12 interviewing tips for journalists

Here I’m interviewing a man at his home in Cuba, where I was a correspondent for the Dallas Morning News. There’s nothing like going to work in shorts and sandals. Photo credit: Kim Ritzenthaler

Interviewing – A Lost Art

1. Be straightforward and honest. Sincerity works. Bending the truth may help you get an interview or two, but eventually the tactic will catch up with you. Your reputation will suffer. Some sources will stop talking to you. So don’t think of the short term, doing whatever it takes to get an interview. Adopt a longer-term strategy based on building your reputation and not resorting to tricks or deception.

2. Put yourself in the shoes of your subject. Try to understand his point of view. You don’t have to agree or disagree with the person, but you must remain neutral. If you think someone’s crazy, don’t mumble under breath, “Geez, this guy’s a nut case.” (Wait until you get back home or to the office, then you can let it all out...)

3. Ask open-ended questions. For instance: “Tell me about your job. What you were doing when the
tornado hit? What kind of person was Joe? How do you want to be remembered? What’s your greatest accomplishment? What’s the toughest obstacle you’ve ever faced?” These kinds of questions force people to give their version of events instead of simply agreeing with you. A close-ended question – which leads to a yes or no answer – can often shut down the conversation. Note: You will sometimes need to ask close-ended questions when you need to confirm information and get specific answers. But close-ended questions aren’t a good way to start the conversation.

4. Find a way to persuade your subject to trust you. That can be difficult nowadays because so many people distrust anyone who works in the media. But trust is crucial. Sources want to know what you are going to do with the information they give you. They need to trust you or they won’t talk. Even if you are talking to someone whose views you find disgusting, repulsive, politically incorrect or morally wrong, you need to make them know that you understand and appreciate how they feel. You are there to get the story, not judge.

5. Be original. Ask unexpected questions. Look for new angles. If you are interviewing someone famous, for instance, you need to understand that this person has heard many of the same questions over and over again. You should already have most of the background you need. P.R. agencies often provide press kits containing more background than you’ll ever use. So look for something different. Your subject might be passionate about something that has nothing to do with whatever talent or trait made him famous. That could lead to an angle that will make your story different than the rest.

6. Be humble. It’s OK that you don’t know everything. No one does. If you don’t understand something, say so. Ask the question again. Apologize if you have to, but keep asking questions until you are sure you understand. Sometimes you only get one crack at interviewing someone and it’s vital that you get the facts right.

7. Be sensitive to your subject’s feelings, especially if he has just endured some kind of tragedy. Don’t join all those other journalists who yell out, “So how do you feel?” to parents whose children have just been murdered. Find a different approach. Be patient. This can mean staying at a crime scene until everyone else has left, or returning when others no longer care. Or it can mean sending a family a card or flowers. Or you might let family members know when new information emerges in an investigation they are following.

8. Be prepared to act quickly. If you discover something shocking or scandalous about a public official, for instance, try to interview him quickly before he has a chance to come up with a cover story.

9. Learn to do phone interviews. Practice active listening.

10. Be polite, but persistent. If someone won’t give you an interview, write him a letter. Visit his office or home. Ask a mutual acquaintance to lobby on your behalf.

11. Be flexible. As you are wrapping up the interview, ask an open-ended question aimed at letting your subject vent or talk about his interests or priorities. Ask, “Is there anything you’d like to add?” This sometimes leads to the most interesting part of the interview. Some interview subjects are dying to let the world know something entirely unexpected and interesting. Give them that chance.

12. Finally, if all else fails...bring beer. That’s what I used to persuade the late Ronnie Biggs to tell me his story. He took part in the infamous Great Train Robbery in 1963 and was a fugitive in Rio de Janiero when I caught up to him (Download PDF of my story).

If you have an interviewing tip you’d like to share, please send it to me and I’ll post it. Email: teaton@flagler.edu or maninhavana@yahoo.com.
Loosening Lips: The Art of the Interview by Eric Nalder. This is one of the best tip sheets on interviewing I’ve seen. Download 5-page PDF.

Also see the Poynter Institute’s Interviewing Bibliography. In fact, Poynter has several useful articles about interviewing, including Interviewing: The Ignored Skill.

I also encourage journalists to join Investigative Reporters & Editors, or IRE. Members have access to thousands of tipsheets from some of the country’s best investigative reporters. Topics include not just interviewing, but reporting, covering specialized beats, using the Internet, making sense of electronic records and much more. Search IRE’s tipsheet database by topic is here.

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