

## **WAS KELLIE PICKLER'S DEEP TWANG A FINAL FACTOR IN *AMERICAN IDOL* LOSS?**

BIRMINGHAM, ALA. If perception is reality and speaking southern equals dumb, Fox's top-ranked reality show *American Idol* was thick with hick contestants this spring. And the head of the pack would have been North Carolina native Kellie Pickler, who was voted off the show last week. But a top business communication expert says when it comes to southern accents, perception isn't always reality.

"A lot of people might question Kellie's intelligence because of her deep southern accent, but that's not necessarily accurate," said **Deborah Boswell**, a Birmingham, Ala.-based speaker and consultant on business communication issues. "People perceive us by the way we talk. They make judgments on our character, mental capacity and professionalism. Kellie is beautiful, poised and talented but when she opens her mouth the 'extreme southern' speech distracts many people from hearing what she is saying. All they can think is 'this girl isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer.' It may have been one of the big reasons she was voted off."

Boswell suggests that even if Kellie *were* a rocket scientist she could still be terribly misread by a public accustomed to assigning the stereotypical "ignorant hillbilly" role to those with a southern dialect. Think *Gomer Pyle*, *Hee-Haw* or *Dukes of Hazzard*.

What's a good southerner in the public eye to do? The key, says Boswell, is to learn to modify your southern accent—not eliminate it.

"As southerners, we love the sound of our relaxed way of speaking. But we need to know that when the stakes are high—whether on *American Idol* or during an important business presentation—any speech style that deviates too far from 'standard American' is often perceived as a negative."

Boswell became aware of the need to modify her own southern twang when she began speaking to audiences about communication skills. She explains, "I began to understand that everyone in the audience wasn't from the south and I wanted them to hear

my content and not be distracted by the sound of my voice. I haven't eliminated my accent. I simply want to sound credible and professional."

Southern speech isn't the only dialectical archetype from popular culture that stirs negative perceptions, says Boswell. A person with a Bronx accent, for instance, might be perceived as abrupt, rude, or lacking tact—but usually not stupid. "With the southern accent the speech is slower, and that comes off to other southerners as friendly. Those outside the region might perceive the speaker as friendly—but not necessarily professional, credible or intellectually capable."

However, adds Boswell, the sweet sound of southern speech has been proliferating in American popular culture over the years, and even in business circles a natural, well-rounded southern accent is as accepted as any form of American speech "as long as the speaker is in control of those 'gotchas' that feed the negative perceptions."

What are those gotchas and how would Deborah Boswell train Kellie Pickler to sound more like, well, a rocket scientist who also sings well? There are four main areas of improvement Boswell would recommend.

"The first speech characteristic to be addressed is the lilt. Lilt refers to the pitch change we're hearing in her voice that gives her speech a 'sing-song' tone. Kellie takes a single syllable word and turns it into a two-syllable word by moving the pitch from higher to lower within the word."

The lilt is the "essence of the southern drawl," says Boswell. "We are attempting to be engaging and approachable, and that warmth is conveyed with the lilt. But it's interesting that when someone is really focused and confident," such as when Kellie belted out the country ballad FANCY on the April 4 broadcast, "the lilt all but disappears."

Vowel pronunciation should also be targeted. Not just the long "i" sound ("ice"), but the short "e" (as in "pen") and the "au" vowel ("out") as well.

Then, Boswell suggests restoring the rightful place of consonant sounds such as the final "l" in "call" and the infamous final "ing." (Can you say "fishin'?" )

Finally, it's a grammar thing. Many times bad grammar accompanies an extreme southern accent. Working on correcting three or four key grammatical mistakes will improve Kellie's spoken presentation almost immediately.

"How you speak is part of who you are," reminds Boswell, "but you may find situations where you will want to tone down your strong southern accent." Speech experts call this "code switching," or subtly shifting from one style of speaking to another at will.

"Reese Witherspoon is a good example of code switching. To portray June Carter in 'Walk the Line' she gracefully moved from her soft, natural southern accent to a stronger one. With practice, businesspeople and others can learn to do the opposite: to manage a strong southern dialect by easing into a more standard-sounding speech pattern when the time is right."

For the smoother southern to sound natural, however, the new speech patterns should be practiced so they become part of the speaker. If *American Idol* judge Randy Jackson weighed in on the matter, he might remind us to "keep it real."

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