

6 Interviews - tips and traps

When the journalist/researcher/producer gets in touch find out all the information you need to know. If it is for a newspaper or magazine, find out what they want to talk about and what their deadline is. If it is for radio or TV, will the piece be live or recorded? How long will the actual broadcast piece be? Will it be part of a longer feature and if so will anyone else be on the programme giving their views? Are they planning to run a tape of something/someone else before or after your piece? It may make a difference to what you are planning to say or how you are going to put your comments, if you discover that someone with totally opposing views is going to be on the same programme. If there is a prewritten or pre-recorded piece to accompany yours, ask to have it read or played to you, so you can hear it before making your views known. Get the journalist/researcher/producer to run through the questions he/she intends to ask and make a note of them. This may give you an opportunity to (tactfully) suggest any changes you think will help you to get your message across. Then say you will call back (or come to the studio) at an agreed time to let them have your input. Don't be bullied into doing a piece straightaway - you need time to prepare your thoughts. Make an excuse if need be, but make sure that you get some time to put your thoughts in order, even if it is only ten minutes.

Prepare:

Think about the line of questioning you have in front of you. Is there a particular angle you want to promote, or a "spin" you want to place on the issue? For example, a piece about a local women's refuge could be "spun" to explain how we have been lobbying nationally for an increase in the provision of refuges, safe houses and police support for the victims of domestic violence.

Write down the main points you want to make. The number you will be able to use will depend on the length of the interview, but it is always worth having at least three main points plus two reserves, and having by you written as clear headings any backup information, statistics and useful material. Make sure that you have thought around the issue which you are discussing and have checked any facts you are not sure about, so that you are prepared for any question which might come out of the interview which the journalist/researcher/producer may not have briefed you on or even thought of yet! Clearly if you are taking part in a panel or studio discussion, or you are not the only contributor to the programme, other questions are likely to arise.

Practice:

Run through your notes - out loud if possible- to a tape recorder if you have time. Do you sound convincing? Would you be interested enough to listen? Delete or explain any jargon you are using, and leave out all abbreviations or acronyms. Assume that the audience knows nothing at all about the subject. Does what you are about to tell them still make sense?

So you are ready to go ahead: call the journalist back, or head for the studio! **Don't forget to switch your mobile off before you start the interview.**



Personality:

Now you need to project yourself, your interest and expertise/commitment to the subject and make people want to hear/read what you have to say. If it is a radio or TV interview, ask the presenter what the first question will be before the recording starts, so that you can have your first answer ready. Remember, if it is recorded, and you feel yourself getting bogged down or making a mess of an answer, stop and ask if you can start the answer again. Get him/her to repeat the question, take a deep breath and start again. It is very rare for an interviewer to refuse this, since it is in his/her interests to get a good coherent interview too! Of course, if it is live, you will not get that opportunity!

After it is over, if you wish, ask to hear the recording back again. If you are really unhappy with the result or feel you could do better, say so. Usually an interviewer will agree to do it again, unless he/she is rushing to put the piece out on air or is dashing off to cover another job.

TV

Practice makes perfect with TV; the more experience you get the more comfortable you'll feel and better you'll present. Even regular news readers, light entertainment broadcasters and chat show hosts get nervous before a show.

Don't wear bright, stripey, spotted patterned or fussy clothes; stripes and checks strobe on TV and are distracting. Plain greys, blues, blacks etc are the best colours and narrow pinstripes are OK - too much white tends to flare or dazzle under the lights. Pick up tips from what news readers and presenters wear - they have plenty of practice.

Always look interested - it shows. Listen to the questions carefully and answer them clearly. Sit forward slightly in your chair, don't cross your legs or fold your arms. Have your hands loosely in your lap, holding notes if you have them, or resting lightly on a table or desk if there is one. A useful tip is to lick your lips just once before you start, you will find this relaxes your mouth, so you look natural and not as nervous as you feel. Don't fiddle with papers, rings, earrings, etc as this is amazingly noticeable and very distracting for the viewer. If you are part of a panel or a studio audience show that you are listening intently to the speaker; boredom is emphasised on TV and nothing looks worse.

Obvious really, but find out what time they want you and make sure you allow yourself plenty of time to find the place and park the car! Moral support - even if it's just someone to drive you or get you a cup of coffee - is always good, so ask your Club, Regional or National Association Press Officer if they can do so!

On Location

This could be anywhere - your office, your home, a venue connected with the story or, using a location as a relevant backdrop to the story. If an office/other workplace is being used, make sure someone nearby knows what is going on and if possible post a colleague (or a sign) outside to ensure that noise levels on the corridor are kept down and that there are no interruptions. If the location is out of doors, you may need to be prepared to do several retakes if traffic or other factors interfere, so be patient and try to keep the adrenaline and concentration going!

The Remote Studio

For TV, you will end up in a room on your own, probably, with a camera lens pointing at you out of a wall! The main studio will phone you or you can phone them with instructions of what to do, if necessary - how to mike yourself up, etc, and you will hear the interviewer/presenter either through an earpiece, through a sound system in the studio (or if the technology fails - as it often can) down a phone line! It is a bit disconcerting, and quite hard to convince yourself that you are really on TV, so you will need to work extra hard to be relaxed, confident and NOT to read from your notes. Make sure that you look at the camera lens while you are being interviewed!

For radio you will find yourself in another small room with no windows. Instructions on how to set yourself up should be clearly displayed. As you go in you will see two switches, a light switch and an isolator switch, both of which you should turn on. A red light will come on to tell you the equipment is live. (A red light will also usually come on outside to let people know an interview is in progress.) To begin, you should ring the telephone number you have been given and tell them you are there. They will then ask you to replace the receiver so they can call you back when they are ready. You then need to put on the headphones, push the button which says "phone divert" and check that the sliding switch for the microphone you are using is on full. DON'T replace the phone receiver! You should then be able to hear the studio through the headphones and they should be able to hear you through the microphone. Don't get too close to the mike; you can watch the voice level on the panel in front of you and be careful not to rustle papers, etc. If there is a technical hitch, the interview could be done down the phone line. When you have finished, make sure you switch everything off.

NEVER make any comments "off the record" - there is no such thing! No matter how well you know the journalist, or how friendly he/she seems to be, never tell them anything you don't want them to use. Quite simply, if you don't want to see it in print or hear it on the air, don't tell them!

SOUND CHECKS: This is: "Say anything you like into the microphone, Mr President, we are just doing a voice level check...." "We start bombing Russia in 15 minutes..." and the whole world heard it! The safest thing to say on a sound check is your name, your position, your Club name or what you have come to talk about. Nothing else!



DIRTY TRICKS: There are one or two, and to be fair, they are not always intentional. The interview is over, the camera/tape recorder has stopped rolling and your adrenaline level is dropping to normality.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, we had a technical hitch. Could I ask you to start again?"

"Could we just ask you one more question?"

"Could I ask you to redo question six, there was something I wanted to add?"

Whatever the reason, they are going to start again! ALWAYS ask for a few minutes. You need to repsyche yourself, you need to look at your notes and to pump that adrenaline back round! It isn't easy, but pretend you are starting from scratch and go through the same procedures.

EVEN MORE DIRTY: You are off camera/tape "So now tell me the truth/real story/what you really think about...." Be careful - this is the legendary off the record briefing, which has been the downfall of many a trusting politician!