

FINDING YOUR SIGNATURE VOICE

John Beede (SpeakerCareer.com) interviews Amy Jen Su (ParavisPartners.com)

John Beede: Hello everybody. My name is John Beede. Welcome to another SpeakerCareer.com interview where we teach you how to become a paid professional speaker.

On the line with me I have Amy Su. She is the co-author of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence*. I'm very excited to have her on the line because she's going to teach a lot of great principles about how to demonstrate authentic value distinction and to connect with your audiences in a positive way.

Amy, thanks for being on the call with us.

Amy Su: Thanks for having me, John.

JB: Let's connect the listeners on this call with you. For people who aren't familiar with you or your work, can you share a little bit about your background—how you arrived at where you're at today, all that good stuff.

AS: Sure, I would be delighted. I'm managing partner and co-founder of Paravis Partners and Executive Coaching and Leadership Development. For probably over a decade, twenty-five colleagues and I have shared a mission to help others unleash, discover and sustain their personal best, which we call Signature Voice. And, John, this work is really part of a greater life purpose for me. It brings together a lifetime of interest and experiences in psychology, business and even east/west philosophies around human growth potential and development. I'm delighted to be here to share some of our work with folk today.

JB: I'm really excited for it. That's one of the most important concepts that I both believe in and teach—having an authentic voice. So, let's teach what that is. What's the definition of a signature voice? Why is it critically important for public speakers to find theirs?

AS: Sure. Signature voice is our most authentic and connected self. It's an expression, our voice, our presence that's uniquely our own and makes its mark like a signature. I think it's critically important for public speakers, whose role is to bring a mission and a message in an authentic way—a mission and a message that deeply resonates, impacts and changes the lives of others.

You know, John, in preparing for our call, I watched several of your videos on SpeakerCareer.com and your Everestmotivationalspeaker.com, and I'd say you have signature voice in spades.

JB: [laughter] Thank you for that. I definitely appreciate that. I really think that it's offensive to get in front of an audience and to deliver a message that isn't congruent with your belief, and just because it's in a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book or you read a cool story or you heard something that another speaker did, doesn't mean that you can deliver it the same way. That's why I was so excited to get on this call with you.

AS: Yes, no, agreed. It was so fun to watch you in action too.

JB: [laughter] I appreciate that. I'm humbled, you did your homework on me. [laughter]

AS: Yes. [laughter]

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JB: I think a lot of speakers and leaders can be kind of surprised when they don't score perfect marks or they get back a score sheet from an audience that says they didn't score straight tens; they couldn't connect and influence the way they thought they were influencing. So how can speakers actually diagnose how effective they're being with an audience and identify what their strengths and their weaknesses are?

AS: You know, self-awareness and accurate self-assessment is such a critical part, I think, to any speaker's growth journey. It's what keeps us humble and growing and trying to be our best and flexing our muscles.

I think speakers can more accurately diagnose their effectiveness by considering two questions and even visualising in their minds, plotting these two questions on a two-by-two matrix. If you can imagine, John, along the YXs, the question, "How well did I convey my distinctiveness, my value and my message today as a speaker, and, in effect, how strong or weak was my voice as a speaker today?" And then if you can imagine along the XXs, "How well did I impact my audience?" In effect, how strong or weak was your voice for others as a speaker and what we call signature voice is in that upper right-hand quadrant, where you've nailed both. So you can use this two-by-two as a way of assessing, "How strong was my voice for self, how strong was my voice for others and which one is my strength axis and which one do I have the opportunity to keep working on?"

JB: I love that. I remembered it in the book, but I'm plotting it out again. I like these two very concise questions, that's perfect. So let's cover each of these quadrants. Let's say that you're in the lower left quadrant; what would you title that one and how would you move from there up to the signature voice? Let's talk about the qualities and the solutions for each one of those.

AS: Sure. So you find yourself in the upper left-hand quadrant where, hey you have a strong voice for yourself, you've got your message out there, but you realise, "Maybe I didn't connect with my audience well enough today." We call that having a driving voice. Not quite signature because you had your message and your agenda, but perhaps you weren't as audience-centric as you needed to be.

You look at the lower right, where you have a strong awareness and voice for others, and we're really cued into the audience, but maybe you didn't show your level of confidence or the strength you needed in your voice. We call that having a supportive voice.

And in the lower left, we've all had those days where...

JB: [laughter]

AS: ...where we would tend to be more passive than we hope, where you're unsure in your message and your voice and it didn't quite land for others. We're not in our signature voices and we potentially slid to one of these other boxes.

JB: Got it. So assume we land in one of those boxes where we're very confident but we're not audience-centric or we're unsure and we didn't even land with the audience. How do we start moving towards this signature voice?

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AS: I think speakers can readily move towards the signature voice by thinking of ourselves as athletes and thinking about, 'How do I continually up my game, how do I condition my mind, my skill and my body, as a speaker, to go out there on the big stage?'

My co-founder of our firm and co-author Meryl Wilkins and I developed an easy-to-remember acronym for folks, of each model. Like, hey John, ACE that serve, ACE your test, ACE your speaker's voice. In that, the A stands for your assumptions, the beliefs and values that drive all of our actions and behaviours. For speakers, it's critical to have that right mind set before you go out there on the stage to get into signature voice. If you're tapped into what passion or mission brought you to the stage to begin with, think about how you're spreading this good word today. And then the C and A stand for communications strategies. You know, this is that toolkit and repertoire that all speakers use when they walk out there and start inspiring and motivating others.

I think one of the most important ones for speakers is storytelling; how do we keep perfecting our craft, clearly setting up a story, hitting our highlights and points, making sure that we have a clear takeaway lesson, creating an emotional connection with the audience. So that is what the C in ACE is all about.

The E in ACE stands for energy, our whole world of nonverbal communication and energy that we transmit and that is so critical for the big stage; making sure that we're dialled up so that everyone, including the person sitting in the farthest seat from you from the stage, still feels you and connects. A great speaker trains and conditions along all three dimensions to get to signature voice, their assumptions, their communication skill and their energy.

JB: You work with a lot of people, coaching executives; can we go through each one of these in the ACE strategy, assumptions, communications strategies and energy and talk about where you see some of the biggest problems to be and maybe give what you've, in the past, given as a prescription or a solution for those problems?

AS: Sure. In the A for assumption you often see folks having a set of limiting beliefs, assumptions that don't work for them anymore. Maybe it was an assumption that you adopted when you were earlier in your career or when you were first starting out as a speaker and those assumptions don't serve you anymore. It's really pausing to say, number one, "What assumptions are limiting me today?" Whether it's, "Hey I'm worried I don't have enough experience" or "I look too young" or whatever that might be, and shifting to something much more empowering. You know, hey John, what's that mission or passion that gets you out there on stage? How does that align with your values? Who's your best self and really drawing out those empowering assumptions?

JB: I love that you talk about age because so many new speakers are young and old, I find, and the youth should say, "Hey, I'm able to connect with people in this young, energetic vibrant way," and then with age comes experience. I think that, especially for college students and teenagers, to have someone in front of them with experience is something that they look at and say, "Awesome, this person's been through a lot of life." Both of those can be very disabling beliefs if you have these assumptions that 'The audience doesn't want to listen to me.' Because, if anything, it could not just be age but it could be any number of assumptions. I really love that.

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AS: Yes, you're right on, and how do we pause for a moment and kind of uncover, 'Wow, what's this voice crack, what's the story I have in my mind that's holding me back and how can I connect to something bigger that I can believe in and that can really make a difference in people's lives?'

JB: That's so cool. I think that we are so conditioned to our own stories. I guess a better word than "conditioned" is we're so familiar with our own stories that sometimes we don't embrace the inherent value that they can provide to other people's lives because they obviously haven't lived our stories.

AS: That's right, and how do you get in touch with those and how do you update those? You know, the story that worked for you five years ago is not the story of who you are today. We often just don't take the time or give ourselves permission to say, "Who am I now, John Beede the speaker, relative to five years ago? How many more experiences have I gained? How much bigger is my platform?" And from a humble place to allow yourself to really deepen that and embrace that.

JB: [laughter] You're hitting the nail on the head because five years ago I was talking about how to reach your goal and how to prepare for it. For me that was Mount Everest and then two and a half years ago I reached the top of Everest and now I'm saying, "Well, what are my new assumptions and beliefs? How does this new story that I've reached the top of Everest, that now I'm moving forward in my life, what's my message now?" [laughter] So you're kind of... you're selling your coaching services, I think. [laughter]

AS: Yes. That's assumptions and I think, as you mentioned the other two boxes, the communication strategies, it's so interesting. It's like playing a round of golf. Some of us love our driver and can hit the big shot off the tee box, but maybe we're not so good with our nuance short game. Some of us might be a lot more comfortable with our short game clubs, you know, great at listening, great at connecting with others, but we struggle a little bit with hitting that big shot off the tee box. Really, for the C and As we're looking to help people develop and expand their repertoire so that they can influence lots of different audiences and mediums. So I love the C and As because you can be totally authentic and be who you are but constantly be flexing new skills and practicing new communication strategies to round yourself out.

JB: I like this example of contrasting two pretty famous speakers, Brian Tracy and Les Brown, who come to mind. Les Brown is very charismatic and loud and laughing and telling vibrant stories, and Brian Tracy gets down to the strategies. I think that both of them could widen their audience appeal if they could take a line out of each other's book. If anybody listening knows those guys, use them as representatives of how to cross these communication strategies.

AS: Yes, totally. You know, in some ways those guys have their signature, but as you stand there and reach new audiences and put yourself in new situations, it's great to take a line out of others' play books and then make them your own.

The E and As are a whole world of nonverbal communication and energy we give off. Depending on what research study you read, you'll see that anywhere from 75 to 90 percent of our impact is, in fact, nonverbal. What our bodies are telling us and what our bodies are telling others is just as

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critical a piece to pay attention to. It's everything from, "Hey John, how do you and I and everyone out there listening make sure we're taking care of ourselves so that my best self can show up?" and then "How do we work with our bodies in a way that is authentic but that allows us to translate it from the big stage to smaller, more intimate settings as well?"

JB: I loved when you went over them originally and said, "Connect with every single member, especially those people in the very back of the room." One of my favourite lessons when I was first learning to speak was to fill your voice in the back cracks of the room. I had a very quiet, timid voice when I first started speaking and that changed the way my body acted, if that makes sense. By trying to fill those back corners, the cracks in the back of the room, my body had to react to this training lesson that I was being taught. So, how can people...

AS: Aaahh, I love that.

JB: It's a cool little concept, isn't it? Don't fill the ears of the audience in front of you, but fill the back cracks of the room with your voice.

AS: I was just getting excited by what you're saying because space projection is such an important piece of speaking, and knowing how to translate and own your space. You know, our book is called *Own the Room*. We were noticing where the boundaries of the room are, but I love your visual— noticing where the cracks are in the room and trying to fill that. Your presence and your voice all just need to be much bigger in a ballroom or in a large conference room or on stage. I think that's a great tip that you've just offered.

JB: We've all seen speakers who get up, and some of them are timid; after a minute or two you sort of tune out and wonder what else is going on in your life. Then others get up on stage and they just take everyone over. It's like seeing Elton John in concert, where nothing else in the world exists. What do you think of the differences? How does that happen? How do you get to be that Elton John in the speaking world?

AS: I think it's a lot of what you said, just recognising that your space that you're speaking in is much bigger than a one-on-one conversation. The inverse is what you would bring to a really large stage. For example, when I'm a getting a keynote, I hold my presence and my space much, much bigger. In fact, I'll go to the room in advance and walk the perimeters of the walls and get a feel for "just how far do these walls go?" Which is totally different than the one-on-one presence you would bring into a coaching session, working with someone one on one where that same kind of presence would be overbearing to somebody.

JB: [laughter] Walking forty feet back and forth.

AS: Right? So oftentimes I'll say to my my assistant, "don't schedule coaching on the same day as speaking" because I'm still authentic, I'm still me, but it's just a different size.

JB: You've just hit the nail on the head. That's so good. Often you'll get off stage and people come up and say, "Oh my gosh, you're so different off stage than on," but it's still authentic, it's still who I am,

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it's just who I need to be on stage. You wouldn't be the same person at your family dinner; you're still being authentic, though.

AS: Yes, yeah.

JB: Cool. So if someone uses this ACE conditioning and they're always checking in with their assumptions, their communication strategies and their energy, then you're saying that that can help us move towards the upper right corner of the quadrant where we find our signature voice?

AS: Yes that's right. There's no magic bullet. Through the years that we've coached people, we've realised that it's the whole being, it's your whole person, it's your mind, your heart, your skill and your body. Signature voice is you and your best in the upper right-hand quadrant. We have to look at and address the whole person.

JB: Beautiful. Two themes that I'm seeing throughout your book and that I think are critically important for speakers are the importance of having a value proposition and an authority story. Can you define each of those and talk about how they can benefit speakers?

AS: Sure. I love the concept of a value proposition and working with people to say, "Wow, there's an essence to you, there's a unique alchemy, this interesting chemistry of things, of strengths and experiences that make John Beede, or whomever, themselves." Recently I had someone say to me, "Hey, I was made for this job." Your value proposition is when you can say, "Wow, what are those things that I'm differentially better at than others, and today, not five years ago? What's my highest and best use in this world and what gives me the most juice?" It's like asking yourself every day, "What's my highest and best use?" I think, for speakers, knowing your value proposition is such a critical part of the job because every time you're on stage you're being asked to tap into a deep, deep well of what you know and the mission and message that you're trying to deliver, which is all wrapped up in your value proposition.

JB: Do you think that the thing that gives you that juice and that magic when you first wake up in the morning, the thing that really excites you today, is what's also valuable to the audience?

AS: I think it's interesting that it's more the power of that intersection. When I think about my highest and best use, it's like, 'Wow what is it that I can uniquely contribute to the world and that I want? What sort of positive contribution am I looking to make? Let me look at what now juices me.' In the case of leaders, sometimes when those two things don't match anymore, it might be time to find a new job. In the case of a speaker, it could be what you're excited to talk about has changed, as you mentioned, relative to five years ago.

JB: Sure.

AS: And in the updating of assumptions and the updating of your value proposition, what's your highest and best use out there in the world and does that still juice you?

JB: Got it. And if it doesn't juice you, you can't be authentic, you can't ever arrive at the signature voice quadrant if you're not juiced about what you're talking about.

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AS: Yes. I think that's true. I think that's where oftentimes you'll hear someone say, "Well that was a good talk but it kind of felt like the person was a talking head. Where was the heart in that?"

JB: It's a little flat and then you can have somebody who may not have the craft of the communication strategies or the right structuring of the speech, but they crush it on stage because you can feel their passion. It's like they're energy just overtakes the entire room because you can feel their passion for that story.

AS: That's right.

JB: Let's talk about authority stories.

AS: Sure. Authority stories are interesting because they're about what we believe about those in charge, your relationship to them. Our authority story forms throughout our lives at critical junctures. You know, your interactions with your parents, your teachers, your bosses; how do each of us think of this word—"authority"—and are we comfortable in our authority? Are we uncomfortable both in our own and with others? I think as a speaker you're often invited to be an authority on a certain topic. Therefore, it's important to consider how comfortable you are with that notion. I have seen that when folks are not comfortable with the idea of authority, they subconsciously might hold themselves back or show up as less confident. And for the others who either love to be a rebel in the face of authority or relish having authority themselves, oftentimes you have to remind them, "Hey, remember to connect with your audience and don't risk being overbearing or have your talk come off as a know-it-all expert."

JB: That's really quality stuff. How would somebody who's in that place, of the audience members feeling like they're overbearing, how would they check in and realise, "That's being me?" Or if somebody realised that they had audience members who thought, 'Man, he's not really confident in what he's saying,' how would they check in and be real about noticing that those two were taking place?

AS: How do we hold our awareness? It's so interesting, there's this balance for speakers of both being centred enough in ourselves that we can stay on message and get our voice across and, at the same time, having enough awareness of, "What's happening with the body language of my audience? Do people seem engaged? Do they seem inspired?" And where things can go wrong is if we are too audience focused. It's like if we take the lead ball in our belly, that's like our personal power and we hand it over to the audience. Oh no, I'm seeing somebody...

JB: [laughter]

AS: ...seem unhappy, so now I'm getting less confident and I'm handing over my power ball.

JB: Yes.

AS: This is somebody too deeply imbedded in themselves, going on and on and not noticing that people are yawning or ready to move on, sort of pausing and maybe asking a question to the audience to reengage folks.

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JB: It reminds me of the guy who's had one too many martinis at a cocktail party and just doesn't realise that he's, oh my gosh, shut up. [laughter]

AS: Right.

JB: We talked a little bit about body language already, but you said it's...did you say that 70 to 90 percent of what we convey comes across in our body language? Was that the stat that you gave?

AS: Yes. It's amazing, depending on what study you read, but I don't think I've ever read anything below 75 percent.

JB: With it being so important, how can people improve on their body language? You can go in your garage or in your bedroom and train. When I say "exuberant" in my speech, I'm going to throw my arms off to the side. You can try and train yourself to do this, but how do you connect and have a really authentic body language rather than a rehearsed one? How can you improve body language so that it's still authentic?

AS: I think first and foremost we need to be comfortable in our bodies. When you think of when folks say, "Hey, that guy seems settled in his shoes," or "That guy's walking the talk," or "He seems really comfortable in his own skin," all of those phrases imply a settling in the body. The first thing is, how do we make sure we, as speakers, are grounded and centred in ourselves so that we are in touch with our bodies? We can access the very real emotion and expression. When we have an authentic conviction for our message, that just naturally spills out of us versus something that's rehearsed or that we're puppeting. I guess that's number one.

Number two is recognising that expression and emoting fall along a kind of dialogue continuum. If the left side of that continuum is high, high composure and less emoting, where do you fall on a scale from zero to ten? Are you a natural emoter? Or are you someone who's more naturally composed? If you think of it like a volume setting on a radio dial, what clicks can you click up or down depending on your message or your audience situation?

JB: In your experience, is this a fluid process? When you coach clients, does it take place in a week or in a month? What sort of time frame are we looking at for arriving at this signature voice and embracing body language and the ACE conditioning? Everything we've talked about so far, how long does it take to arrive at "Okay, here you are, you're in your signature voice right now?"

AS: It's such a funny thing. Formally we'll contact folks six months to a year to work together and to really practice these things, to talk about these things, to raise awareness, but I think that if we step back from that and think about time, in some ways the process is both instantaneous and a lifetime journey. It's almost a paradox. On the "instantaneous" front, there's something magical when a client or someone I'm working with becomes present and conscious and realises that at any moment we can tap into our truest and most authentic self. We've all had those moments where you go, "Wow, that felt great, my voice was heard and I felt so connected to everyone in the room."

JB: Yes.

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AS: Then, on the other end of the paradox, in some ways this is probably a lifetime journey for all of us. As humans we keep wanting to expand and make a broader and wider impact. For example, John Beede or Amy Su or whoever is listening, you're not static at any moment in time. As you grow and desire a larger impact, you must continue conditioning and mastering your art like an athlete or an artist and continually updating those mind sets and skills and energy pieces that we've talked about here.

JB: You reminded me of the book *Open* by Andre Agassi. In it he talks about his career when he was young. He was able to move back and forth across the tennis court really quickly and have these shots that were really blasted with power. Then, as he got older, he was one of the oldest tennis players around and he had to change his game dramatically because he couldn't serve with as much power any longer. He wasn't as quick moving around, so he had to completely transform the way he played. You use the analogy of an athlete, it's almost a perfect analogy that he just had to continually become an authentic player, playing to his strengths and his weaknesses as he aged.

AS: Oh yes. Thanks for that book recommend, I'm definitely going to check that out.

JB: That's my favourite book ever, you've got to check out *Open*. [laughter]

AS: Okay, that's great to know.

JB: [laughter] It's my favourite book. What are some signs that people are backsliding? You have a chapter about that in the book. If somebody has moved to their authentic voice, how can they tell that they're, "Ooh, I just fell out of it," or "I need to make some adjustments," or "I've grown in a different area of my life and now I need to refine that voice and use some ACE conditioning for myself?"

AS: Yes, you know, we all have cues that we are backsliding. Oftentimes I think of the backslide as when we've become reactive or our fight or flight pattern has kicked in. I think the real trick here is to catch ourselves sooner in a backslide, before we get too far down a familiar rabbit hole. I think for those of us who orient toward a more supportive voice where we can become a little too overly focused and attuned to others and lose awareness of ourselves, you might notice cues like, "Oh wow, my assumptions are all starting to have a voice track of being a victim," or there's a lot of fear-based feelings and beliefs going on here, or you start using apologetic language, or you notice that you're starting to hold yourself in your space really small. If any of those cues come in as you build your self-awareness muscle, it's a cue to say, "Okay, how do I now, instead, hit the pause button and take a deep breath?" Sometimes it's just that one moment of pause to get ourselves back to our authentic signature voices.

JB: So you can come back to the signature voice as quickly as a minute or a second.

AS: A nano-second. Say you're in a meeting with somebody and they've just made a request of you. You feel the natural impulse to want to please them, so you're just about to say yes even though you know your plate's totally full. How do you catch yourself in the act and say, "You know what? Let me think about that and I'll get back to you," to buy yourself some time so that you can respond more authentically.

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JB: This is powerful. If you're on stage and you give that little lead stomach ball of power to that person who's grumpy in the audience, you're saying that you can just put it right back into your belly or you can own that again.

AS: Right. If I notice, "Look how I got hooked by that one guy who has no reaction face and let me shift my awareness now to the 99 percent of the other audience members who have big, bright eyes and look excited about what I'm saying."

JB: Yes, and often you're creating assumptions about them. It's like, "Hey, that guy might have a crick in his back or he might have a boil on his foot." You never know why he's making that face; it's not necessarily what you're talking about.

Let's say somebody, right now, is listening to this call and they're going, "Oh my gosh, Amy, I'm connecting with this, she has a signature voice. They're loving what you're saying and they want to learn more from you. How can they go about getting a copy of your book or becoming a coaching client? What other options do they have from you?"

AS: They can learn more about Paravis Partners, our book and myself at www.paravispartners.com or send us an email at info@paravispartners.com and we'll be sure to get back to them.

JB: That's "p" like "Paul," a r a v i s for "Paravis," correct?

AS: Yes.

JB: Perfect

AS: Paravispartners, yes. Thank you.

JB: Everybody, that's paravispartners.com. Alright then, Amy, to say goodbye, what immediate steps would you recommend to people after listening to this call? If somebody heard this and came up to you a year after this call was over and told you what they did, what would you be proud to hear that they changed about their speaking style or their life, in general, as a result of listening to this?

AS: Three immediate steps come to mind for me, John. For folks listening to our call, number one I'd say is to stand up, get centred and just take a moment to relish your signature voice in your best self. Imagine when you are standing on stage as a speaker, maybe image your best event. What does that feel like in your mind, heart and body? That's you and your signature voice, and know what that really feels like.

The second piece is—and I know we haven't talked about it, but I'm actually quite passionate about it—consider how self-care and what you eat, sleep, exercise, the people you surround yourself with, nurture and support your signature voice.

Then I would say, third, go out and do one of those items right now. Give yourself permission to take care of your best self and make that happen. I would be so proud if someone came up to me and said, "Hey, a year later I feel more and more like my true, authentic self. The last time I got up on stage I felt like I was speaking my truth and I made a difference in the world."

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JB: Amy, thank you for taking the time to help not only the listeners of this call but the world to become a more integral and authentic place. I appreciate you and the time that you've given on this call.

AS: Thank you so much for having me, John.