

# Do You Have The Pipes to Become a Voice Over Star?

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**James Mandell** If you've been told you have a great voice and would like to explore how you could make thousands of dollars working a just few hours, a couple of days a week, in your pajamas -- join the club. Millions of people would like to be self-employed in the voice over industry doing just that, especially now that employment is hard to come by.

"I get hundreds of calls per week from people from all over the country who want to get into voice over," says James Mandell, owner of [VoiceOver LA](#), a popular voice over agency, casting company and production studio. "Maybe one in a thousand really has the pipes and can get work," he observes.

You can't deny it, it sounds like the ideal gig. To secure voice over work, you don't have to shave, put on makeup or even clothes. With technology what it is these days, it's not necessary to leave home to audition. All you need is a computer, a microphone and the right software. Those who believe they have a "face for radio" or live miles from an urban hub have a chance, albeit a remote one.

## It's not as easy as it sounds

"It involves so much more than just having a pleasing voice," Mandell says. You have to be able to read lines and make them sound as if they're natural conversation. You have to know what to emphasize, and how to enunciate without sounding affected. One of Mandell's favorite examples of a tricky pronunciation is the word "ask." He says that most people don't even realize they drop the k at the end of the word and say "ass," as in "ass your doctor." Then there are those who pronounce it, "axe," as in "Let me axe you something." The vast majority of people don't even realize they're mispronouncing it.

There's a reason that some of Hollywood's most talented actors get the best gigs, and it's not just that clients want to associate their brands with a famous name. You'll note that most commercials don't identify the voice. Professional actors get the best gigs because they're consummate acting pros, and they know how to sell a line -- they've dedicated their lives to perfecting this fine art.

But some of the stars who make more than six figures in voice over are not the most prominent. They include Keifer and Donald Sutherland, Richard Thomas of 'The Waltons' fame, John Corbett (Aiden on 'Sex and the City'), Morgan Freeman, Alison Janney, Linda Hunt and Holland Taylor.

Then there are the character actors -- the ones who voice Sponge Bob Square Pants, The Simpsons and Pixar films. Some of them are known actors, but others you wouldn't recognize if they sat next to you at Applebee's. Even if your friends tell you you do great character voices, your chances of getting a role on a show or in a film are extremely slim. "Unless you're an A-List actor, you have to be based in New York or L.A. to get those kinds of roles," Mandell says, adding that your chances are a little better for voicing video games.

Those who think they can do great ethnic accents -- British, Southern, Indian, Russian, whatever -- are not necessarily a shoe-in either. It's true you hear a lot of those accents on the air; but most of them are done by natives of the intended region. One of Mandell's worst nightmares is when he's out in a social setting, a new acquaintance finds out what he does for a living, and says, "I can do great voices! Here's my British accent... here's my old man voice... now I do teenager... and listen -- this one's my best! Indian convenience store

guy!" Those voices might amuse your friends, but there's little chance of getting a professional gig with them -- unless you come from the actual country you're mimicking.

## The much-coveted Golden Voices

There are, however, two types of voices that are in hot demand. If you have one of these voices, don't be surprised if an agent stops you on the street and hands you his or her business card.

- **The Voice of God:** That deep, resonant voice that sounds like authority from on high. "But it has to be natural, it can't be forced or feigned," Mandell says. "If people stop you mid-conversation and tell you, 'Wow! You sound like James Earl Jones,' you're in. If you stop people and say, 'Wanna hear me do James Earl Jones?' you're out.
- **The Sultry Sex Kitten:** Women who speak in a velvety-voiced purr are also in demand. But this, too, has to be natural. "You have to sound like a woman in her 30s with a smokey voice. Not a woman in her 50s with throat cancer," Mandell notes.

If you have one of these voices and can act, or you just sound like a regular, friendly, reliable everyday person, you still might have a chance -- and you don't even have to live in a major city. [J. Lawrence](#) is a successful voice over artist; he's a regular sounding guy who has a full time job with a media company and lives in New Hampshire. He built himself a home studio and used voice over websites like [Voice123.com](#) and [Voices.com](#) to establish himself in the industry.

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These sites are great resources for budding voice over talent. Not only do they tell you how to get started and how to make the necessary demo, or sample of your voice, but companies that need voice over work list their needs on the site, and if you have the type of voice they're looking for, you can record an audition for them and bid on the job. Mandell refers most of the inquiries he gets to a "Getting Started" article on [Voices.com](#), which explains the industry from start to finish.

"A lot of people get really excited about this, and invest a lot of money in classes, equipment and a professionally recorded demo," says Lawrence. "But few ever earn enough money to cover their expenses. Less than 2 percent of all voice over artists make more than \$5,000 per year." Lawrence is one of the lucky few who does, but it's nowhere near enough to support his family of four, so he wouldn't dare quit his day job. Still, the supplemental income is nice.

## How to get started

If you want to get started the right way, it could cost you several thousand dollars. You'll probably find yourself spending money on:

- **Voice over classes:** You can get individual instruction for about \$100 to \$150 per hour, or take weekly group classes that run from around \$495-\$800 per series. Some companies, like [Talk Shop](#), offer classes for as little as \$49, live via phone or Skype, so you can take them at home no matter where you live.
- **Equipment:** This is the least of your worries. You can get a usable [USB microphone](#) for about \$50. Your computer probably already has the software, and if not, you can get recording packages for anywhere from \$100 to \$300.
- **Professional Demo:** This is the most expensive part. A professional production company can lay in music and sound effects so that you sound as if you've already made commercials, but it's going to cost you between \$1,000 and \$3,000.

The amount can be intimidating to most who are not serious about it, which is not a bad thing. Money is not the only expense involved. It takes quite a bit of time and effort to become good enough to start booking lucrative gigs. Auditioning on the two sites mentioned is a great way to practice, says Lawrence, although they've become so competitive, it's hard to make money off them these days. People bid extremely low just to get work, and if you're not one of the first 30 auditioning, they probably won't listen to you. Still, Lawrence was able to cultivate steady clients after booking gigs on these two sites.

So if the thought of entering into the voice over fray still sounds viable after learning about all that is required, you just might be one of those people with the "Money Voice." If you've decided against it, you can still have fun with it by trying to identify which star's voice you hear on that orange juice commercial.