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**The Future of Voiceovers: Hold Your Tongue...Possibly Forever**

**By Peter Drew**

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"Do we need to cast a voice-over talent for this project?"

That's a valid question any producer might ask when creating an advertisement, corporate audio-video presentation, video game, etc. Of course, the answer depends on what elements the producer and client feel will best communicate with the audience. For a radio ad, a fully sung jingle with no voice-over could work best. A TV spot or corporate narration might be most effective using scrolling graphic and text, again without an announcer. But very soon producers could be pondering whether their productions need a voice over talent for a more disturbing reason. Vocal utterances produced by air passing through folds of tissue and formed by lips, teeth, and tongue may, simply put, become obsolete. Yes, the "virtual voice talent" may very well become a reality.

**Welcome to the Machine**

In the May 2004 issue of Mix Magazine, in two separate articles, Stephen St. Croix and Paul D. Lehrman relate their experiences with a new piece of software ominously named "Vocaloid." This little computer-coded wonder is a speech synthesizer that's being used to synthesize background vocals on actual recordings that are being sold to the public--background vocals so good, you'd be hard-pressed to recognize they're fake singers. Now, considering the dubious singing talents of many of our current pop stars, maybe a Vocaloid virtual diva named Britney isn't too far-fetched. Audio manipulation, including pitch correction, equalization, compression, reverb, have been used for decades to save the bacon of many a pop star's performance in-studio or on stage. Technically, it's just a short step from this point to a "singer in a box."

In fact, in the letters section of the July 2004 issue of Mix Magazine a person identified only as "BC," referring to the St. Croix and Lehrman articles, boasted that he's created a "band" called The Bots... "created wholly from speech synthesizers and 3-D graphics." BC further states, "I use Vocaloid among a variety of other speech synths to make it more into an ensemble. The Bots have released two CDs, a 'record deal' with Magnatune, and a second video in the works. It's been a long and painful ordeal, but I've finally gotten them to the point where they seem as real as any other band out there--except no

live concerts."

### **I've Gotta Sing**

And that's the crux of the matter. The appeal of virtual entertainers probably will be quite limited—at least for the foreseeable future—because they can't tour, do drugs, get into fights, sue their record labels, promote world peace, raise money for charity, or do anything live flesh and blood performers can do. We, the audience, love the performer as much as the performer's music. And, in this case, that's a good thing. Tony Bennett, the White Stripes, Diana Krall, Toby Keith, Frederica von Stade, and all of the American Idol wannabes are quite safe from Vocaloid elimination.

### **Speak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace**

But voice over talents may not be so lucky. Voice talents are not seen. They don't have adoring fans, except their moms and, maybe, a few other voice-over talents. They perform in short increments: 30 seconds, 60 seconds, a 30 minute narration on how to make a million in real estate. If speech synthesis has reached a point of sophistication sufficient enough to create virtual singers, what's to prevent a software genius from developing a program to replace voice talent? Write the program. Sample 300 to 500 voices, male and female, each with unique characteristics, incorporate them into the software and, voilà, Instant Announcer in a Box. Just load your script text into the program, which converts the text to perfectly uttered speech. No retakes. With a few clicks of the mouse to tweak inflection, emphasis, pacing, dynamics, etc. to polish the natural feel of the voice-over and you're done.

Far-fetched? If entertainment's got a virtual band call The Bots, why can't advertising and marketing have its own virtual Don Pardo?

Well, it seems maybe they can...

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Peter Drew, a freelance voice-over talent and copywriter/producer with 28 years of experience, is heard on radio and television stations, corporate presentations, web sites, and messages-on-hold across America and countries around the world. To send an email regarding this article, please visit Peter Drew Voiceovers at

### **The Demise of Buy & Hold**

**By Ulli G. Niemann**

Based on consistent results I think Buy & Hold should be renamed Buy, Hold & Bye-Bye. It sounded great for a while, especially for the huge majority of investors who don't have the time or interest in really doing due diligence on investments.

Investing, for some, might be just a hobby, but it can sure be an expensive one. Yet, if you're like many

of us, you know there are opportunities for putting your money to work and having it grow. Nonetheless, investing, like any business (and it is a business) has its own unique challenges. Here are what I consider to be the top three.

### 1. Intelligently Deciding What to Buy

When it comes to Mutual Funds, there are today over 13,000 choices. You're going to check out each one, right? Yeah, right. And even for those you do check out, what are you going to look at? Past performance? What else can you look at? But as it says on the bottom of every prospectus, past performance is no guarantee of future results. And in these days of cockeyed cooked books, past performance is barely a guarantee of past results! So you need to decide not only what to buy, but you have to be darn sure you know when to sell it when future results of an investment don't match your expectations.

Sure, there are investment rating services that provide a false sense of security to Buy & Holders. But the fact is that pretty much every investment that rating services have touted over the last few years has lost money. So much for depending on that sort of expert advice.

### 2. Determining When to Buy?

It shouldn't matter when you buy if you're never going to sell—but it does. If you buy just before the market falls, guess what: You will start with a loss that you have to recover before your investment begins making money. So what? According to statistics on mutual fund sales, most investors buy just in time to grab a loss.

Buy & Hold may turn out to be a profitable approach if you intend to hold forever. But we don't live forever, and most people are going to want to sell their investments at some point before forever hits. It's small comfort to know that if you hold your investments for another 20 years, they will make money—especially if you're retired and want to take a cruise next month.

### 3. Staying the Course.

It takes a strong stomach to hang on to an investment when you see it disappearing before your very eyes. Or even when it's up one day and down the next. (Like these days, for example.) And once you decide that having to wait for three decades before your investment gets back to square one is not such a great deal, what happens to your Buy & Hold strategy then? It's out the window and all you're

holding is the bag. The much emptier bag.

So what's an investor to do, especially an investor who's really not a professional? For one thing, find a reliable method of gaining information. One that I like is a trend analysis approach that objectifies market behavior. This type of approach is more kinetic in that it doesn't rely on past performance—it relies on past and present performance to indicate a "trend" toward future performance. While that's not infallible in any sense of the word, it is a broader range of information than most guides.

## The Future of Voiceovers: Hold Your Tongue...Possibly Forever

Using one of those as a foundation for your strategy, determine a buy point and, most importantly, a sell point for any investment you make. Get comfortable with taking small losses before they turn into big disasters.

There is always risk in investing. However there are ways to minimize risk so you become an investor, not merely a gambler with high hopes for a Buy & Hold approach that many people have now found to have failed them.

Ulli Niemann is an investment advisor and has been writing about objective, methodical approaches to investing for over 10 years. He eluded the bear market of 2000 and has helped hundreds of people make better investment decisions. To find out more about his approach and his FREE Newsletter, please visit:

The Demise of Buy & Hold

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