

## Do you want fries with that?

We've all heard that phrase as a familiar part of the drive-thru window experience at a fast food restaurant. There are thousands of them throughout this wonderful country of ours, and they have something in common . . . they sound the same. That muffled and distorted voice at the other end of the box is something we have learned to accept. Usually we get to repeat our order several times just to be sure. We know what we ordered, so if what we hear back sounds vaguely familiar, it's probably correct. What do you want for a meal that only costs five bucks?



Fast food chains have yet to master the art of accurately reproducing the human voice electronically. That muffled quality and “drive-through squawk” are things we have been living with for a long time. I believe that somewhere in the McDonalds and Taco Bell employee training manuals is a section devoted to the art of listening through garble and picking out pertinent information. That section follows the one that contains the guidelines for speaking with a mouth full of marbles. However, as much as they try, the system is broken and needs to be fixed. This mentality spills over



to other areas of personal communication that are evident in our daily lives. To combat this deficiency, people somehow feel a need to raise their voice to another level to get people to understanding what they want. This simply adds to the problem. The louder people get, the more distortion and garble they create. Leaning closer to the microphone (or in this case, the order box) and yelling louder proportionately increases how badly their voice comes across at the other end. This term electronics is called “over modulation.”

As technology advances, improvements are inevitable. Each of us has experienced this when it comes to the quality of sound technology. Even the stock headphones that come with our iPods and music players are capable of reproducing superior quality voice and music. The microphones that convert sounds to electronic impulses have also gotten smaller and more sensitive. In many cases, people do not know where the microphone is located on their computer, tablet, or cell phone. Basically, that microphone serves as an ear to its device. Keep that thought in mind because if you imagine your ears going through what many of these microphones are forced to endure, what you are about to read will make perfect sense.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding when it comes to verbal communication. Just because someone does not completely grasp everything you say and asks you to repeat it, it does not mean that you need to speak louder. It might be a case of simply enunciating your words or speaking slower so they can understand. (This technique probably will not work if the other person does not speak English.) By shouting at close range into a microphone is the



equivalent of putting out a match with a fire hose. It becomes sensory overload! We are led to believe that louder is better when it comes to clarifying our statements. Years ago, my mother told me something that remains with me to this day, “Just because you speak louder than someone else, it doesn’t make you right.”

## The Cell Phone Conversation

Why do people speak louder into their cell phones than in a normal conversation? Is it the fact that can’t see the individual on the other end? Knowing that person is several miles away invokes the actions of the old “tin can and string” we played as children. Do they think that the louder they talk, the more strength it gives their cell phone carrier’s signal to transport that conversation? While this method will work if the parties are within a one block radius (which is about as long as most balls of string will stretch and still be effective), it defeats the built in sensitivity of their microphone. Simply opening a window and shouting in someone’s general direction will achieve the same effect, but it does little to enhance the privacy of that conversation. Background noise also gives people the impression that they need to speak louder. It is a widely held opinion that if they speak louder and more forcefully into their phone, the person on the other end will hear them better, but that simply is not true.



When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone back in 1876, he used the form and function of the human head as the basis for this project. He knew that we listened with our ears and spoke through our mouth. After several prototypes, he settled



on a working model that had a stand-alone microphone and an ear piece that could be moved to whichever ear an individual preferred. In laboratory tests, he quickly discovered that there was also an optimum distance one should speak into that microphone to achieve the highest degree of clarity. If he spoke too closely, his words became garbled, and if he ventured too far away, it produced an echo. Likewise, if he spoke too softly, the person on the other end couldn’t hear what he was saying, and if he spoke too loudly, everything became distorted at the receiving end. If Mr. Bell knew all of this more than a century ago, why are

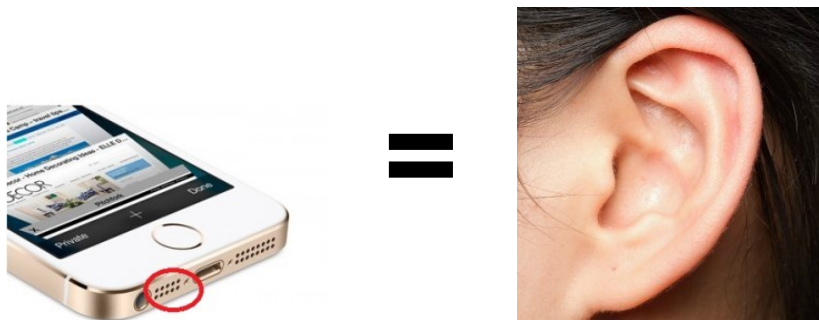
many of us not practicing these techniques today?

Perhaps we need to review the basics of voice communication. Since Mr. Bell designed his prototype telephone with human ergonomics in mind, we have made gradual improvements on both the form and function of our communication devices. While form has met function and changes were introduced and perfected, there always will be two constants . . . the human ear and the human mouth. People come in different shapes and sizes, but the distance between their ear and the corner of their mouth is consistently between five to six inches. With the design of most cell phones, that means

their microphone, which is the phone's "ear," is usually between three and four inches from your mouth at any time during your calls.

### Can you hear me?

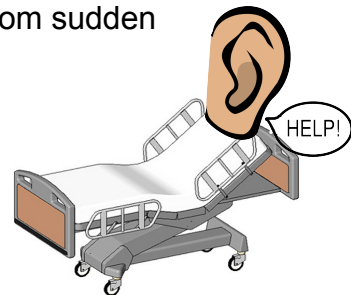
Think about the times you needed to tell a person something in confidence, but you were in a busy place. You got around that by getting closer and whispering into his ear. Even if that whisper was done ten to twelve inches away, chances are that person had no trouble hearing and understanding what you said. That's because his ear was close enough to hear you while others who were out of range of your hushed tones could not.



*A cell phone's microphone acts just like your ear.*

Now let's give one of your ears a chance to trade places with your cell phone's microphone for some typical conversations. This function would be complete if somehow you could attach that appendage to the bottom of your phone, but that would be impractical. For now, just use that talent for imagination you keep inside your head for special occasions like these.

As an ear, you know when something is too loud. We have all experienced movie theaters with surround sound that at times can seem penetrating, or a rock concert where everything seems to vibrate with the music. People avoid buying homes near airport runways for that reason. The human ear is meant to listen at "normal" levels. It isn't like your eyes that can close their lids to protect them from sudden flashes of light or foreign objects that get too close. Your ears are always open! When they become overloaded, they actually distort the sounds that are transferred to your brain as a form of protection. After time, these loud sounds generate a cumulative effect. Your eardrums harden and become less responsive to sounds at lower decibels. This is why so many older people rely on hearing aids after years of continual "noise" abuse.



*Damaged ears seek medical help every day.*



So, what do *you* do when someone shouts in your ear? If you're like most people, your reflex is to cringe and turn your head out of the direct path of that earsplitting noise. Another option is to cup your hands over your ears and temporarily make the world go away. Your body knows when something can be harmful, but your cell phone's "ear" has no such reflexes. It can't just turn away or produce more ear wax to

protect itself. It simply passes along that loud, over-modulated and distorted blast to the network. In actuality, raising your voice to be heard through your cell phone's microphone is unnecessary. Sound tests conducted by the manufacturers of those phones have proven that any microphone placed within five inches of your mouth during speech will pick up everything you say using a normal conversational tone, and it will do it clearly. The louder you speak, the more audio overload and distortion you create.



*Are they talking too loudly, or are my ears too big?*

## **Tone it down!**

The problem is that when people raise their voice during these types of conversations, they are totally unaware of how loud and distorted they sound on the other end. Neither are they making new friends of the people within earshot of that conversation. As hard as you try as an innocent bystander, it's impossible to tune out those conversations. Without any effort on your part, you can learn that the caller's sister-in-law is four months pregnant, her best friend's husband is cheating, and her boss is thinking of firing his secretary. Now let's imagine that you were standing in line next to this same woman while waiting to check out at the super market. You might exchange a friendly glance, but it's highly unlikely that she would turn around to share these personal details with you. Most people would never reveal particulars like those to a complete stranger unless that stranger happened to be within earshot of their "private" cell phone call. It is obvious certain people believe that because there is a cell phone in their hand, they are somehow isolated from everyone in their immediate vicinity. The more involved they get into their conversations, the more removed they feel they are from those who are physically present. Because of the rising volume of their voices, they begin to attract the attention of bystanders. Unfortunately for them, and for their unwilling listeners, they are anything but isolated.



How many times have you received a penetrating stare when you glanced at a loud cell phone talker in a public place? Perhaps it was because you rolled your eyes or shook your head slowly. I'm sure it's happened more than once, and that's because you reminded them that their conversation is too loud and obviously invading your space. For a brief moment, you snapped them back to reality. That "stare" was a defense mechanism, and a short-term form of embarrassment . . .or was it?

Reactions like those are akin to the actions of the preverbal ostrich. By burying its head in the sand, they feel that everything around them has gone away and they are insulated from the world around them. It just might be time for a reality check!



There is an expression that states, “Nobody has ever seen the back of his own head.” While this is correct literally, it also has a figurative implication that could mean, “People do not accurately understand how they are perceived by others.” A form of egocentric tunnel vision always clouds their vision.

CELL CITATION		
<p><b>EVERYBODY CAN HEAR YOU NOW</b>            By bothering those around you with your inconsiderate cell-phone usage, you are contributing to incivility, noise pollution, and dangerous distraction.</p>		
INFRACTION		
GENERAL	RING	
<input type="checkbox"/> Shouting/loudness <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of consideration <input type="checkbox"/> Disturbing the peace <input type="checkbox"/> Poor multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/> Annoying novelty ring <input type="checkbox"/> Overly loud ring <input type="checkbox"/> Bad ringing judgment <input type="checkbox"/> Incessant ringing	
CONVERSATION	ENVIRONMENT	
<input type="checkbox"/> Forced bystander listening <input type="checkbox"/> Talking too long <input type="checkbox"/> Airing dirty laundry <input type="checkbox"/> Painfully banal subject(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> Disregard for surroundings <input type="checkbox"/> Invasion of personal space <input type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate location <input type="checkbox"/> Violating “NO CELL” rule	
REMEDY		
<input type="checkbox"/> Hang up <input type="checkbox"/> Turn off ringer	<input type="checkbox"/> Consider others <input type="checkbox"/> Apologize	<input type="checkbox"/> Impound phone <input type="checkbox"/> Seek therapy
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It just might be our civic duty to inform these noise offenders of their transgressions, and just how far out of line they are. But in general, we are just too polite and afraid of hurting someone else’s feelings. Maybe we need to view these socially unacceptable acts as if you were attending a cocktail party with your boss when you notice a piece of parsley lodged between his two of his teeth. Do you tell him? Certainly he doesn’t know it’s there. While there would be some initial embarrassment on his part, it is by the far the lesser of the two evils. You can let him go through the entire evening grinning and flashing those “almost pearly-whites” at friends and social acquaintances. As the evening progresses, so would the ridicule and eventual humiliation. Well, this is similar. By nipping some of these transgressions in the bud, we might be able to save a few eardrums and some sanity as well. After all, nobody wants to discover that piece of parsley at the end of the party.



## Quiet Time

One of the things we all have in common is the longing for peace and quiet. After a busy day, there are few things we enjoy more than settling down someplace peaceful with a beverage of our choice. It is a welcome break from the constant cacophony that seems to riddle our lives. Whether its traffic noise, loud music or boisterous and annoying conversations (cellular or otherwise), a break from those routines is frequently necessary.



*You did order fries with this . . . didn't you?*

Keeping that in mind, there are very few quiet places we can go to and completely unwind. My preference would be a remote tropical island somewhere in the South Pacific. That would be the ultimate in solitude, peacefulness and serenity. There, the sound of the surf would serve as a constant calming effect. I could wave at the occasional airplane flying over my island and look out for messages in bottles sent from jealous people thousands of miles away. Stress would be non-existent, along with loud and obnoxious individuals who feel that it necessary to invade my space. While this is only a short-term solution, it just might be the break many of us need. So before you beat me to it, I'm going to give my travel agent a call and make those reservations!