more than make up for it.

Union voiceover rates

There's a union for voice actors and other performers working in the U.S., called SAG-AFTRA. There used to be two separate unions—the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). The two unions merged in 2012, and now all voiceover work is covered by the one combined union. In Canada, the combined performers union is called the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television, and Radio Artists (ACTRA). In the U.K., the union is called the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA). For all other countries, check www.fia-actors.com, the International Federation of Actors (click "About FIA" and choose "List of members" to look up your country).

One of the main things performers unions do for their members is set pay rates for various types of work. If you're in the union, you don't have to worry about deciding how much to charge; you'll be paid "union scale." Union scale varies depending on the type of job you're doing and how the material will be used. For a commercial job, for example, you'll be paid depending on how many markets the commercial plays in and over what period of time. For corporate/industrial projects and video games, you'll be paid according to how much time you spend in the studio. The list on the next page shows approximate union rates for some common types of voiceover work at the time of this writing.

These examples are just to give you a rough idea, and there are additional categories. Also, rate calculations for commercial "residuals payments" (i.e., the payments you get when your spot runs regionally, nationally, or for additional broadcast cycles) get very complicated very quickly. When you start booking union work, your agent will make sure you get paid the right amount. You can visit sagaftra.org to familiarize yourself with pay scales for various types of work. Click the "contracts" pull-down menu. Choose "Commercials," "Corporate / Educational," or "New Media" to view the various rate sheets. You can download the union rate sheets to your computer in PDF format (links at www.VoiceIntoMoney.com).

Other financial benefits to working union

If you earn enough doing union gigs, you can also qualify for unemployment benefits, which means that, once you register, you'll receive a check every week you don't work. Unemployment benefits are supported by payments made by employers, not tax dollars, so don't hesitate to sign up thinking that you're burdening everyone else. Unemployment is not welfare; it's a benefit you earn by working.

If you generate enough union-covered earnings within a single year, you can also qualify for union health insurance benefits, and you also get retirement benefits regardless of how much you make. For more information on unemployment, and union health and retirement benefits, see Chapter 15: *The Union*.

Approximate union voiceover rates*

Radio commercial: about \$280 for a one-hour gig, with the spot playing for up to 13 weeks in one market, not including New York, L.A., or Chicago. For New York only, it's around \$420, and for L.A. or Chicago only it's roughly \$380.

TV commercial voiceover: around \$470 for a one-hour gig, with the spot playing in one market for up to 13 weeks. For New York it's around \$870, and for L.A. or Chicago it's about \$760.

Corporate/industrial: (e.g., corporate videos, instructional programs, interactive kiosks) about \$400-450 for the first hour and around \$115 for each additional half hour (there are two categories of industrials—depending on intended use—paying slightly different rates).

Game characters: up to four hours in the studio, playing up to three characters: about \$825. Or, one voice, up to one hour: around \$415; additional characters: about \$275 each.

*Check sagaftra.org for current rates.

How much should I charge if I'm non-union?

If you're not a union member, you can still use the union rates as a basis for setting your own fees. Even if you charge full union scale or more, your clients are still getting a good deal; if they were using a union actor, they'd have to pay union health and retirement fees in addition to session fees. Charging union scale or above also ensures that you're not undermining the union's efforts at maintaining professional pay rates, which helps all of us, regardless of union membership status.

Non-union commercials: Be especially careful not to accept low-paying non-union commercial jobs. Producers often equate "non-union" with "less expensive," and they'll try to get you to do commercial work cheap. When this happens to you, keep in mind that there are finite numbers of commercial TV and radio commercial slots available. If you do non-union commercial work for low or no pay, you're eliminating an opportunity for a union actor to make union scale and earn union benefits. You're also eliminating the opportunity to get a decent non-union "buy-out" rate for yourself. For non-union radio or TV, there's no reason why you can't charge full union scale or even more, say \$300 for a local radio spot or \$500 for TV, and that's at a minimum (charge more for New York, L.A., or Chicago, based on the numbers given above—check the rate sheets for union scale in those cities). In fact, it's not uncommon for non-union voice actors to charge two-to-three times the standard session fee for a commercial buy-out because the client can run the spot indefinitely.

If you don't have an agent and someone wants to hire you to do a non-union commercial, consider using this as leverage to get an agent and asking the agent to negotiate for you. Nothing generates interest

from agents like an actor who's already working, especially if that actor has a gig and needs help negotiating the fee.

Non-union corporate/industrials: You can also use union rates as a basis for setting your fees for corporate/industrial work. Check sagafta.org for rates covering specific types of work. Unlike commercials, there's no limit to how many video and Flash narrations and Web audio tracks can be produced and distributed, webcast, and so on, which means that working non-union on these types of projects does not impact the availability of union industrial work beyond any given project. You should still charge a reasonable rate, though. If you charge a rate equal to full union scale or more, or an equivalent per-word or per-recorded-minute rate, there's less chance of undercutting union rates.

As mentioned above, union scale for non-broadcast corporate / industrial work (video and Flash narrations, Web audio, etc.) is roughly \$400-450 for the first hour, depending on how the recording will be used and around \$115 for each additional half hour. Beginners should expect to be paid at least one-half to two-thirds of union scale or more for non-broadcast work, which means you should never be paid less than \$250-300 for the first hour of voiceover work for a corporate training program, Web audio, or other not-for-broadcast material. And when it goes beyond an hour, you should get at least \$75 for each additional half hour. Once you've had a little experience—just a handful of paid gigs—you should charge full union scale or more. Or just charge the full amount beginning with your first gig if you can get it. I know agents who charge \$500 or more for the first hour and \$400 or more for each additional hour for non-union industrial work, and that's above union scale.

If you do corporate/industrial gigs from home, you can charge for both studio and engineering time, or you can charge a flat per-word or per-minute-of-finished-audio rate instead of by the hour. When I work from home (which means zero travel time and expenses), I often use a per-word or per-minute rate for non-broadcast work, e.g., 50-65 cents per word or \$75-100 per finished recorded minute, with a \$200 or \$250 minimum, but even that's negotiable. If a client just needs me to work for a few minutes on a not-for-broadcast project, I might do it for \$150 or even less than that, especially if they're willing to pay upfront. Or, if it's a regular client and they just want a quick redo on a line for a project I just did recently and they paid me a good rate, I might not charge them anything.

Get paid in advance

When a client asks for a deal, don't be afraid to ask for something in return, like being paid in advance. Payment in advance isn't always practical on the client's end, but it's never a bad idea for you, especially if your client is in a distant location, which makes it more difficult for you to make them pay if they resist doing so. If you use PayPal for your advance billing, you'll get paid immediately and not have to hold up the work

waiting for a check. Once PayPal has accepted your client's payment, it's locked in. More on PayPal in Chapter 11: *How to Get Paid*.

Give yourself some negotiating room

It's always good to have a range in mind when you're discussing your non-union voiceover rates with clients, and there's always the possibility of a compelling reason to work for a little less, but don't be afraid to set your fee and stick to it. Never agree to work for an unspecified length of time for a flat rate. Some producers aren't familiar with industry rates, so you may need to educate them. If the producer won't budge from the flat rate they're offering, you might agree to work for a specific length of time and no longer. A standard commercial session is one hour, and when it goes beyond an hour, union rules stipulate additional payment. For non-broadcast sessions, pay is always calculated according to the first-hour and additional half-hour rates outlined above. Put your terms in writing, and have the producer sign. See the sample agreement in Chapter 11: *How to Get Paid*, which you can also download as a Word template from VoiceIntoMoney.com.

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Chapter 3

Types of Voiceover Work

VOICEOVER WORK INCLUDES a number of subcategories: radio and TV commercials, film and TV narration, corporate/industrials, animation, audiobooks, promos, video games, Web audio, and automated phone systems (“IVR”) and robo-call messaging.

Commercials

When most people hear the term “voiceovers,” they think TV and radio commercial voices. In the early days of radio and, later, television, advertisements were “read” by announcers. Professional announcers were trained by broadcasting schools for diction and delivery, and they all sounded pretty much the same—like old-style “newsreel” announcers. Their delivery was typically very staccato and brusque, with none of the normal guy or girl quality you hear in modern commercials.

We live in a consumer age, and it’s increasingly difficult to do anything without being exposed to commercial advertising messages, but it wasn’t always this way. In the past, before every product category became overrun with dozens of brands—and before there were hundreds of TV channels (before there was TV!) and radio stations, not to mention the Internet—the typical consumer might have had to evaluate at most a small handful of brands before making a purchase decision. Advertisers’ main job was to inform the buying public that their brands were available. Consumers were less savvy, too, which meant that advertisers could get away with saying, essentially, “Buy our product.”

TV took off in a big way in the 1950s and ’60s. This coincided with significant growth in the proliferation of consumer products in the post-World War II era, and so advertisers needed to figure out new ways to make their brands stand out. With so many more commercial messages competing for customers’ attention, product managers had to develop new methods of differentiating their brands. This marked the beginning of modern creative advertising. Instead of saying, “Here’s our product;

buy it," advertisers began looking for ways to create emotional relationships with customers, given that their products were often essentially identical to competitors' offerings.

The need to build an emotional connection with the audience brought about a shift from old-school announcing to more character-oriented "voice acting," especially on the radio. Instead of having an announcer rattle off the virtues of whatever toothpaste or laundry soap was being hawked, maybe with a jingle at the end, ad agencies began creating mini-dramas that would play out over 30 or 60 seconds. For example, a husband and wife might bicker over always eating the same boring dinner at home, then decide to go out instead, followed by the announcer giving the essential product information. The difference is, he or she sounded less like an announcer and more like a friend. Problem solved, marriage saved. These little scenes needed trained actors to make them sound realistic, and that's how modern voiceover acting was born.

TV commercials are similar to radio, except they use on-screen actors to play out the scenarios and then sometimes have a voiceover announcer at the end to talk about the product, but again, the announcer is much more likely to sound like a normal person. The goal is the same, to establish an emotional connection, thereby creating a sense of intimacy in viewers' minds, as though they were listening to a friend tell them something or hearing the person's thoughts, as in TV spots with on-screen pictures accompanied by a "non-announcer" talking over them ("This is my car. I like it because it looks *fast*").

Of course, you can still hear old-style announcers on TV and radio, but they're far more likely to be used in an ironic, tongue-in-cheek fashion. The two exceptions I can think of are direct response advertising, which still uses hard-sell announcers ("To order your juice blaster, call 1-800-blah-blah-blah – blah-blah-blah-blah! Operators are standing by! Call now!"), and low-budget commercials for local businesses, which are usually less concerned with making an emotional connection than with giving viewers essential information on what they're selling, where they're located, upcoming special sales events, and so on.

The great thing about getting into commercial voiceover work is that we all know what they sound like; we've been listening to them our entire lives. In fact, you probably heard your first radio commercial during the ride home from the hospital with your parents after you were born. So if you're interested in doing voiceovers and have a little acting talent, you probably already have some sense of delivery, timing, and so on. You still need training and practice, which we'll talk more about later.

Commercial voiceover work is generally easier to get than some other types of work simply because it's not unique to New York or L.A., the way animated TV shows and feature-length animated movies are, for example. Even small towns in the middle of nowhere have commercial radio stations, which means they're probably going to produce at least some of their own radio spots.

TV and radio promos and imaging

Promos are TV and radio stations and networks advertising their own programming, e.g., “Tonight, on *The Late Show* ...” Imaging includes “Station identification” messages (“You’re watching WABC-TV, New York”). Unlike commercials and narration, if you get hired to do promos, you’ll need to be able to create a consistent voice style and delivery for as long as you have the job—which could be years or even decades—as that voice will become part of the network or station’s brand. Some promo announcers use exaggerated mannerisms to good effect, but for the most part it’s straight announcing and it’s usually fairly high energy.

Doing promos and imaging is a great gig—it’s a steady job with good pay—but it’s also more like regular employment than other types of voiceover work. If you’re a regular promo announcer for a TV station, you’ll probably have a regular schedule every week, and you’ll report to the same studio at the same time on most work days.

If you like the predictability and don’t mind doing variations on the same thing over and over, maybe promos and imaging are right for you. On the other hand, if you thrive on variety, or if you have another job or business that you can’t or don’t want to give up, you might want to stick to the less routine types of voiceover work. Again, one of the great things about doing voiceovers in the first place is the flexibility. If you do promos, you give up a lot of that flexibility. On the plus side, you’ll get steady work, good pay, and the opportunity to become the voice of a TV station or network.

If you’re interested in getting into promos and imaging, again, one major advantage is that you hear them all the time on TV, and you can practice while you’re watching. As with commercials, you can repeat what you hear while you watch, and you can record your own versions and compare them with the real ones.

Film and TV narration

Films and TV shows often use narrators, especially documentaries. Narrators for documentary-style TV shows and films typically employ a fairly low-key announcer-style delivery, ranging from fairly dry and informative to mildly cheerful/friendly. The delivery needs to be understated so it doesn’t compete with what’s onscreen. Will Lyman, the long-time narrator for PBS *Frontline* is a good example, as is any local public television station announcer. The documentary narrator describes what’s onscreen, provides segues between topics and scenes, and so on.

Dramatic and comedic TV shows and movies also use narrators, although this type of narration is often performed by one of the on-camera characters. Remember Harrison Ford’s narration in the original theatrical release of *Blade Runner*? It had a very film-noir quality to it, which enhanced the dark, apocalyptic feel of the movie. Again, most of us have seen and heard many documentaries over the course of our lifetimes, and so we’re very familiar with what that style of narration sounds like.

If you want to do TV and movie narrations, you will need to either 1) be an established film or TV actor or 2) have a few years of experience and be really good not only at your skills, but also at networking constantly and developing contacts. If you're interested in TV and film voice-over work, your best bet is moving to L.A. or New York, and you might want to consider becoming involved in TV and/or film acting.

Corporate/industrials

Although commercials and animation work are what usually capture the popular imagination when it comes to voiceovers, the biggest slice of the voiceover pie by far consists of non-broadcast corporate/industrial narration. Even huge companies running multiple broadcast advertising campaigns at any given time often have hundreds or even thousands of employee training videos, trade-show presentations, and other non-broadcast media productions, and most of these programs use voiceovers. Plus, non-broadcast voiceover work continues to expand rapidly, with Web audio and other new-media applications being developed constantly.

Corporate/industrial work isn't as "glamorous" as commercial work—no corporate video is ever going to play on TV or radio or win an award—and it doesn't pay residuals, but it does pay very well for the time you spend doing the work. The union has two categories for corporate/industrial work: "Type I" and Type II." Type I covers media that will not be played in public (e.g., training videos); Type II refers to media that *will* play in public (advertising kiosks in retail stores, for example, and other programming that will play live (not over radio or TV) to the general public. Type II industrial work pays at a slightly higher scale (around \$450 for the first hour and \$115 for each additional half hour) than Type I (around \$400 for the first hour and \$115 for each additional half hour). Check the SAG-AFTRA website for more information, including the latest rates; the contracts are usually renegotiated every few years. For non-union corporate/industrial work, see Chapter 2: *How Much Money?* for a discussion on how much you can charge.

Animation

Animation voiceover refers to cartoon-character voices. If you want to do animation, you need to be in Los Angeles. That's where most of the work is done, and you have to be there in person. All of the voice actors in a given animated show or feature film work together in the same studio at the same time; there's no recording at home and sending in your files. In animation, they record the voices first and then create the visuals to match the actors' lines. The exception is when they dub English lines into finished animation that was originally done in a foreign language.

Animation work is harder than most people realize. You need great acting skills and timing, and exquisite control over your voice. You have to convey the full range of emotions and feelings through voice alone that on-camera actors can rely on facial expressions and physicality for, and that range is often exaggerated in animation.

If you're good at imitating Bart Simpson or the *South Park* kids, that's great, but don't make the amateur's mistake of thinking that this will get you hired. You need to be able to create voices for *new* characters that are believable and that directors think will work, and you need to be able to sustain the character or characters, potentially for many seasons. Animation is a job, and you have to be able to do consistently great work day after day. Plus, you'll probably be expected to do more than one character; on major animated shows, it's common for actors to perform several roles each.

If you want to work in animation, your best bet is 1) moving to L.A., and 2) contacting agents who represent animation voiceover actors and asking them what they need from you to consider you for representation (check VoiceIntoMoney.com for a link to franchised agents).

Computer game characters

Computer games have become a significant source of work for voiceover actors in recent decades. Doing computer game characters is similar to animation in some ways, but it's completely different in others. As in animation, you need strong acting skills, but unlike animation, you typically won't be interacting with other actors while you're working. Rather, you'll be required to deliver individual lines, which the "audience" (i.e., the customers who play the games) may or may not hear, depending on the choices they make in the game. For this reason, if you work in computer games, you'll need to be absolutely consistent in your line delivery, staying in character throughout. Each of the character's lines have to match up with the previous and succeeding lines, again, depending on the choices made by the player.

A lot of game work is done in the San Francisco Bay Area because that's where many game companies are located, but there are companies all over the place. You can work remotely sometimes, especially if you're an experienced character actor. Game work typically pays on a buy-out basis, i.e., you won't get paid any residuals or royalties. If you're interested in games, having a good agent who has contacts with game producers is key. You can also contact the companies directly, but it can be difficult to get gigs without an agent, the reason being that it's a lot easier for producers to just send off their scripts and character breakdowns to a few agents than to have to contact dozens of actors on their own.

Audiobooks

Audiobooks are a good source of steady voiceover work for those who can create and maintain a consistent voice and delivery throughout many hours of finished work. Formerly known as "books on tape," audiobooks began as "phonographic books" back in 1877 when Thomas Edison invented his phonograph technology. Since then, every new sound medium has been adapted to audiobook use, and today's audiobooks can be purchased on CD or downloaded as digital audio files and played through computers, digital audio players, smartphones, and tablets.

The pay for audiobooks is generally lower than it is for other types of voiceover work, but the amount of work for any individual gig is much greater, given the many hours it takes to record an entire book. Also, there's no union scale for audiobooks; each project is negotiated individually. If you're interested in audiobooks, check out the Audio Publishers Association website (audiopub.org). The union is also becoming more involved in audiobooks, so check sagafta.org, too.

Voicemail and automated telemarketing

Telephony applications—voicemail greetings and pre-recorded telemarketing pitches, also known as interactive voice response, or IVR—are a huge source of voiceover work. Every business uses voicemail, and larger businesses have extensive voicemail trees. This can be some of the easiest work to get, and it's also relatively easy to do. You still have to maintain a voice and an attitude, but the main focus is on speaking clearly so that callers can understand you, and maintaining a brisk pace to minimize the time people have to spend listening to their choices.

Automated telemarketing pitches use fairly high-energy announcer-style reads, and speaking clearly and with a brisk delivery is important. People often hang up immediately when they receive these “robo-calls,” and so the message has to grab their attention fast. Consider the following pitch, for example: “Are you spending too much money on prescription drugs?” People who use a lot of prescription drugs might be inclined to listen, but it's still important to get that essential message—“we sell prescription drugs for less”—across clearly and quickly; otherwise, if they realize that it's a recorded sales call, they might hang up before they understand what it's about.

I get these calls now and then, and I'll often stay on the line in case there's an opportunity to talk to a live person so I can ask for the boss's contact info and offer my voiceover services—especially if it's obvious that they're using a non-professional. I'll say something like, “I noticed you're not using a professional announcer ...” Worst-case scenario is *they* hang up on *me*. No big deal.

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Chapter 4

How to Be a Professional

IN THE VOICEOVER BUSINESS, professionalism is key. Having a great voice is definitely a plus, but even if your voice is merely good, if you act like a professional and have well-practiced skills, you're going to get more work and make more money than if you behave like an amateur.

Professionalism can make all the difference between success and failure in our industry, especially given how much competition there is. Many aspiring voiceover actors are lacking in this area, so if you develop professional work habits, you'll automatically have an advantage over a lot of them. Put yourself in the client's shoes: Who would you rather hire, someone with a great voice, but who's unprepared, unreliable, and generally difficult to work with, or someone with a reasonably good voice who's totally prepared, follows up promptly, takes direction well, and makes the whole process as easy as possible?

Being a professional is largely a matter of developing and maintaining good business habits. The following is a list of some of the elements that will communicate to clients the fact that you're a professional and help you get work and make money. Many of these are described in detail in other parts of the book; this is a quick checklist.

Have a good attitude: Attitude is a major part of being a professional voice actor. To put it bluntly, don't be a jerk. Word gets around in this business, and if you have a bad attitude, people will hear about it. Don't be a prima donna. Return phone calls and emails promptly. Show up on time. Be easy to work with. Listen carefully to producers' directions. Don't argue. Don't talk trash about other actors or, especially, about clients. Even voiceover rock stars—the folks with nothing to prove and who make mountains of money every year—don't throw their weight around, which, when you think about it, probably played a big part in how they made it to the top in the first place.

Get training: Being prepared to do professional-level work takes more than people saying, “Hey, you have a great voice!” You need to know how to use your voice, how to use the mic, how things work in recording studios, and so on, and that means getting professional training. All of the major markets and many secondary markets have decent quality voiceover schools, and there are even online classes available (see Chapter 5: *How to Develop Your Skills*).

Practice often: Voiceover is just like any other skill; you have to practice regularly to develop and maintain it.

Network: Voiceover is a relationship business. The more you network with people who are in a position to hire you – or introduce you to those who are – the more successful you’ll be (see Chapter 8: *How to Get Work*).

Put up your own website: A website is now a must-have for voice actors. Sure, you could direct potential clients to your agent’s website or your page on one of the voice-casting sites, but why lead them straight to the competition? You’d be amazed at how many voice actors still don’t have their own websites, so if you have one, you’re already ahead of the game. Putting up your own website is relatively easy and inexpensive, especially if you don’t go overboard with fancy design (Chapter 8).

Always carry business cards: When you’re out in the world and you suddenly find yourself in a promising networking situation and someone asks you for your business card, be sure you have one to give them. Fumbling around with paper and pen and saying, “Oh, um, I don’t have one with me, but I can write down my number for you,” will make you look like an amateur. Your card should include your name; the fact that you do voiceovers; and your phone numbers, email address, and website URL (Chapter 8).

Create a great relationship with your agent: Your agent is much more than just someone who throws work your way now and then. He or she is a valuable resource who knows who’s who and what’s what in the voiceover business in your area and in general. Ask them for advice about your demos, marketing efforts, and so on. Don’t overdo it, though. Agents are busy people, so respect their time. Make sure your agent always has all your current contact info – home phone, cell phone, email – and always respond promptly to their calls. Notify your agent when you’re going to be out of town or otherwise unavailable. Check in by phone or email every week or two. Offer to take your agent out to lunch now and then – once or twice a year is fine – or offer to bring lunch in for the staff. Either way is great for keeping up with the business, and it will help put you in your agent’s good graces (see Chapter 9: *How to Get a Great Agent*).

Be accessible and responsive: Responding quickly and professionally to clients’ and agents’ calls and emails will score you major points – and go a long way toward getting you hired. And rehired. Conversely, being

hard to reach and not returning calls will help ensure that you don't get called in the future. Always carry your cell phone with you. Make sure your previous clients have your current phone numbers and email address, and if you can't always answer calls, always return them promptly. Be sure your voicemail or answering machine works and has an up-to-date greeting.

Show up on time: Being on time should go without saying, but you'd be amazed at how many people ignore this most basic rule of business etiquette. Simply showing up on time can make all the difference when it comes to booking voiceover gigs. Think about it: If you were an agent or a producer, who would you be more likely to book, someone who's always on time or someone who's in the habit of showing up late? It only takes being late for a gig once to put a client off ever using you again. No one is going to care what your excuse is or whose fault it is; if you hold things up and a client has to wait—with the meter running on expensive studio time—they're going to remember you, and not in a good way.

Follow up: When a prospective client calls or emails you, or a friend or associate tells you they know someone who needs voiceover—follow up as soon as possible. Also, follow up regularly via email with previous clients (Chapter 8: *How to Get Work*). This is harder than it sounds, and if you're not diligent about it, it's easy to let follow-up emailing slide.

Set up a home studio: If you want to be a professional voice actor, you need to be able to make your own high-quality recordings for auditions and non-broadcast gigs. A professional quality sound studio used to cost thousands of dollars at a minimum, but now you can get near-studio-quality sound with any reasonably current laptop or desktop PC or Mac, equipment that costs as little as a few hundred dollars, and free or inexpensive recording software. Even a budget home voiceover studio with a decent mic will make your auditions sound far better than using a cheap computer mic or your smartphone (see Chapter 13: *How to Set Up Your Home Studio*).

Keep good records: Keep track of past clients, potential clients, work expenses, and—most important of all—who owes you money and how much. Always keep your records up to date. Keep track of any and all work-related expenses, including transportation costs for getting to and from gigs, any materials, equipment, and services you purchase for your business, and so on.

Follow through on your commitments: When you make a commitment to a client, whether for pricing, turnaround time, or, especially, being available at a certain time and place, do everything you possibly can to follow through.

Do your homework: If you've booked a gig and have access to the script ahead of time, read it over carefully, along with the character breakdowns, storyboards, descriptions of what's happening onscreen if it's a video or

animated project, and so on. Make note of words you're not sure how to pronounce, awkward constructions, typos, and so on. That way, when you get to the gig, you'll have all your questions ready and you won't have to take up more time than necessary getting them answered, or you can contact the producer or your agent ahead of time with your questions.

Of course, the most important aspect of being a professional voiceover actor is having well-practiced skills, and that's the subject of the next chapter.

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(Chapters 5 – 17 not included in this free preview)

Chapter 18

Free Resources at
www.VoiceIntoMoney.com

SOME VOICEOVER BOOKS have appendices at the end with a variety of information. Instead of doing that here, I've elected to include links to free downloads and other resources on the companion website to this book: VoiceIntoMoney.com. This makes it easy for you to download free recording software, for example, and access up-to-date union pay info; all you need to do is click the appropriate link instead of having to type it into your Web browser. Plus, Web links often change; I will keep them as current as possible and add new ones whenever I find something useful.



VoiceIntoMoney.com
Tons of Useful Resources for Voiceover Actors

[HOME](#) [FREE Downloads and Links](#) [Home Studio Gear and More](#)

Everything You Need
Interested in making money doing voiceovers? This site has everything you need to get started, including loads of free downloads and links, plus all the essential home studio gear you'll need, along with useful books on the voiceover business, marketing your services, and more. **Bookmark us!** (Ctrl-D Windows, Command-D Mac)

[Click here](#) to purchase **You Should Do VOICEOVERS!**, your how-to manual for becoming a well-paid professional voice actor!

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business templates
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client email templates
demo resources
union information
home studio setup info
vocal warm ups
and lots more

GEAR!

Here's a partial list of what you'll find on the website:

- Free software downloads and tutorials
- Free practice scripts
- Free business templates (talent agreements, invoices, etc.)
- Agent lists and contact info
- Client email templates
- Demo resources
- Union information, including pay rates
- Info on setting up your home studio
- Vocal warm ups
- And more

You'll also find our Amazon Web store, where you can purchase gear for your home recording studio; books on voiceovers, acting, and marketing; and other useful items. You'll pay the exact same low prices that you'd pay on Amazon.com, and we've selected the most useful items from among the thousands of products sold on Amazon.

There are other sources for these items, including—for books—your local library; if they have a book you need, why not read for free? If you haven't already purchased *You Should Do VOICEOVERS!*, you can even ask your library to buy it. In any case, the site is there for you, and I hope you'll make good use of it.

Ready to get started?

Thanks for reading. If you're ready to look into becoming a well-paid professional voiceover actor, having a solid plan is critically important. *You Should Do VOICEOVERS!* will help you avoid the mistakes that can ruin your chances before you even get started. Just go to www.VoiceIntoMoney.com, where you can purchase the book and access all the free information and downloads described above.

Thanks for reading!