Are you communicating with everybody, somebody, or nobody?

A couple of weeks ago I was at Ronald Reagan National Airport waiting for a flight to Miami. I was checking my email, Twitter, etc. on my phone, when the woman next to me asked me in Spanish if the flight was about to leave. Luckily (for her) I speak Spanish, and I told her that no, not yet. I pointed at the podium, which was empty, and explained that the plane was not yet in and that when we got ready to board, there would be someone there making announcements.

She told me she was headed to Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic). She showed me her boarding pass, and I pointed out her seat number and her group number, explaining she needed to wait for her group number to be called. Unfortunately, she spoke no English. None. I asked her if she had ever traveled before. She hadn't.

Here she was, about to embark on an international flight, and she had not the faintest idea of what was going on or how to navigate the boarding process, which most of us take for granted. In Miami, she would be OK, since the announcements are made in both English and Spanish, but in Washington, the announcements are all in English. If I hadn't been sitting there (and been a Spanish speaker), I am not sure how she would have figured it out.

Which brings me to a marketing question: who do you communicate to?

Everybody?

You can't communicate with everybody, obviously. There are too many variables. There's language obviously, and then there's

level of knowledge. Do you assume that your audience knows certain things or do you explain everything thoroughly?

Some?

Chances are, most communicators are aiming to reach only some of the total audience. This is called the target audience. Communications are tailored for the representative member of the target audience. So, in the DCA example of above, the gate agent speaks in English only because most of his audience speaks English.

Nobody?

If nobody understands your message, then your communications are in serious trouble. You are making strategic and tactical mistakes. It has happened at the Miami airport, on flights to Spanish-speaking countries, the gate agents don’t speak a bit of Spanish (and if they do, heavy accents and bad translating make it virtually impossible to understand). Very few people understand and everybody is confused.

When making communication decisions, you must consider your target audience (and then some). You will choose language, complexity of message, and what will resonate based on how you can reach the majority of your target. You will not communicate with everybody. But if you are communicating with nobody, then you have a problem.

Thoughts?