

Men's Health



Photo-illustration: GREG NEWINGTON

Not as old as you look but as young as you sound

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In the ongoing quest for youthfulness, people use all sorts of measures. Some say you are as young as your arteries. Others say you're as young as you look.

Michael Kelly, a Sydney voice expert and speech pathologist, says you are as young as you sound.

Sydney's veteran radio presenter, Bob Rogers, is 80 but sounds 60. In the first ratings this year his show on 2CH overtook his younger rival John Laws on 2UE.

It may not be conscious, but Rogers keeps his voice young with a higher pitch, speed and the absence of that tired "vocal fry" routinely heard in old voices.

By decelerating and accelerating he avoids the plodding monotone so characteristic of aged voices.

Kelly, the director of Kelly Speech Communication, says older men can sound younger by raising their voices slightly and putting some zip into it.

"If you make your voice more vibrant, you'll feel more lively and people will perceive you as more energetic," he says.

With age, the vocal folds become increasingly calcified and inelastic. The respiratory muscles weaken so that less air gets in and out, hoarseness is more common and vocal tremors creep into the voice.

Although voice patterns are largely unconscious, he says you can become aware of these age-related changes and take steps to overcome some of their effects.

You may slip back but some changes can be maintained.

With increasing age, male voices usually gain authority but as they get into older age, frailty creeps in and then they begin to lose authority.

Kelly says the male voice of authority is louder, lower and characterised by a judicious use of speed and pause. It has control and power.

"The minute you open a business meeting or presentation, your first words will tell those present whether you are worth listening to. People are usually thinking about other things and you have to break their preoccupation.

They'll give you a few minutes and then go back to their thoughts, unless you hold them."

When you pick up the phone, your voice conveys a lot of information about you to the person on the other end. It tells roughly how old you are, if you're interested in the conversation, and if you are lacking confidence or feeling low.

Much of the meaning of what you say is conveyed by your voice's personality.

Kelly, who teaches people to understand and use the power of voice, likes to listen to the voice personalities of politicians.

He says the voices of both the leader and deputy leader of the federal Labor Party lack passion. They need to loosen up and allow some spontaneity into their voices.

"Kevin Rudd is too measured and predictable for me," Kelly says. "He sounds almost metronomic. The beat is regular and I can predict exactly when he is going to pause next. This makes him sound scripted.

"He has a diplomatic background and it seems as if he filters everything before it comes out while, at the same

"Peter Debnam sounded as if he was barking. There was just this noise."

time, he controls his pitch, speed and volume. It is almost as if he is wearing a sound harness.

"His deputy, Julia Gillard, is too slow and too country. This creates a perception of being dull. Her delivery is broad and plodding and there's no flow or emotion — it's monotonous."

When speech patterns are completely predictable, the audience continues to hear but stops listening. To be entertained, the ear needs vocal variety.

It is only when the content is compelling that the quality of the voice does not matter. When he was in combat, the quality of Paul Keating's voice didn't matter because people were listening to his brilliant repartee.

But when he delivered a set prime ministerial speech, they heard its flaws. Kelly says the voice of the former

leader of the NSW opposition, Peter Debnam, is unconvincing.

"He sounded as if he was barking. There was just this noise. Nothing sticks. Although he would get loud, he was still flat and made little connection with the camera. I think he had the same problem as Simon Crean, who could not hold the listener's attention."

Kelly is more flattering about NSW Premier Morris Iemma, although he would like to see him lose that questioning upward inflection at the end of his sentences.

As Iemma has gained confidence, his voice has gained authority, but he still tends to talk down to his chest and slightly to the right.

"He has a working voice of middle Australia, of a family man; reliable, a little earnest, with some, but not great, passion," Kelly says.

Although John Howard's delivery has always been measured and without rush, Kelly says he has begun to sound his age. It has lost its freshness although it still has leadership and, when necessary, passion.

So which politicians have good voice personalities?

"Peter Beattie is excellent for Queensland," Kelly says. "He sounds like the bloke around the corner, he's believable, he's ordinary and has a good relationship with the camera. He plays well in his state but I don't believe he would play well federally."

While Philip Ruddock is flat and dry and Peter Costello has a smirk in his voice, Kelly loves listening to Joe Hockey.

"Hockey has got it. He has a big jocular voice that fits well with how he looks. He is comfortable in his skin and at ease with himself and so he is easy listening. He may be saying nothing of substance, but you give him time."

While former US president Bill Clinton was masterful, Kelly says Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards is pretty good too.

"He's got a great natural connection with a little southern aspect thrown in and comes across as believable and authentically passionate," Kelly says.

"Not so Hillary Clinton. Her voice is forceful but without real warmth. She doesn't draw you in."