

## HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW - Creating an Oral History

In my career, I have conducted thousands of interviews, been interviewed hundreds of times and as a media consultant, I have also observed thousands of interviews from a neutral seat. There are a few tips that have worked consistently well for me and perhaps they will help you. I write this from a media professional's point of view, but I think many of these points are applicable to business and employment interviews as well.

### **1. Start slow, safe and personal.**

I usually begin with a question that focuses on the person and not the topic at hand, such as: "Where did you grow up," or "what was your first job out of college?" First off, you relax your subject and you humanize the interaction. This relaxes the atmosphere, starts the conversation on safe ground, and lets you get a sense of the where your subject is coming from. Second, you sometimes get a surprisingly good story.

Many years ago, when Oracle was a startup on a meteoric rise, Larry Ellison was interviewed by a veteran magazine reporter. The subject was corporate strategies related to database software. But the reporter started by asking Ellison where he was born and raised. Ellison known for his aggressive and independent style, revealed that he was raised by a single mom and spent much of his youth on the streets of Chicago. This, for many years, became a key component of the Ellison persona and the Oracle's street-tough competitive style.

### **2. Coax, don't hammer.**

The "shock jock" interviewer may get daytime TV audiences to cheer and jeer, but chances are your audience is too sophisticated and businesslike for such low-rent tactics. I prefer interviews who have the up-close, but soft style that coaxes revealing, newsworthy, useful answers. For that reason, I am a huge fan of NPR's Terry Gross, host of the long-running Fresh Air. She coaxes the most revealing content out of her subjects, by adopting a very personal rapport and asking questions, in a "c'mon, you can tell me" style. People tell her the most amazing stuff. I'll bet a few of them later wonder whatever possessed them to reveal certain matters on national television.

### **3. Make some questions open ended.**

All interviews require you to ask specific questions that get answered with narrow data points. "What was your last job title?" But, in my experience, the most interesting responses I get come from open-ended questions, such as, "What is your vision for your organization five years from today?" or one of my current favorites, "Do you worry about any unintended consequences from what you are trying to accomplish?"

Years ago, I interviewed Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace a controversial segregationist running for the presidential nomination. I was no fan of his, but made it my business not to show my personal animosity. I asked him what he thought the voters of Massachusetts shared in common with him. "They are as tired as I am of big government stomping on hard-working folks butts," he said. This is a tired old saw today, but that interview may be the first time a candidate personified "big government" bullying

everyday people. Wallace almost won that Massachusetts primary. His campaign sent me a thank you note for giving Wallace the chance to state his case. I have regretted it ever since, but it was where I learned my job was to get the interviewee to tell his story and let the readers decide what they think of his or her ideas.

#### **4. Ask what you don't know.**

There's a lawyer's tip that advises you to only ask witnesses questions that you already know the answers to. I do the opposite. I ask questions on issues where I am clueless what the answer will be. Lawyers hate surprises. As a journalist—or reader—I love them. Surprises mean I have something that has not been previously reported.

#### **5. Let the interviewees wander a bit—but be careful.**

Interviewers, in my view, try to hard to control the conversation, when the person in the other seat is the one who can produce the news.

I recently watched Oprah Winfrey interview Sean Penn in a Haitian refugee camp on television. Penn was in an uncharacteristically reflective mood. He obviously wanted to talk about the recent dissolution of his marriage but Winfrey changed the subject on him. Then he wanted to talk about the suffering of children, but she changed subjects on him again. After that Penn seemed bored and detached. I don't blame him.

There is a danger, however. If you are conducting a business interview, the company representative may resort to talking points and "Corpspeak" if you allow too much slack. I usually stop writing, fold my arms and look out the window. They often trail off. Sometimes I complain that I had hoped to get from the person something that I could not have downloaded from the company site. Sometimes it work, sometimes it does not.

#### **6. Don't send advance questions.**

Sometimes, time requires me to send email questions, and then I get written answers in return. These are often adequate but the result is rarely as good as a face-to-face, candid interaction. If I am going to have face time, I make clear the topics that I wish to cover and even ask if there are other subjects the interviewee would like to discuss.

But I don't send questions in advance. The result feels far too scripted, and the answers start feeling like they were written by a committee. The result is that very little new ground is covered. It also eliminates my beloved follow-up questions, the ones that drill down on what was or was not said in the response. Very often, the follow-up question produces the lead to the story I report.

#### **7. Be prepared. Find the overlooked.**

I used to spend days researching before conducting an interview. Thanks to Google, that has been reduced to approximately an hour. I see what the subject has told other reporters and bloggers and I figure out what can be added to those previous conversations. I also look in forgotten cubbyholes. In

searches I often go back to always go to result pages 3, 4 and 5, where I may find surprisingly interesting content that no one else has recently looked at.

I go into the room know the topics I want to discuss and trying not waste time of asking for answers recently discussed. But I do look for updates and I do look for the questions that someone else forgot to ask. I recently was scheduled to interview Yammer CEO David Sachs for my Forbes column. I had planned to ask him about his \$25,000 hiring bonus to Yahoo employees. Unfortunately, in the preceding week , other reporters got to ask him all about it. I read them all and started my interview by asking Sachs how many resumes he had received and how many offers he had made. As a result, I got a small scoop, by asking the missed question.

Quite often, a subject's response to one question begs for a follow up. Many times the follow-up question reveals more than either the interviewer or interviewee expected. You just can't make that happen when you are following a script. When you do that, your mind very often goes on to your next question and you are not listening carefully to what your subject is saying.

I do come prepared and I let my subject know what subjects I want to cover. I also ask if there are other topics she or he would like me to add. I even jot a few topics down to make sure I remember them. But I do not write down questions and I stay poised to change directions and topics based on what my subjects are saying.

## **8. Listen, really listen.**

The value of my interviews comes out of what people say, not what I ask. If I ask a question and the subject drifts off, there is often a good reason. I can get feisty and retort "Please answer my question," or I can see where the person wants to go. If it's into Corpspeak and key points, I simply stop writing. If it's into an area that might interest my readers, then I let the subject wander. The key is to pay close attention to what is not answered and make on-the-spot judgments on why that area was skipped or glossed. Was it uninteresting to the subject? Unimportant? Painfully embarrassing?

## **9. There are dumb questions.**

Try not to ask a question that your subject has already answered. It discloses that you really weren't listening after all. Also try not to answer any questions that are answered in the interviewee's online bios or company FAQ.

And remember above all, the interview is about the person you are talking to, not about you. It's your job to reveal them, not to build them up or cut them down. Good night and good luck.