



# Becoming a Successful Commercial Actor

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by Sandra Merrill

The skills needed for commercial auditioning are different than those used for other types of auditions. Unlike theatrical auditions, where sides are provided the night before, the actor auditioning for commercials often times will not know the specifics of the spot until they arrive at the audition. At this point they may be handed copy, a storyboard, or receive nothing by way of explanation until they're actually in the audition room.

As a Casting Director, I recognized specific skills actors needed to best perform under these circumstances. Certainly, improvisational experience helps, since commercials are often unscripted and rely on the actors' ability to create the scenario they are given. The actor may need to react to a car driving by, a football game on TV, or to being shot in the neck with a poison dart.

Informed actors also understand that their job is not to sell the product (a common mistake made regarding commercials) but rather to play the reality of the situation in all its permutations: from eating fried chicken with the family to having a chimpanzee as your boss, it's important for the actor to understand the nuance of performance so as not to go "over the top". Learning camera techniques, such as cheating towards camera also help in creating a stronger performance.

Knowing not to take yourself too seriously is important, since you may be called upon to don a chicken suit or dance in a conga line. Since commercials run the gamut from testimonials about hemorrhoid relief to jumping into cold water as a member of the Polar Bear Club it's good to portray yourself as a good sport and team player.

Sometimes the personal interview is used in the audition. Using this as a therapy session to talk about ex-lovers, LA traffic or family tragedy is never a good idea. Mainly, the interview is used as a snapshot of your personality, so find something unique and interesting to say about yourself.

You also need confidence (not to be confused with cockiness) to go into the audition and see yourself being hired for the role. In the waiting room, don't look at the other actors and see them as more qualified for the part. It can be intimidating when you recognize an actor who has umpteen National spots running, but don't psyche yourself out of the job.

I tell students to prepare for the unexpected when auditioning for commercials. Many actors without specific commercial training take the "I'll just wing it" and learn it on the job approach (though I can't think of any other situation where that logic would work). Often times I think this is perpetuated by the commercials themselves; how hard can it be to walk down the street talking on the phone saying "Can you hear me now?" What isn't shown is the hoops the actor had to go through in the audition to actually book the spot.

Actors need to realize the audition is the job. If you don't perform well, you won't be hired.