I've touched on this subject in my previous articles, but the need to understand and connect with your audience requires further discussion.

I recently attended a Billy Joel concert at the Meadowlands. It was billed as his farewell tour. I've long been a fan of Joel, and along with 20,000 others, was anxious to see him perform. Within the first five minutes of Joel walking on stage it was clear that he understood what his audience came to hear. He said, "I know you've probably heard that this is my last tour and I'm getting more into classical music. But don't worry, tonight I'm going to do the old stuff. In fact, that's what they should call this tour, 'Billy Joel does the old stuff'."

In response, 20,000 people roared with pleasure. He then proceeded to perform one hit song after another, setting each one up with a brief description. He was funny, irreverent and down to earth. He said a lot of nice things about New Jersey and mentioned Frank Sinatra. He even poked fun at us in a good-natured way. Billy Joel had the crowd in the palm of his hand.

As I was sitting there listening to this extraordinary entertainer, my friend Nicky turned to me and said, "You see, this guy gets it. He's giving the people what they want" Nicky was right. Billy Joel could have come out and performed Beethoven, Bach and Chopin because of his love for classical music and the fact that it's the direction this extraordinary pianist wants to take his career. But what he understood so well was that a performer isn't just performing for himself. A performance is primarily for the audience and their entertainment, enjoyment or education. The same is true for a speaker. Of course, an artist or communicator must feel passionately about their message. But, if that message isn't in sync with the audience's psyche and passion then you are doomed to fail.

I recently learned this lesson the hard way. Last month, I gave a speech on "The Role of TV in American
"Culture" at a Northern New Jersey high school. I made certain assumptions about these 16- and 17-year-olds and their television viewing habits. I talked about such programs as MTV's The Real World and FOX's Party of Five. I also discussed the nature of TV news and its impact on how teenagers see the world.

The only problem with this approach was that when I asked how many students watched the news, only a handful out of 100 or so said they did. Even fewer watched The Real World or Party of Five. As I engaged them further, I found out that the two most popular shows among this audience were The Simpsons and Dawson's Creek. I wasn't particularly familiar with either program. I found myself making radical adjustments in my presentation in order to keep the teen audience interested and engaged. If I had done my homework, I could have found out more about their viewing habits. I could have talked to a teacher, or touched base with my 17-year-old nephew and his friends and asked a few questions about what kids are watching these days. But, I was lazy. I prepared a canned speech solely about what I wanted to talk about, and exerted minimal effort on what the audience wanted.

That's the bottom line here: Billy Joel knew exactly what his audience wanted to hear and gave it to them. On some level, he felt he owed it to them. The same thing is true for a speaker. I'm not saying you should pander or patronize your audience. But you have a responsibility to know what they want and need when you Stand & Deliver.

By Steve Adubato

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Item Number: 1735967