

How to Self-Direct When the Client Doesn't Want a Directed Session

When there is no director in your headphones, you become the director.

A client sending you a script and saying, “*Just give us your best read*” can sound wonderfully simple. In reality, it puts more responsibility on you. Without a live director giving adjustments, your job is to interpret the information you have, make confident performance choices, and deliver something the client can use.

This happens all the time in professional voiceover. Some clients simply do not want to schedule a directed session. They may trust you to handle the performance, they may be working on a tight schedule, or they may want to hear your interpretation before offering any additional notes. Whatever the reason, self-direction is an important skill because the client is now relying on you to do more than read the words correctly. They are relying on you to understand what the copy is trying to accomplish.

Start With What You Actually Know

Before you record, gather every clue the client has given you. Read the script, the email, the creative brief, and any notes that came with the project. Think about the brand, the intended audience, where the finished piece will be used, and any descriptive words such as *warm, conversational, authoritative, playful, natural, sincere, or energetic*.

Even a short client email can contain useful direction. The mistake is hitting Record immediately and hoping the right performance magically appears. Give yourself a minute to understand the world the script lives in before you start performing it.

Ask What the Spot Is Trying to Accomplish

A strong self-directed read begins with intention. Instead of asking only, “**How should I sound?**” ask what the client needs the listener to think, feel, or do.

Maybe the spot needs to reassure someone, build trust, create excitement, explain something clearly, make the listener laugh, create urgency, or make a product feel premium. Once you understand the purpose of the message, many of your performance decisions become much easier.

Pick One Person

Do not talk to “customers,” “listeners,” or “the audience.” Choose one specific person and talk to them.

That person might be your neighbor, your brother, a coworker, a nervous parent, or somebody shopping for a new car. The imaginary listener should fit the script. The more specific that person becomes in your mind, the less likely you are to slip into generic announcer mode.

Make a Choice Before You Record

Do not begin recording without deciding what your first interpretation is. You might decide that Take One will be relaxed, friendly, and confident. Then commit to that choice.

You can always make an adjustment after listening back, but the first take should have a point of view. Self-direction becomes much harder when you are simply reading the script repeatedly and waiting for one take to somehow feel different.

Direct Yourself Between Takes

After the first take, do not simply say, **“I’ll do another one.”** Give yourself an actual piece of direction.

Maybe the next take should be more intimate. Maybe you need to back the energy off 20 percent, smile less, move more quickly through the setup, or give the payoff more room. You might tell yourself, *“Share the good news instead of selling it,”* or *“Talk to one person who really needs to hear this.”*

That is self-direction. You are listening to the performance, diagnosing what could be better, and making an intentional adjustment instead of merely recording the same read again.

Change the Intention, Not Just the Inflection

One of the easiest traps is recording several takes that are technically different but emotionally identical. Moving the emphasis to another word or changing where your pitch rises does not necessarily create a new interpretation.

Instead, change why you are saying the line. One version might come from the thought, *“I really want you to know about this.”* Another might come from, *“I can’t believe you haven’t heard about this yet.”* The words have not changed, but the internal motivation has, and that usually creates a much more useful difference for the client.

Record More Than One Take - But Don't Send Everything

You may record six or eight takes while you are working. That does not mean the client needs to hear all of them. Part of self-direction is also knowing when you have the performance and being willing to make an editorial decision.

Choose your strongest take. If the client has requested options, send a second take that gives them a genuinely different interpretation. Two excellent, purposeful choices are much more useful than seven versions that all live in roughly the same place.

Keep an Ear on Your Pacing

Pacing can drift when nobody is directing you. You may rush because you are trying to create energy, or slow everything down because you are trying too hard to sound warm and sincere. You can also fall into the habit of giving every sentence the same rhythm.

Listen for movement in the thoughts. Some ideas naturally move faster, while others deserve a little room. Conversational does not mean slow, and energetic does not mean fast. The pacing should support what you are communicating.

Listen Like the Client

Once you have a take you like, stop listening as the actor who recorded it and imagine that you are the producer who hired you. Ask whether the read sounds usable right now. Does it fit the brand? Does the opening establish the right tone? Is anything overly performed? Are you hammering words that do not need emphasis? Would you ask this actor for another take?

That change in perspective is one of the most valuable parts of self-direction because it forces you to evaluate the result rather than the effort you put into creating it.

Don't Fix Everything With More Voice

When something is not working, resist the temptation to solve it by adding more energy, more smile, more emphasis, or more “voice.” Often the better adjustment is to do less.

Back off. Think the thought. Trust the words. Talk to the person. A performance can become much more believable when you stop trying so hard to make it sound like voiceover.

When in Doubt, Give Them Useful Contrast

If the client has provided very little direction and has asked for more than one take, make the contrast meaningful. For example, Take One might be confident, polished, and upbeat, while Take Two is warmer, more personal, and understated.

Now the client has an actual creative choice instead of two versions that differ only because you paused in a different place.

And Yes - You Can Ask a Question

Self-directing does not mean you are forbidden from contacting the client. If something materially affects the performance, ask.

Questions such as *“Would you prefer this to feel more conversational or more promotional?”*, *“Is this primarily aimed at existing customers or new customers?”*, or *“Can you confirm the pronunciation of the brand name?”* can prevent unnecessary revisions.

The key is knowing the difference between asking a useful question and asking the client to direct the entire performance by email. Gather the information you truly need, then make a choice and do the job.

The Goal

The goal of self-direction is not to magically guess exactly what the client is hearing in their head. None of us can do that. The goal is to take limited information, understand the purpose of the copy, make intelligent acting choices, and deliver professional audio without needing someone to coach every sentence.

That is a huge part of being a working voice actor. Clients remember talent who can take a script, understand the assignment, and deliver something useful without requiring a tremendous amount of hand-holding.

The UVTV Self-Direct Challenge

Take one short commercial script and record three versions. The point is not to create three different voices. The point is to make three different performance choices while still sounding like yourself.

- **Take One:** Your instinctive read. Do what naturally occurs to you after studying the copy.
- **Take Two:** Make it about 25 percent more intimate and conversational. Talk to one person.
- **Take Three:** Add confidence and energy without turning it into an announcer read.

Then listen back without watching the waveform. If all three takes essentially sound the same, go back and change the intention rather than simply changing the inflection.

Before You Send It

- Did I understand what the client is trying to accomplish?
- Does my performance fit the brand and intended listener?
- Does the first sentence immediately establish the right tone?
- Am I communicating thoughts instead of emphasizing random words?
- If I am sending two takes, are they genuinely different?
- Did I follow every technical instruction the client provided?
- Would I be comfortable delivering this take if there were no opportunity for a redo?

Make the choice. Trust the choice. Deliver the performance.