

How to Get Started in Voice-Over & Radio Announcing

Scott Cimarusti

Everyday we are exposed to some aspect of the broadcasting/voice-over industry. It can range from routinely tuning in to our favorite radio station in the car during our trip to the store, or listening to the background on-hold message when calling a local business. Advances in technology and an increasing focus on all forms of media, have created an increasing need for talented voice announcers.

Although radio as a medium is over a century old, it remains a predominant source of information and entertainment; still competing with network television, cable, and satellite broadcasts. After all, you can't safely watch TV and drive a car (yet). And with the incorporation of the World Wide Web and Webcasting, a radio station's audience has grown to potentially be the entire planet.

Conversely, though personal computers and the Internet are relatively new technologies, their presence in both our personal and professional lives has become just as prevalent. As a result, software has become an integral tool for education, information, automation, and countless other applications—not to mention entertainment. CD-ROMs and the World Wide Web all incorporate software that often includes audio requiring a voice-talent.

Still, with so many different applications, voice-over/announcing jobs seem to remain an eclectic and elusive career for many aspiring announcers. As with many other pursuits, the first question becomes, "Where do I even begin?" Announcing is not necessarily the type of career that one can go to school to earn a degree in. Although there are community colleges and vocational-type schools that offer radio engineering-type courses, that kind of training does not necessarily prepare one to get a job.

There is no "secret" to it, necessarily. Just commitment, perseverance, and knowing where the potential opportunities are hidden. "How to Get Started in Voice-Over & Radio Announcing" will provide some general guidelines to follow when pursuing this career path, including insight into some hidden prospects. You'll also get some tips and

ideas from people who have made careers in this industry in various capacities. Though this information will not necessarily guarantee that you will become the next Don Pardo or Howard Stern, you will get a practical foundation upon which you can begin building a career as a radio and/or voice-over announcer.

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What It's Like (Really) To Be a Radio/Voice-Over Announcer

I think it's safe to say that each of us—at one time or another, to some extent—has imagined ourselves as a radio show host, or other type of announcer (like the narrator of movie trailers, for example). It seems like fun, and it doesn't appear to be difficult work—after all, you're just talking. Plus, one often hears rumors of the huge rates the big-name voice talents get paid.

The truth is, the jobs paying the Hollywood-caliber salaries take a lot of talent, perseverance, and more than a little luck.

But the good news is, the “famous” announcers are really in the minority. According to the Screen Actors Guild, 70% of the guild's nearly 100,000 members make less than \$7,500 a year as actors, while less than 2% make more than \$100,000 annually [*Hollywood Reporter Online*, May 14, 2001]. I believe the same holds true for radio/voice-over announcers; a similar minority of radio/voice-over announcers get paid the exorbitant salaries.

This means that there must be plenty of work out there for regular people outside of New York and Hollywood that are looking to earn a reasonable living, or just make a little extra money, doing something that is fun and different. And there is. There are thousands of people just like you that get steady work—either full- or part-time—as a radio or voice-over announcer.

Radio Announcing

Radio announcers can work full- or part-time. Most on-air shifts range from 4 to 6 hours, with full-timers working Monday through Friday (sometimes plus one weekend shift).

The shifts, or dayparts, as they are called, are usually 6-10am, 10-3pm, 3-7pm, and 7-midnight. Some stations also have an overnight shift from midnight to 6am. Part-timers usually work weekends, holidays, or substitutions during the week.

In addition to doing a show, most on-air announcers spend a few hours a week doing production work—voicing and creating commercials and other announcements. Some announcers are also asked to make promotional appearances as well.

Voice-Over Announcing

Voice-over announcers are usually freelancers with no set schedule. They work when they are needed. Voice-over jobs can range from a 30 second radio commercial to narration for a 2-hour video. There's no technical background or formal education required.

Where are the Jobs?

The amount and type of work you can get in either career often depends on where you live. For example, if you live in a smaller or medium-sized area, you have a better chance of getting on the radio because larger cities usually attract more famous radio personalities. This doesn't mean that you won't be able to get on the air in a big city, you'll just encounter a lot more talented and experienced competition.

At the same time, if you're located near a large metropolitan area, there will probably be more opportunities to do voice-over work, since there's likely to be greater demand resulting from more media production companies and talent agencies in the area.

Salary?

Now, for the answer to the question everyone asks at some point, "How much can I make doing this?" The short answer is, it depends. The long answer is that it depends on the area you live/work in, your talent, your experience, and how much work you can find.

Radio Announcer Salaries

The first job I was once offered right out of college was co-hosting a morning show in a fairly small midwestern college town for the sum of \$11,000 a year. Not a lot of money by most people's standards. At the same time, I know of an on-air host in another,

slightly larger midwestern town who makes approximately \$80,000 a year. Not bad for 25-hour work-week. The bottom line is there's really no hard-and-fast rule for salaries in radio. Like everything else, you start low while you have little or no experience, and your salary increases with your expertise.

In larger cities, radio announcers can often be union labor, where salaries are negotiated, and, as a result, usually higher.

Voice-Over Announcer Salaries

Salary for voice-over work is usually not represented as an annual figure, due to the fact that it's often not regular work. In this regard, voice-over work is most similar to freelance work of any type; you're paid for the particular job you do. And again, the pay scale can range quite a bit. One video production company I worked for paid \$220 for up to an hour of in-studio time when narrating for video projects. Now if one could only get that kind of hourly salary for a 40-hour week...

Of course, bigger companies in bigger cities will pay more—especially if the project involves a national or international market. And, depending on the situation, there may even be royalties. If you wind up working through a talent agency, they can get a cut of your compensation. Which is more than reasonable; after all, they have the contacts and they were instrumental in getting you the job.

Meet a Few Professionals

Since the intention of this publication is to help you get started in radio/voice-over announcing, some of the people I chose to profile are, in some way, associated with hiring or training. And, since not everyone has the geographical career advantage of living near Hollywood or New York City, I chose people who have built different careers in the same, or similar, typical (in my opinion), medium-sized market.

Jay Pearce is Program Director at WILL-AM radio (<http://www.will.uiuc.edu>), part of the broadcast division of the University of Illinois in Urbana. Jay has held just about every type of position in radio in just about every type of market.

How did you get started in radio?

"I actually began broadcasting in fifth grade, when my next-door neighbor and I rigged up one of those 'science kit' AM transmitters with a microphone and a turntable which we bought for a quarter at the thrift shop. We ran it through a CB antenna mounted on the roof of his house...and WBDJ Radio (stood for Bruce, Douglas, Jay) was born. It took a whole two weeks before we lost interest. Then, in college at University of Illinois Chicago (Circle back then) where I was a business major, I took a communications class which led to reading news and spinning tunes on the "closed circuit" campus station...and the rest, as they say, is history.

"Halfway through my first year at UIC(C), I applied to Southern Illinois University—Carbondale, which had a broadcasting program reputed to be second to none—and it was. I was accepted for the fall semester. I worked various shifts—news, sports, DJ—at the university's radio station (WSIU) including a stint as student station manager. I also worked shifts at various commercial stations in the area through college.

In 1979, when I graduated, I headed for Terrell, TX (just east of Dallas) and managed a small—and I mean small (there were only two of us there)—radio station for six months before returning to southern Illinois and going to work full-time for a station in Marion as operations director, then news director. From there I went to Carbondale for a job as assistant news director and morning drive anchor, then to WSIU as it's first assistant news director, eventually becoming news director there while teaching radio news reporting.

"In 1994 I moved to Chicago as news and program director of the Illinois Radio Network. Then in 1995, I came to Champaign to put Illinois' first Internet radio station on the air—

the first station anywhere built from the start to both broadcast and netcast. I was VP of radio operations for the company that owned the station as well as manager of the station. After the owner's interests turned more toward the Internet operation and less on radio, I went over to a nearby town to help a father and son team start-up another station. I did engineering, sold ads, did the morning show and anything else I could to help them out. Meanwhile, in the afternoons, I did audio production and voice work at a local TV station.

“Then, the program director's job opened at WILL and I applied and got it. It's good to be back in public radio. I appreciate commercial radio, but I find public radio to be more compatible with my personal desire to serve listeners with high quality programming which addresses issues that are important to them.”

Describe your current position

“I am responsible for selecting programs from networks [National Public Radio and Public Radio International] and independent producers as well as keeping our locally-produced news and public affairs programs on-track and helping to develop new programs and program elements. I lead the programming staff in this endeavor, keep tabs on the budget, and interface with the other departments involved in the operation, as well as upper management. And, I do a regular airshift and fill-in as needed for anyone who is out. Oh, and I teach radio and television news writing and reporting here at the University of Illinois, too.”

What kind of education do you have in this field?

“I have a BS in Radio-TV from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. What I learned in the classroom gave me a great foundation. Totally involving myself in the business while in college gave me invaluable experience so that by the time I was graduated, I already had years of professional experience as well.”

What resources do you use to keep up with the business?

“I think *Radio World* is an excellent trade magazine to keep up with—and they have a great website, too (<http://www.rwonline.com>). Also, I visit several online sites regularly including *Radio and Records* (<http://www.rronline.com>), *Broadcasting and Cable* (<http://www.tvinsite.com/broadcastingcable>), and *Assignmenteditor.com*...plus a bunch of discussion sites and bulletin boards. It helps a lot to keep up with the industry.”

Do you get to do much voice-over work?

“I do some voice work on the side, and have for several years. I began while in southern Illinois. Basically, I was contacted by people who had heard me on the air and liked the way I sounded. Lately, work has generally been through contacts that I’ve developed over the years; people who needed some work done and thought of me. I have never actually sent out demos or applied for the work.

“The biggest project I have worked on was I did the voice work and digitized the sound files for a multimedia training program for convenience store managers on CD-ROM. I got that gig because a company owned by a friend of mine got the contract to put it all together. It helped that I could not only record the scripts, but also do the editing and digitizing—and could do it at home, which meant I could turn the material around very quickly. It helps that I’m the kind of guy who knows a little about a lot of various things.”

Roger Francisco is Audio Services Manager at Human Kinetics Publishing in Champaign, Illinois. Roger has extensive experience in voice-over announcing—both in front of the microphone and in the recording studio. Roger owned and operated his own audio/video production company, where he recruited voice-over talent for a variety of projects. He also has done a lot of announcing himself for clients including

Mike Trippiedi is Production Coordinator for the Prairie Production Group in Champaign, Illinois. Mike has an extensive background in

Andrea Darlas is a News Anchor/Reporter at WGN radio in Chicago

(<http://www.wgnradio.com/>). Andrea's experience is a great example of how perseverance and persistence paid off in getting her on the air in a top three market.

How'd you get started in radio?

"I began my radio career in 1991 at my college radio station, WPGU-FM at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. I originally started as a DJ working the 'plush' overnight shift, but that soon led to a weekend afternoon slot. After two years as a weekend jock, I got tired of being 'schmoozy' and 'gimmicky' and realized people were tuning in to hear music—not to hear me talking about the music. So, I left WPGU in 1993 to pursue a news internship with another station in town, WLRW, all the while taking journalism and broadcasting classes at the U of I. I became more and more interested in news writing and reporting and completed a three part radio series for a particular journalism class. Well, the news director at the news/talk station in town, WDWS, heard the piece and asked for permission to air it during several of their newscasts. Long story short, I left WLRW, and became an intern and part-time reporter for WDWS in 1993 and 1994.

"When I graduated from the U of I with a BS in Broadcast Journalism in 1994, I left WDWS to try and find a full time news job in the Chicago area, since that is where I was born and bred. I had sent out about a dozen tapes and resumes before I graduated but hadn't heard anything from anyone. So I did what any good student would do after graduation: I went to Europe for three weeks. When I returned home, I had a message on my answering machine to call a small news station in Joliet, WJOL-AM, as they were looking to hire an entry level Reporter/Anchor. I went in for an interview the following week and was hired the next day. I was hired as a reporter to cover city council meetings in the area as well as county board meetings—where I really learned the essentials of reporting. In the afternoons, I'd come back and anchor the afternoon news.

Two years later in 1996, I was promoted to morning news anchor and News Director of WJOL and our 'sister' FM station. Our station management would later acquire three other stations for which I anchored the news during morning and afternoon breaks. "During this time, I started freelancing for WMAQ radio in Chicago, which often hired stringers to cover news stories in suburban, outlying areas. When I attended an INBA [Illinois News Broadcasters' Association] meeting one fall in 1997, I met the News Director for WGN-AM in Chicago. We struck up a friendship and I'd call him on occasion to ask for advice about anything from other job offers to aircheck tapes. Well, he called me in September of 1998 to ask if I'd be interested in some freelance weekend work at WGN. I immediately jumped at the chance to work for them, knowing of their wonderful reputation in Chicago. Two months later, in January of 1998, two WGN reporters quit and I was asked to serve as the evening news anchor for the station until a decision was made about whether or not the News Department would hire any more reporters on a full-time basis. So I was anchoring and reporting, and serving as the News Director for my Joliet stations from 4am until 1pm, then heading up to WGN to report and anchor the evening news THERE until 9pm. After six months of this grueling schedule, in April of 1998, WGN hired me as a full-time News Anchor/Reporter. And that's where I've been ever since."

Describe a typical day for you.

"I work the afternoon/evening shift from 2pm-10pm. When I get to work, I'm usually sent out to cover a news event, be it a press conference, a rally, a meeting, a court case, or a ground-breaking ceremony. After covering the event, I phone-in a live or taped report that will be used during an afternoon newscast. When I return to the station, I 'break-down' my tape and write stories and 'wraps' for the afternoon news anchor. I then begin anchoring the evening news at 7pm. I have live newscasts at 7pm, 8pm, 9pm and 10pm."

What is your educational background?

"I have a BS in Broadcast Journalism from the U of I. Anyone hoping to break into this field [news reporting] should have a college degree, preferably one in a field relating to Journalism—in Broadcasting, News Writing, Print Journalism, or Radio-TV-Film. I was also required to concentrate on two 'areas of specializations', which are like minors. My areas of specialization were English and Speech Communication.

"I've learned that you don't necessarily need a Master's Degree to move up in this business. Stations prefer you spend time in the field covering the day-to-day news events and 'mastering' your craft. But it never hurts to further your education by getting a Masters.

"I would also urge students to concentrate on areas outside of journalism; like sociology, political science, or even a foreign language. I find that the more you know about other topics...be it sports, literature, criminology, etc, the more "well-rounded" of a journalist you will be."

What resources do you use to keep up with the business?

"There's an INBA website (<http://www.inba.net>) which is a great job search tool. If you log onto that once a week, there are new job postings quite frequently. I belong to the Society of Professional Journalists and INBA. They send me newsletters and the like so I can keep up on the business."

Have you been able to get any voice-over work?

"I have done some voice-over work. My biggest projects have been voicing a 'welcome' tape for a hospital in Joliet and a demonstrative tape for a local charity. I got those jobs by word of mouth through contacts of mine when I was working in Joliet. They needed a "voice" and asked if I could help them out, so I did.

"I also record voice mails for various local businesses and I've done about a dozen wraps/packages for Channel 9 [WGN-TV, Chicago]."

Background and Training

One advantage to a career in radio or voice-over announcing is that there are no strict qualifications to get started. Just about anyone who can speak is a candidate. And one can begin either vocation at just about any point in one's career path.

Two exceptions to this, as you have seen, are newscasting and public broadcasting. To be a newscaster, a bachelor's degree in journalism or a related area is usually required. Public broadcasting is often affiliated with an educational institution (a state university, for example), so there can be university-mandated hiring and educational requirements. For the remainder of this publication, we'll focus primarily on commercial radio stations, since they are the most prevalent, regardless of market size.

While no necessary degree or certification may seem to be a pro, it can also be a con. This means that there is really no system in place to ensure entrance in the field. For example, most people who successfully complete law school and pass the bar, can find work as an attorney.

Radio Announcing

In the seventies and eighties, many universities offered four-year degrees in radio and TV. But, unfortunately, the number of institutions still offering this type of curriculum seems to be dwindling. Now, formal education in radio is primarily confined to community college programs or vocational-type schools that may have courses instructing the basics of operating a radio studio. These types of programs do not necessarily guarantee any kind of career placement in the field—though some offer information on where to start looking. If you're looking to be a newscaster, most schools offer journalism programs.

Most radio announcers have had to pick up whatever knowledge and experience they can get from on-the-job training. Which brings up the classic dilemma, "How can I get

the experience I need for a job in radio without a job in radio?" We'll get to methods of getting that first radio "gig" a little later.

Voice-Over Announcing

Again, there is no standard method for getting into voice-over announcing. Most people who do voice-over work, cross over from broadcasting. Some may have a background in theater—either from a formal education or community theater experience. If you have neither, there are some suggestions for getting started in the next section.

Best Ways to Break In

Breaking into Radio

First and foremost, like everything else, you have to start at the bottom. It is very unlikely that your first radio job will be doing the morning zoo in New York City up against Howard Stern.

You're best bet for getting your foot in the door is to stay local. It would be a waste of your time and resources to try and get your first radio job across the country somewhere, based on just a classified ad. Get some experience at a local station, then if you decide you'd like to try for a job across the nation, at least you'll have some experience to be a more likely candidate.

Now let's get to ways that you can get started in radio on your own turf.

Community College Radio

As I mentioned in the previous section, many community colleges offer classes that give instruction in the basics of operating a radio studio. And even though these courses primarily deal with just the mechanics, and not necessarily voice-coaching or styles, they are still a great place to start. An added benefit is that many of the campuses also have a radio station that they use for instruction, where students can sign up for on-air shifts

and get the necessary practice to become more comfortable on the air. The drawback is, of course, the tuition fee if you're on a tight budget. In this case, financial aid could be an option, if you qualify.

Community Radio

In the community where I live, we are fortunate to have a community radio station. If you get on the Internet, you'll find that there are a growing number of these community stations. The employees are usually volunteers, so despite the fact that most of the staff is working for free, this is another way to get on the air and get practice behind the microphone. And since the announcers often get to choose the programming for their shift, they are knowledgeable about the content--which can help for more relaxed on-air delivery (since they're talking about something they know). However, these community stations are not everywhere. And if there is one in your area, they can have long waiting lists, so you may have to reapply whenever they do their recruiting.

Professional Radio

For the sake of simplicity, we'll call and categorize commercial and public broadcasting stations as professional radio.

Commercial radio stations are the most common across the dial. These are the ones that air commercials from paid advertisers to pay for operation costs. Public broadcasting stations, usually NPR (National Public Radio) affiliates, count on listener support to assist with the cost of programming. Many public broadcasting stations have some affiliation with an educational institution.

A professional station is where you'll be headed, however you get started. If you were able to get some training and experience at a community college or community station, you're a step ahead—the transition may be a little easier. If not, you're starting from scratch, and you'll need to get an audition tape together. More on that a little later.

Commercial Radio

At a commercial station, your best chance of getting on the air initially will be the lowest-profile shift; namely the overnight—midnight to 6am usually—on the weekends. Not too glamorous, but everyone starts somewhere. However, with advances in technology, many stations have gone to automated (computer-aided) or satellite network programming during the overnights in an effort to cut costs (it's a lot cheaper to turn on a computer that will work anytime versus paying a human being who may call in sick, etc.) It's likely that regardless of the market, there should be at least one station that needs a live body working in the middle of the night. If not, they should still have hosts for other weekend shifts—even if it's just someone to give the time and temperature during satellite programming. The bottom line is, automated shifts at your local radio stations means that you have fewer opportunities and greater competition for the “live” shifts that are left.

Public Broadcasting

As I indicated earlier, many public broadcasting stations are associated with educational institutions. Because of this, their programming tends to be more informational and talk-oriented. As a result, you're more likely to get a position at a public broadcasting station if you have some credentials, for example a degree in journalism. Aside from that, the application process is similar to commercial stations. Most public broadcasting stations, however, have very little staff turnover. So, getting an on-air position may be a little more difficult. You may have to start by getting your foot in the door as a board operator (engineering a show for the on-air host) and working your way up.

The Application Process

There are two ways to apply for an airshift at a radio station: 1) Respond to an ad in a trade magazine or newspaper, or 2) Submit an unsolicited application. Either way, it's

best to call and verify who the contact person is—even if the ad indicates “No calls please” (nothing turns off a potential employer than an incorrect or misspelled name). In either case—especially when submitting an unsolicited application—it’s a good idea to contact the Program Director (the person usually responsible for hiring on-air announcers) and attempt to arrange a meeting in person, if possible (unless the ad specifically states “no calls”). Your extra effort demonstrates commitment and initiative. Plus, when the time comes to hire someone, and they have a stack of resumes and audition tapes to sort through, they will be able to match a face with the voice they hear on your tape. Most program directors should be willing to meet with potential hires—they can never have too many people on-call to fill-in at the last minute.

Whether you apply in person or mail, you will need to submit a resume and audition tape, usually referred to as an “aircheck tape”. (If you have the means, you can make an aircheck CD, but most people still don’t have the equipment necessary to do this.) An aircheck tape primarily consists of a few breaks or excerpts from past shows—ideally, your most solid breaks. The tape should only have from 3-6 typical breaks and 2-3 commercials that you’ve voiced. The main purpose of an aircheck tape is to give the program director a sample of how you sound. Many people will try to include their funniest or flashiest segments in an effort to dazzle the program director. While there’s nothing necessarily wrong with this practice, you may run the risk of limiting yourself or wasting the program director’s time with show-material that they’re not looking for.

More often than not, program directors simply need consistent announcers that can convey a personality and sound at ease on the air while getting through a break concisely. The first difficult lesson people learn when getting into radio with visions of grandeur, is that listeners tune in to the station for the music or information—not to hear what you have to say. Though what you say and how you say it is important, the radio is not necessarily your personal soapbox or your variety show.

In many markets, program directors get countless numbers of these aircheck tapes each week. With all their other responsibilities, sifting through these tapes can't always be the most immediate priority for them. So if you submit a tape with all kinds of wacky morning show comedy bits, you're not giving them what they need to hear. They may stop the tape after 20 seconds and move on to the next one. On the other hand, if the job you're applying for is a specific, morning show-type program, then by all means, send in your funniest stuff.

After you've submitted your resume and tape, don't stop there—be tenacious. Call the program director on a regular basis to check in, especially if there weren't any specific openings when you applied. This demonstrates commitment and interest. How often to call is best left to your judgment. You want to convey interest without being a pest. Your calls may not get returned right away, if at all. Program directors are usually quite busy with managing personnel, programming the station, and doing their own on-air shift. But don't let that discourage you—and more importantly, don't take it personally. Another early lesson people learn when getting started in radio is to have a thick skin when it comes to rejection or apathy. My senior year of college, my roommate and I naively blanketed the country, looking for on-air jobs at a variety of stations. We were able to cover more than one wall of our bathroom with rejection form-letters.

Congratulations!

Once you get a slot at a commercial station, you've surmounted your first main obstacle. Now it becomes a matter of perseverance and dedication. What you may lack in polish, you can make up for with reliability. This is your opportunity to make the most of your time on the air. Make tapes of yourself (something your boss, or program director, will probably want you to do anyway) and critique yourself. Don't be too harsh—remember that like everything else, sounding comfortable on the air will take a lot of practice. Even

though radio is not rocket science (a popular comparison within the business), it still requires a lot of practice.

Now that you hopefully have at least a weekly shift, this is your chance to prove yourself. Your program director should schedule regular meetings to critique your sound and offer suggestions and constructive criticism. This is a great opportunity to build a rapport and get as much information and feedback as you can. If he or she does not have these meetings, ask if you could schedule a meeting for this purpose. Most likely, he or she will be happy to. After all, it's a reflection on the station if you're not sounding as good as you should be. If your program director is not willing to have these meetings, you may need to rely on self-critiquing alone until you can get on at a different station with a program director that will.

Moving on...

Assuming that you've gotten a job at a professional station at least in some capacity, what happens next is up to you, depending on what you're looking to do. If you have a part-time weekend radio shift in addition to your 9-5 job, and that's the way you want it, enjoy radio as a fun part-time job and the extra cash in your pocket.

If you're part-time, and you're interested in going full-time, then your work has just begun. The best thing you can do in this case is to make yourself as available as possible, and get as much knowledge and experience as you can. Offer to fill-in for full-time announcers that go on vacation or call in sick. Ask about picking up some production work. The more versatile and visible you are, the more valuable you'll be. If you still have dreams of hosting middays in sunny California, by all means, go for it. You might want to have a year or so full-time experience, depending on the market you're in, and the one you're looking ahead to. Radio stations are ranked by the size of the city—or market—they serve. New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago make up the top three markets. If you're starting in 200-market, it's probably not a reasonable

expectation to move right up to a top ten market (though it's been done). If you live and work in a small town and have aspirations of being on the air in a big city, you'll have to work your way up. And your travels may take you across the country and back. But if you love radio, as do most of the people who do it for a living, it can be one of the most exciting and rewarding careers you'll find.

Breaking into Voice-Over Announcing

Many people think that you need to have "an announcer" voice to do voice-over work. While it is true that people with "good" voices get work, so do people with average, "normal" voices. Not every radio commercial you hear features the boomy-voiced announcer. Many of the voices you hear will sound a lot like yours, whether it's just straight-read copy with a music bed or a character skit, it's not the voice you have, but what you do with it.

Getting into voice-over work is not always as methodical as getting into radio. For one thing, it's less regular and structured; you won't have as regular hours. As I mentioned earlier, like any kind of freelancing, you will work only when there is work for you.

If you've already gotten into radio, then you have somewhat of a head start. If you haven't already, try to get some production work. It will demonstrate a willingness to do more work, and it will give you an opportunity to voice some commercials and promotional spots to put on an audition tape.

If you're currently not doing anything even remotely associated with broadcasting, and have no plans to, no problem.

Auditioning

It's still a good idea to make an audition tape (or CD if you have the means), but you'll have to start from scratch. Listen to the radio. But instead of changing the station as soon as you hear a commercial, leave it on and listen carefully. If possible, tape a few commercial breaks, and listen to the commercials a few times to get an idea of how the

commercials sound, and the different types. Maybe even transcribe some of them.

Then, get a hold of a simple cassette recorder and microphone and practice reading the copy. Imitate the styles you hear the best you can. Listen and compare your reads with the ones you hear on the radio. Practice, practice, practice. Practice reading aloud from a magazine or newspaper (I used to practice while reading to my daughter). Make sure you use inflection (don't read in a monotone) and annunciate clearly (don't mush all your sounds together). And most of all, relax. When you're nervous, you tend to talk too fast (something we're all guilty of to some degree). Make a conscious effort to read a little slower. It may feel strange at first, but once you listen back to what you've recorded, it will sound normal. When you think you've got a good read, keep it for your audition tape.

Next, if you have an opportunity, have a friend or family member listen to your tape and see what they think. This is not always easy, receiving criticism from people close to you. But they may hear something about your read that you didn't notice—especially since you've probably listened to the tape and heard your reads several times by now. It's always good to have a fresh set of ears listen too.

Finding work

Now is the most difficult part—finding places that need voice talent. Your best bet at first is to grab the yellow pages and dive right in. A few types of businesses to start with are: radio stations, TV stations, talent agencies, production companies, and software design companies.

Start off by volunteering at radio and/or TV stations—without compensation, if necessary. Chances are, they may have a budget to pay you something for your work, but the fact that you're willing to do the work for free may at least get you in the door.

The types and number of businesses that utilize voice-over announcers will vary depending on the area you live in. If you live in a smaller area located within a

reasonable distance from a bigger city, get on-line and look for these types of businesses located in that city. This is a longer shot, but by no means out of the question. If you have the voice that they're looking for, the company will not have a problem with you commuting for a day's recording session. They may even have contacts in your area to set up an ISDN link. An ISDN is basically a beefed-up phone line that transmits and receives higher quality audio than a regular phone line (often for an additional charge). If there are any facilities in your area that use ISDN lines, then your potential market can open up to be the entire country. This of course, means more research and leg-work to find the businesses that may need your voice.

At first, this may seem like a huge amount of work. And it is. But, the more places that have your voice in their talent pool, the greater your odds of getting work. Talent agencies and production companies often have large talent pools that their clients choose from. And clients are usually very loyal to certain voice announcers for several reasons; they're familiar with the particular announcer's style and ability, and/or they may want to keep the sound of all their productions consistent.

What this means is that it is not easy to break into this business. You have the disadvantage of odds, as well as going up against announcers who are already established.

But, by all means, don't let this discourage you. Your initial efforts may be considerable, and you may not get any work for weeks, even months. But once you get rolling, offers may come flooding in. And chances are, the compensation will be well worth that initial effort.

Keep learning

Once you start getting work, new possibilities will open up to you. While you're in the studio recording, you'll receive invaluable tips and feedback from studio engineers,

production coordinators, and often the clients themselves. Listen carefully to their suggestions and take their criticism as free voice-coaching; it will serve you well. You'll also have more material for audition tapes. And the better the material on the tape, the better your chances for getting additional work.

Resources

Radio

Your best resource, by far, will be the Internet. There's a lot of radio related sites on the web. But for job information, these are the best I've found:

<http://tvandradijobs.com>

<http://www.careerpage.org>

<http://www.nab.org/Radio>

<http://www.radioearth.com>

You can find a huge number of specific radio station sites at yahoo.com and search for stations by region.

Some sites offer the service of posting your own ad for the type of station and job that you'd be interested in. Keep in mind that placing one of these ads does not guarantee anything. In fact, some program directors regard these ads as last-resort efforts from people who are hoping to sit back and wait for the offers to come to them. If you want a specific job, there's really no substitute for doing the leg-work of researching potential markets and the stations there.

Voice-over

Most of the sites I came across for voice-over announcing were basically on-line demo reels for producers to listen to samples. Some offered opportunities for announcers to sign-up to be listed (usually for a fee), and some didn't. The following are the best sites

that I found for basic information as well as other more specific links depending on your interest and geographical region:

<http://www.aftra.org>

<http://www.sag.org>

<http://www.i-vor.com/>

http://www.futurenet-surf.com/YahooLinks/links2/pages/Voiceover_Industry/

<http://voicedatabase.com/>

Tips From the Pros

Andrea Darlas, news anchor and reporter for WGN radio, Chicago:

“First and foremost, be prepared to work! When you start out in this business, you'll more than likely be assigned to an overnight shift, or you'll be asked to work more than one shift. Be flexible. You'll probably work weekends and holidays—I still do! Also try and wear more than one hat. By this I mean know how to write, know how to produce, know how to report and how to anchor. Learn all aspects of this business—you never know when someone may leave the station and they'll need someone else to step up to the plate—you want that someone to be you!

“My second piece of advice: network, network, network! Call radio stations in all markets; send tapes and resumes to a variety of stations, too. Keep business cards from everyone you meet and never burn bridges. You never know if someone you offend may turn out to be your boss someday! I met my current news director at an INBA [Illinois News Broadcasters Association] meeting. Those are great for students to meet potential future employers. I was friends with my boss before I became his employee. I'd call him for advice and play aircheck tapes for him and get feedback. I think that was my foot in the door at WGN.

“Lastly, always try and improve yourself. Aircheck yourself and give it to your boss to critique. Be confident, too. So many people told me this business is too competitive and to “give up now”, but I never did...and it paid off!”

Jay Pearce, Program Director, WILL-AM, Urbana, Illinois:

“Get involved as soon as you can and as much as you can—whether it's as a volunteer at a student station, or in any position you can at a professional operation. Apply for internships—even unpaid. There’s nothing like getting that real world, first-hand experience. And learn to network. Most of the good jobs are really obtained through connections. Employers give more consideration to people who are referred to them by someone they trust. So, make contacts and use them.

“Also, be a worldly person—be interested in a lot of things. Especially if you're going into communications whether it be journalism or as a DJ or talk host—you have to know how to relate to your audience, and that means you need to know about things they are interested in. It's a lot like talking to friends over a cup of coffee. Experience life and keep up on things. It makes you a much more interesting person...and the more interesting you are, the more people will want to listen to you when you speak to them.

“A lot of succeeding in this industry has to do with rapport. To advance, you have to keep up and give people a confident feeling that you know what you're talking about and that you have some valuable skills and knowledge that will benefit them. That's what it's all about. I've even been asked point blank in interviews, ‘So, what can you do for me? If I hire you, how will my operation benefit?’ You have to be able to answer that...and then follow through once you're in the job.”

Special Considerations

One thing to keep in mind, no matter which type of announcing you’re looking to get into, is that you’ll have an easier time if you work with what you have. Some on-air hosts try

to have that “radio sound”. Or some voice-over announcers try to sound like James Earl Jones. Be yourself. Use your voice and personality and get the most out of them.

While you may not have an easy time getting started, the work is there. You just need a little perseverance and patience.

Your Game Plan

First of all, decide which type of announcing you’re interested in doing first. Even though there’s a lot of cross-over between them, you can always make that transition once you’ve been up and running for awhile. It will be the most efficient use of your time and resources to concentrate all your efforts on one area initially, especially if you’re starting with little or no experience.

Acquire a radio/cassette recorder and microphone. You’ll need this for recording radio station announcer breaks and/or commercials, then your own audition tape.

Once you have a tape put together (for radio or voice-over), open up your local yellow pages or hop on the Internet and scour your area for radio stations, TV stations, production companies, talent agencies, software companies—anyplace that might need a voice. Then, start calling or e-mailing contact people. Keep a log of which businesses you’ve contacted, who the contact person is, and what kind of services they need (if any). Make plans to follow up with businesses that use announcers, but don’t need any at that particular time.

Keep listening to the radio, and keep practicing.

About the Author

Scott Cimarusti began a career in radio in college back in 1990 at the training station for the student-run radio station at the University of Illinois. From there, he worked his way up to a Friday evening “morning-show”-type program. After graduating, he got a part-

time weekend shift at a local rock station, eventually getting an overnight at an adult contemporary station across town. From there, he used his production skills to get a job at a video production company as an audio engineer. He currently works for the University of Illinois in their public broadcasting division.