

LOOSENING LIPS

The Art of the Interview

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THE SET UP

RESEARCH: Whether you have five minutes or five days, research the person and the topic. Run the name on the Internet or check the clips. Talk to the person's cohorts. Read court records. A well-researched question is a better question. A well-researched interviewer is empowered.

PLAN: Make a tactical plan. Discuss it with colleagues. Who should you interview first? Where will you interview the person? How much time will you have? Will you tape or not? The best place is usually where the person is doing the thing you are writing about. However, whistle-blowers and reluctant targets are best contacted at home. You might calm a nervous source by taking him or her for a walk. A lunch appointment requires a person to spend at least an hour with you. A phone interview is the least desirable, but also the most common.

ORGANIZE: Write single-word clues on the flap of your notebook to remind you of issues you want to cover. Organize paperwork so you won't fumble as you talk. Prepare a comprehensive all-purpose question for cases where the door might slam in your face. Prepare the photographer and the fellow interviewer so you will work together.

INNER INTERVIEWING: Imagine a successful interview. Warm up like an athlete. Be skeptical but never cynical. Believe and you will receive.

RELUCTANT PEOPLE

THE OPENER: Having worked yourself into a friendly, courteous and aggressive frenzy, approach your subject as though you belong there. Straightforward introductions are best. Be open and unafraid. Never lie.

KEEP IT GOING: When the door is closing on your face, find common ground. "By the way, I notice you've got a poodle. I've got a poodle. Weird dogs. Just the other day . . ." The process is to get a person talking about anything and eventually they'll talk about what you came for.

TAP THEIR CURIOSITY: As a person hangs up the phone, quickly offer to explain what you are working on, what you know about or what you have been told. Prepare for this ahead of time.

GET THEM TO SPEAK ABOUT OTHERS: Bring a list of other people to the interview. A payroll. A phone book. Your own list. Go down the list with the interview subject. People are more comfortable talking about others. In doing so, they will reveal more about themselves and their organization, and point you in other directions.

NO BIG DEAL: Respond to the "I can't comment" by explaining that you need their help, that talking with you is no big deal, that you are talking with others and that you are here to learn (only, of course, if all of this is true). Say all this with a soft but relentless momentum. Massage objections into possibilities. Propose alternatives. Don't argue. Steer. Keep the conversation rolling. Respond to the "I'm afraid to comment" with a little sympathy and a lot of reassurance (if those reassurances are honest). Listen to people's concerns and understand them. Propose easier "assignments" like "just describe your job" or "tell me about your town." You'll get to the harder stuff later.

PUBLIC OFFICIAL OR OTHER BIG SHOT: Gently, without being insulting, respond to a "no comment" from an "important" person or bureaucrat by explaining how bad that sort of thing looks in print. "Let's find a way to talk about this. Tell me about this one aspect, for instance . . ." As a last ditch, explain that you will be doing a story whether they cooperate or not (if that's true). Explain that you want to get it right. Offer to call back shortly before the story runs to describe what will be in the story. (In the process, get all the contact numbers).

DETOURS: If a person won't talk, go to others in his or her office or to associates. You will get more information, and by doing this you will loosen them up.

ANONYMITY: Don't accept information "on background" blithely. Even if it means going back several times, convince people to go on the record. (Absolutely "off-the-record" information is useless, since you can't use it under any circumstance. Avoid it. It's a waste of time.)

RATCHETING: If a subject insists on talking "on background," make a formal agreement and explain that you will try later to get them to talk on the record. Take notes. At the end of the interview, or at a follow-up interview, pick out quotes that aren't too damning and say: "Now what about this thing you said here. Why can't you say that on the record?" If they agree to put that comment on the record, go to another one in your notes and say: "Well, if you can say that on the record, why can't you say this? And so on. I have gotten an entire notebook on the record this way. If they insist on anonymity, however, you must honor it.

THE STATUE OF LIBERTY PLAY: Emphasize that people are more believable when they put their name behind what they say. It's the American Way: A robust public debate.

FOR THE SAKE OF CLARITY: There are cases where someone tells you part of a story and then balks. Or you already know part of a story and can't get the rest. Try saying, "look, you've already told me this much (or, I already know this much). You had better tell me the rest. I mean, you don't want me to get it wrong. I sure don't want to get it wrong."

NO QUESTIONS, PLEASE: Sometimes making a statement is better than asking a question. Read from a document or repeat something someone said. A question might produce nothing more than a "yes, no or I don't know", A statement will provoke a comment. On one occasion I inadvertently repeated something that was inaccurate to a cop. In correcting me, he dragged out a report I wanted to see.

USE WHAT YOU THINK YOU KNOW: Ask the official WHY he fired the whistle-blower rather than asking WHETHER he did the deed. The question presumes you already know even if you don't have it confirmed. They'll start explaining rather than denying.

LOST REPORTER: It doesn't hurt to say you need the person's help. "Who is going to explain this to me if you don't?"

TRY AGAIN: When the door is slammed in your face, try again a day later or a week later. Keep trying. People change their minds. If it is terribly important, try again a year later.

GETTING ALL THE GOODS

CHRONOLOGY: Take the subject through his or her story chronologically. You will understand the tale better, and you will spot gaps in the timetable. You'll organize the interview subject, the way you would straighten a messy file cabinet.

LIFE STORY -- Get the life story, even in cases where you don't intend to use it. Even when I interview a lawyer about a case, or a bureaucrat about a government policy, I get the life story if I have time. I get useful information and ask better questions as a result.

LOGIC: Listen for logic. Respond to your instincts. If you don't understand something, gently insist on an explanation. If a person uses A-C-D logic, ask that they fill in the "B" part. The most important information may be hidden in B. Don't be afraid to ask. There are no embarrassing questions; there are only embarrassing answers.

HOW AND WHY: When a person says something important, ask the key question: "How do you know that?" It sheds light on credibility, extracts more detail and is a door opener to other sources. Follow up with: "How else do you know." Also, ask people why they do what they do, rather than just asking what they do.

HYPNOSIS: When people reach an important part of a story, slow them down and turn them into storytellers. Ask where they were standing, what they were doing, what they were wearing, what was the temperature and what were the noises around them? Then switch to the present tense, and ask questions like: What are you doing now? What is your friend saying? You and the interview subject will walk through the scene together. This technique frequently fails at first. People prefer to tell their story the easy way, in the abstract. "I drove the car off the cliff." Tell them this won't work. "I'm trying, but I just can't picture it yet. Drive me off the cliff with you." This is how you get a story, not a bunch of facts.

PAY ATTENTION TO DETAIL: Inventory the room thoroughly and in an organized fashion. Look at the walls, read the top of the desk and study the lapel pin. You'll get clues and details for your story. Make notes on what you see. Make use of what you see in the interview. Ask about it.

SPONTANEITY-- If you are on the scene, let things happen. Listen and watch for the unexpected.

TELEPHONE - If you can't be on the scene, ask people on the phone to describe their surroundings. This will transport you emotionally over the phone lines and provide information (the plaque on a man's wall became a key detail in one story, after I had independently verified what it said). Get people to tell their stories in three dimensions over the phone. Let things happen. Listen and "watch" for the unexpected.

USE YOUR EARS -- We talk too much during interviews. Let the other person do the talking. Check your biases at the door; listen with an open mind. React with an open mind.

LOOK FOR OTHER SOURCES: While at the interview, listen and watch for other sources. Meet the secretary, the assistants and the co-workers and make note of details about them. This will come in handy as you turn them into sources.

GETTING THE CONFESSION: Ask the subject for the names of people who support him or her. Then ask for the names of people who would criticize. Then ask what those critics are likely to say. This will jar loose uncomfortable information and tips. Ask whether the person has ever been disciplined or fired on the job or in school, charged with or convicted of a crime, arrested for drunken driving, sued, testified in court, etc. Since all this stuff is on a record somewhere, people are reluctant to lie about it.

LIARS: If you know someone is lying, allow the liar to spin his or her yarn. Don't interrupt except to ask for more detail. Deceivers frequently provide extensive detail because they think a very complete story will add to their credibility. Listen and take good notes. When the lie has been fully constructed -- down to the last nail -- go back and logically pry it apart (nail by nail). Don't be impatient. The fabricator is now in a corner. Keep them there until they break.

DON'T JOIN: Be sympathetic in manner, but don't join sides with your sources. Protect your source from exposure, if you have promised to do so, but not from his or her dishonesty and ignorance. And don't get sucked in by the embattled congressman who seems so cooperative when he grants you an interview and says, "I don't believe in taking money from those guys." You should say, "that may be true, but I'm asking you whether you took the money, not whether you believe in doing so."

DON'T FEED: Be wary of feeding information to an interview subject. In some cases it will come back to you as fact. Cops will tell you: "Don't ask whether a person saw the red car, ask what they saw."

ASK AGAIN: Sometimes it pays to interview a person two or three times on the same subject. One public official gave me four different and conflicting explanations for the trips he took at taxpayer expense.

REVIEW: Go back over your notes and look for holes. Then conduct a second interview. Tell the interview subject what you believe you have learned. This will kick loose additional information, fill gaps and correct your mistakes. Do it again and again, if necessary. I like to get back to key players just before a story runs to assure accuracy. This last step has often improved the story.

INNOVATE: If an outrageous question comes to mind, and seems compelling, ask it. During a phone interview I convinced a man sitting in a bar with a cell phone to pass the phone around so I could talk with his companions. A ship captain allowed me to go through his files only because I asked.

DRAIN THEM: People aren't aware of how much they know. You must guide them through their memory. Visualize your subject as a bucket full of information and empty it.

HONESTY: Don't pretend to be someone else and don't lie. You can certainly omit information, but the more you can reveal about the nature of your story, the more comfortable and helpful your subject will be.

BE THE DIRECTOR: A great interview feels like a conversation but moves relentlessly toward the information you need. Keep control, but do so gently.

BE FLEXIBLE: You may know what your story is about, but don't get stuck. A really great interview might be one that completely changes your story. Seek the truth, not what you believe to be the truth.

PERSONALITY: Let your personality shine through (if you have a good one). Don't be a blank wall.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: Near the end of an interview, ask the person what else our readers might be interested in. Sometimes people have more than one newspaper-worthy story in them.

CHECK BACK: After the story runs, call the subject for his or her reaction. You'll get additional stories and tips this way.

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