

A successful speaker must know the audience

As an indirect result of being an educator, writing columns, articles, and books over several decades, I am often invited to speak at different functions throughout the country.

Like past presidents, celebrities, and famous authors, I'm frequently asked to present an address on any number of subjects to a variety of organizations.

"It's a rather prestigious honor," I was just the other day boasting to a friend who called me from back east.

"Public speakers make big bucks nowadays," I continued proudly. *"Just last week, I was addressing a group of professional and received a rather substantial honorarium."*

"He got lasagna," my wife Dolores interrupted in the other line.

She has this nasty habit of bursting my bubble. It was unfair to suggest that all I got was dinner. I also received a lovely paperweight with my name inscribed on it.

The interesting thing about receiving such invitations is that people do not know that I have a fear of public speaking. They feel that because I am a professional writer and educator, I must be an expert on everything and can successfully deliver a lecture on any subject to any audience.

I don't know how they reach such a conclusion. Granted, I do consider myself an authority on quite a few things, but I get invited to address groups from social workers to scientists, from factory workers to philosophers.

The process usually goes something like this: A group will call me and tell me the nature of their organization, then inquire whether I could deliver a lecture that would be of specific interest to them. Because of my fear of public speaking, I almost always decline the invitation. Since I am embarrassed by my fear of public speaking, I end up agreeing to speak, receive a formal invitation, then proceed to talk to them about my prostate.

This has always been a successful strategy, since my audience normally falls into the more mature demographic. Speaking to them about the declining nature of the human body has always been a big hit.

I have been doing this for years now, and talking about my ailments has continued to help me form that all-important bond with my audience.

That is, until recently, when I was asked to address a large local service organization.

As I regularly do in my lectures – besides praying that I don't embarrass myself – I rattle off a number of ailments I possess and ask the members of my audience to raise hands if they have ever experienced such conditions.

"*Gall bladder,*" I yell out, and people raise their hands and break into spontaneous applause. "*Bursitis,*" I cry, and more hands fly eagerly into the air. I proceed to call out more and more ailments, gathering more and more excitement and enthusiasm until I work my audience into frenzy.

"*Irritable bowel,*" I scream as the audience erupts with acknowledging applause.

And just when I thought I had them all in the palm of my hand, I yelled out "*Prostate!*"

A hush fell over the audience.

I was thrown. This had never happened before. Prostate was always my ace in the hole.

Whenever I threw out that query, I could always depend on a guaranteed connection. But not this time. All I got was silence.

That Woman's Club of San Diego must be one healthy group.