

## **The Way You Speak Can Speak Volumes About Your Career**

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By: Sherri C. Goodman

For years, former SouthTrust Corp. accounting systems manager Mingming Jang relied heavily on display boards and handouts to communicate with colleagues in meetings.

Jang, a native of Taiwan, had a tendency to speak too quickly and struggled with certain sounds in the English language such as “th.”

“In my first language, we do not have this sound,” the 35-year-old Jang said. Other sounds also gave her trouble – she couldn’t make the “l” sound and had trouble saying words that ended in an “n,” such as “nation.” As a result, she often had to repeat herself when she talked with co-workers and vendors.

An immediate supervisor asked her to consider working with a speech pathologist – paid for by SouthTrust – to modify her accent and improve her English. Twenty-four sessions later, she says she feels more at ease when she tries to communicate.

More companies and employees are investing money into speech pathologists and with good reason, said Deborah Boswell, president of Birmingham-based Professional Speech Services. The company, which started as a speech therapy practice, has since shifted much of its focus to corporate services, working with employees from SouthTrust Corp., ProAssurance Corp. and Protective Life Corp., among others, to help them improve their speech.

“If you cannot speak standard American English with standard grammatical form, you will not get a promotion and you may not get the job,” said Boswell, who has been working with corporate customers since 1997.

A study by a linguistics professor at the University of North Texas supports Boswell’s statement.

For the study, 56 executives with hiring power listened to recordings of 10 men reciting the same 45-second passage. The 10 speakers were from different U.S. regions, and the employers were asked to judge them on qualities such as personality and education level. They also had to list what jobs they might offer the speaker.

The job seekers with identifiable accents – such as a Southern drawl – were more often recommended for lower-level jobs with little or no customer contact. Those with a less identifiable accent were recommended for higher contact, higher profile and higher paying positions.

Hal Holland’s heavy Southern drawl and slow speech prompted his supervisor at Integrated QSG in Birmingham to recommend accent modification sessions. The company paid for several of the courses, then Holland paid for several more.

“I’ve always realized I needed to do something about it,” said Holland, vice president of business development for the bank services consulting company.

Holland, who spends much of his time on the road making presentations to bank executives throughout the Southeast, said the sessions made a noticeable difference. And he wasn’t offended that his boss asked him to get the lessons.

“I wanted to get better. In a sales and advising role, you’ve got to be able to continue improving. If not, you’re going to lose,” he said.

### **Great Opportunity**

Boswell tells her clients, who are recommended for the services by their bosses, to view it as a company investment.

“No company is going to spend money on an employee they want to get rid of. I tell them to approach it as a great opportunity,” she said.

Jang, who will work with SouthTrust’s acquirer, Wachovia Corp., through the end of the year, believes her improved language skills will help her land another job. “I have no doubt this will help me in the future,” said Jang. “I have a good resume and SouthTrust has treated me well. Now I am ready to go out and sell myself.”

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