



Martin Ingber

Sweet and Sour Sounds of Home

By Diane K. Faulkner

In this day of business-by-phone-tag, the way a person sounds is almost as important as how she looks. Just as some employers took the "looks" issue a bit too far a few years back—think of the airline attendants' fight against unreasonable height, weight, and age restrictions, and Michigan's groundbreaking law protecting the obese—other employers are now getting a bit too picky about the way their employees sound.

Take, for example, the owner of a fire-detector distribution plant outside of Charlotte, N.C. Oddly enough, he doesn't like the way Southerners sound; he thinks their accents are unprofessional, and he insists his

staffers refrain from using their first and middle names—a Southern custom—when they introduce themselves. He is very open in his preference for Midwesterners, claiming that he likes the way they sound and that the Midwestern work ethic can't be beat. Is this owner an aberration? Only in his openness, perhaps.

The University of North Texas conducted a study that showed how easily we stereotype people with no more to go on than the way they sound. The study used a recording

of 10 white men reading an identical 45-second passage. The wording, constructed in standard American English, contained no jargon or any other indicators of anyone's background. Each speaker, however, had a distinct accent common to specific regions of the United States.

The recording was then distributed to HR directors and others responsible for hiring in a variety of companies. When asked to rate and comment on the speakers' "attributes," respondents' comments got personal. The listeners noted that speakers sounded educated or uneducated, intelligent or unintelligent, energetic or lazy, uptight or laid back, outgoing or

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withdrawn, and assertive or docile. Based on their overall impressions of the speakers, the executives gave the men with the nondescript Midwestern and Californian accents the highest ratings. Accents from Minnesota, Boston, and Texas followed, and the worst ratings were for the men with accents representing Louisiana, Georgia, and New Jersey.

Further north, in Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania found a more subtle—and infinitely more illegal—form of discrimination. In this study, men and women used White Middle-Class English, Black Accented English, and Black English Vernacular while contacting 70 rental agencies that advertised the availability of rental housing. In the university's analysis, they "found clear and often dramatic evidence of phone-based racial discrimination."

We'd like to think that employers know better, but apparently, that's not always true. In Jacksonville, Fla., an African-American male was denied a face-to-face interview at a regional

financial institution when an interviewer heard his voice-mail message. At that time, applicants took pre-employment skills tests when they submitted their applications. If they met the minimum test scores and experience requirements, they were immediately granted an interview if an interviewer was available. If not, the applicant was asked to call for an appointment.

When this man tried to make an appointment, his call was not returned. The interviewer, a white female senior vice president, detected his race even though he spoke standard American English—what the U. of P. study classified as Black Accented English. According to the senior vice president, who is now retired, she filled the position with a white woman who was less experienced, because "there were no black members at that branch, and they (the members) might feel uncomfortable."

The African-American man in this last example is, obviously, part of a protected class; had he taken action, odds are high he'd have won his suit.

In the example of the fire-detector distribution plant, however, the legalities are less clear. The Southerners who work at that company will certainly be uncomfortable, feel stress, and most likely be passed over in favor of less qualified non-Southerners for better positions. On the surface, it seems the owner has created a hostile work environment that not only makes it difficult to keep staff, but also serves to set up his company for a lawsuit.

But did he? According to Regina Alberini Young, a labor and employment attorney with Rogers, Towers, Bailey, Jones and Gay, P.A., in Jacksonville, the answer is no. The reality of the employment examples described above is that, while potentially both have costly outcomes, only one crosses the legal line.

Young says, "To date, it is not unlawful for an employer to discriminate on the basis of an employee or applicant's regional accent. In order for one to have a claim for discrimination or harassment, one has to be in a 'protected class.' One's American roots, in terms of region, are not protected. . . . Conceivably, an employer could legally ridicule and harass an employee all day long if such harassment is based on one's Southern roots, Midwestern roots, Texan roots, etc. Such harassment is not good management, obviously, and could lead an employee to pursue some type of legal recourse. Even though the employee's chances of prevailing on a hostile-work-environment claim based on his American/regional roots would be almost nonexistent, many plaintiffs' lawyers would find something else to pursue."

"There is one caveat to the above," Young continues. "Every state is somewhat different, some much more pro-employee than others. There has been some recent indication that California courts, for example, recognize harassment claims that are not necessarily based on an employee's protected status. That's California for you."

And that's a good warning for us. ♦

Keeping Wu in the Window

By Ming-Jer Chen

Chinese businesses value consistency and stability in their *guanxi* networks and relationships. This preference for continuity influences a wide range of business decisions, from job changes to the staffing of negotiation teams. As the following story illustrates, they will sometimes go to great lengths to preserve continuity—or at least the appearance of it!

When the Dutch manager of the technical-support department learned that his contact person in the Taiwan headquarters had been replaced because of job rotation, he complained because it had taken him some time to establish this relationship, which he referred to as his window to Acer in Taiwan. The Taiwanese managers understood his worries and promised to find a solution. After some time, however, they came up with the following suggestion: "To keep Kevin Wu, we have to allow him to gain additional experience, but to keep your window to Taiwan, we will call his successor also Kevin Wu." ♦

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