

ANDREW SOBEL Building Enduring Client Relationships

Do an "Unplugged" Performance

About 12 years ago, I was living in Rome, Italy, where I was the country head for Gemini Consulting. For a major assignment for a \$5 billion aerospace and defense company, I was collaborating with a business school professor. He taught me the power of performing “unplugged” in front of clients.

This professor was opinionated and at times difficult to get along with, but he was also brilliant and had tremendous conviction. After spending nearly two months doing an in-depth analysis of the company's business, we scheduled a meeting with our client, who was the CEO. The professor was adamant: For this meeting, there would be no reports, no charts, no handouts, no overhead projector, and only I (the partner in charge) from among the team members would attend with him. It would be just us and the CEO, “mano a mano,” as it were. I was aghast at first, as the occasion would have normally merited at least a 100-page slide presentation filled with eye-popping graphics. We went to see the CEO, and the professor simply brought a pad of paper with two pages of notes.

We sat down, and the professor began. It was a mesmerizing tour de force. He started by neatly summarizing the company's current situation, moved on to critical market trends, and then outlined key areas of strategic weakness that needed shoring up. It felt more like an intimate conversation between two colleagues rather than a traditional consultant's report. As the professor spoke, he gained energy and enthusiasm. He became more and more animated. He paused at key moments, sometimes just to provide some space for the CEO to ask questions, sometimes to ask the client directly, “What's your reaction to that?” or “Is that consistent with how you see it?” The CEO was completely and utterly engaged. Two hours later (remember, this was Rome!) we got up to leave. The client said, “Thanks, that was a really great meeting. I look forward to our next discussion.”

Where does the term “unplugged” come from, anyway? A bit of history:

The advent of multi-track and then digital recording technologies ushered in an era of popular music characterized by endless layers of complex sounds. Today, a modern recording studio will offer bands 64 digital tracks and the ability to reproduce any instrument or sound they want. The result is often soundtracks that overwhelm the ear. In contrast, The Beatles recorded their landmark album, “Sgt. Peppers,” on primitive, 4-track analog recorders which, according to their producer George Martin, enhanced rather constricted their creativity.

In 1989 MTV launched an “unplugged” series which featured popular musicians performing with only acoustic instruments. Soon, every major artist was issuing an “unplugged” CD. Of course, this was nothing new: Just listen to Bob Dylan's early records if you want to hear great unplugged folk/pop.

Why is an unplugged performance so appealing to listeners? I think there are four reasons:

The basic melody and chord changes of the song are clear as a bell. You get to appreciate the music as the artist originally conceived it (most songwriters initially work out their songs on just a piano or guitar).

The performer's voice becomes more central. You focus on the quality, timbre, and nuance of the vocal performance far more than when you're confronted by dozens of layered tracks of instruments.

You are able to listen more clearly to—and reflect on—the lyrics. You think about the words being sung rather

than the wailing electric guitar solo that's overwhelming your senses.

It's intimate: You feel like you could be listening to the artist in a small coffee shop or club.

This past weekend I experienced this in spades when I heard former Beatle Paul McCartney in concert in Las Vegas (OK, I will let on that I am a closet Beatlemaniac, and that I have written a lead article for a major business magazine, coming out this spring, entitled "The Beatles Principles." More later...). I won't wax on about how spectacular his concert was. Needless to say, Paul performed numerous Beatles hits—flawlessly and using the original arrangements—as well as material from his solo years. In the middle of the concert, his backing band left the stage, they dimmed the lights, and he played a short set of songs, with no accompaniment, on acoustic guitar and piano. "Now it's a bit like you're listening to me in my living room, at home," he said, quietly launching into megahits like "Blackbird" and "Yesterday." You could hear a pin drop in the MGM Garden Arena, and the audience was transfixed.

So what does an "unplugged" session with your client look like? Well, none of us can boast of having "Yesterday" in our repertoire, but putting that aside, there's plenty we can bring to an intimate client discussion. Here are some suggestions for appearing unplugged:

Meet with your client one-on-one, or with no more than one other colleague.

Leave the audio-visual aids in your office. No slides, memos, nothing.

Bring, at most, a pad of paper and some handwritten notes. If you're in a restaurant, bring nothing—or perhaps, an 8"x11" piece of paper folded into quarters. You can then discretely take notes on it if you need to.

If possible, stay out of conference rooms. Meet with your client over coffee, lunch, or in his or her office. If possible, invite him or her to your office.

Have a clear message for the session. Be specific: "I've got three ideas I'd like to bounce off you," or, "I'd like you to consider this, and here are four reasons why." If you know the person well, a completely free-wheeling discussion may work, especially when punctuated by good questions (e.g., "You've already accomplished so much in your career...what's left now? What are your dreams for the next five years? And so on).

Follow up the next day. Write a short, handwritten note thanking your client and possibly summarizing some of the key points you talked about.

We have all become very accustomed to using email, voice mail, and the telephone for communications. Web sites have become more sophisticated, and often feature wild graphics and/or music. Document production is so easy and modular that it's a cinch to show up at a meeting with 20 or 100 carefully crafted PowerPoint slides. If you work for a large firm, you're increasingly tempted to bring the "whole team" along—after all, your team members need client contact, too, and you want to show the client that it's an institutional, and not just individual, relationship. There's nothing wrong with any of these things—but after a while they can obscure the real you.

Occasionally, just occasionally, drop all the props and do an unplugged performance. Your client will see and feel the difference.

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