
Corporate videos a boon for Bay Area voice actors

By **Dominic Fracassa** | January 4, 2017 | Updated: January 4, 2017 4:52pm

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Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

San Francisco voice narrator Vicki Baum has a studio in her closet, which can help companies keep production costs down.

Vicki Baum spent a decade working her way up the ranks of the real estate industry.

In 2008, she had the title, the power and a good salary, but the job, she said, was “sucking me dry.” So when the real estate market cratered, she decided to pursue an idea she had toyed with for years — working as a voice-over artist.

The job brought her right back to corporate America. Baum’s switch coincided with a trend in the Bay Area and beyond, in which companies are increasingly turning to video to make tutorials engaging for workers and clients. It’s lucrative and even enjoyable work, even if the videos can be tedious and technical. Baum’s clients include Cisco Systems and Apple, which recently hired her to do short videos on how to use some of its apps.

“A lot of people say voice-over work ‘is something I’ve always thought about, but I have to pay the mortgage or raise my kids,’” Baum said. “People don’t realize that artistic endeavors can be your career.

“Now I support myself entirely with this work, and its amazing.”

Voice-over work is highly competitive, with droves of performers auditioning for a limited number of jobs. Still, actors say that rates for corporate narration gigs commonly range between \$300 and \$500 per hour.

“A lot of the work is no longer leaving town,” said Nancy Balik FitzGerald, a spokeswoman for Voicetrax, a Sausalito voice academy where Baum trained for 3½ years. “Scripts written by ad agencies were being farmed out to L.A. actors, but there’s a huge, trained pool of local talent, many of whom are doing this full time.”



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When Kelly Kramer joined Cisco as its chief financial officer in January 2015, she wanted to change how her enormous team approached work. Instead of always thinking about spreadsheets and numbers, she wanted people to consider their roles more broadly — how they can work to benefit the company as a whole and bolster the bottom line. So Cisco decided to create an educational video that helped finance workers shift and broaden their thinking — and hired Baum to narrate the video.

“The human voice is a great way to connect the learner to that information. People want that connection,” said Julie Moylan, a senior manager at Cisco who oversees internal education activities for the company’s finance department.

Moylan estimates that Cisco has doubled the amount of narrated training it produces over five years.

In addition to internal training videos, the actors report that there are more bookings for video narration work ranging from human resources education to corporate culture pieces, and even medical and legal disclosures.

Baum gets booked for a variety of voice-over projects, including commercials, documentaries and video games, but she said that corporate narration gigs make up 60 to

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The explosive growth of digital videos and the ability to distribute them across a wide array of devices and websites has meant plenty of work for the region’s voice actors, according to Kevin Rasted, the director of on-camera and voice-over talent for the MDT Agency in San Francisco.

“Social media and having an online presence definitely contributes to there being a lot more work for all of these different talents,” Rasted said. “There are all of these new platforms for companies to reach out to their target audience, so we work on a lot of social media-type projects, where the clients will post to YouTube or on their Instagram.”

Corporate narration is the “predominant type of project our talent books, because there’s the most availability,” Rasted added.

The plunging costs of producing videos has also helped the industry.

Baum said that many companies are increasingly keen to hire actors who can help keep production costs lower by performing and recording at home, as she often does, rather than booking expensive studios.

“Having an actor that can direct themselves, you don’t pay for studio time, engineer time and all of that,” she said.

Voice-over actors with corporate gigs are quick to point out that despite the typically prosaic scripts they’re asked to record, they approach performances with flair and personality. Getting a client’s message across, actors say, requires a deep understanding of a script’s subtleties.

“You have to internalize a certain specific attitude and emphasis, and that’s trickier to do in narration because you have to keep in a certain style,” said Chuck Kourouklis, a voice actor from Fairfax.



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“We’re constantly adjusting our curriculum to teaching as the industry demands it,” Baum said.

In addition to industrial and medical narration, Kourouklis has lent his pipes to a smattering of video games, including the popular “League of Legends” online multiplayer battle game.

“You have to figure out exactly what your persona is, and understand what your objectives are. The acting is really obvious when you’re a 500-pound Visigoth wielding a mace. It’s not so obvious when you’re doing an industrial medical narration,” Kourouklis said.

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