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SPARK MINUTE



30 Tips on How to Interview Like a Journalist

on November 7, 2011

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As a 16-year tech journalist and founder of a brand journalism business, I've conducted tons and tons of interviews. While I have "lots of experience" I also realize it's a synonym for "I'm getting stale." In an effort to reboot my interview style, I decided to look for inspiration from other journalists.

This article began with me questioning fellow journalists for their best advice on how to interview. What follows is some of my own advice, but a ton more from industry colleagues on how to conduct a journalistic interview for print, blog, radio, TV, and films.

TIP 1: Find a good interviewee

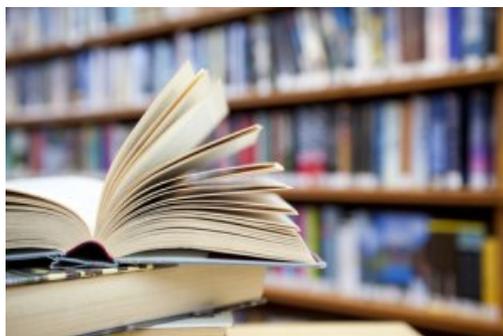


D'uh, right? When you do have control of who you're interviewing, seek out a good subject. You'll never know just by looking at them, so ask around. Sometimes a PR person will help you. If you're shooting video ask who is dynamic on camera.

“The truth is that some people have a good story to tell on a subject, and others don’t. Some people are naturally talented at being interviewed, and others aren’t. If you find a good interviewee, you won’t need all the other tips,” said copywriter [Star Zagofsky](#).

TIP 2: It’s your job to research

This was the most oft repeated advice, when it’s possible. In many of my run-and-gun style interviews, I don’t know who I’m interviewing until I meet them. But, I do know the event I’m going to and I can research that.



In the cases when you do know who you’re going to interview, know the answers to basic questions such as the individual’s background, hot topics, what the person has worked on, currently working on, and what they’re trying to promote. If the information isn’t readily available online, ask their PR rep or publicist, if they have one.

When you exhibit your knowledge “the person knows you took the time to do so and they then provide a much better interview,” explained journalist Joan Wenner.

“The value of doing a tremendous amount of research is being able to ask questions very few others have done. This alone sets you apart from the rest and can win you not only a subject’s respect and attention, but material no one else has ever gotten,” said author [Caitlin Kelly](#).

While being prepared is generally good advice, Larry King has repeatedly said in interviews that he never researched his subjects. I don’t believe those claims.

TIP 3: Let your preconceptions go or not?



Being prepared is good advice for any job, but you need to leave room for discovery, or shouldn’t you? I got conflicting advice from journalists who suggested you start with the end in mind or know at least 80 percent of the story before you even begin.

“Know the outcome you want in advance and let that outcome drive the questions asked,” advised journalist Rachel Franco. “What are the main objectives of the piece being written and what questions do you need to ask to arrive at those objectives?”

This is good advice if you just need to finish your piece quickly and plug in some quotes. But the problem with this interviewing and production process is you end up publishing your preconceived notion as to what the story is. You’re not giving the story any room to grow.

Conversely, if you do your research but not force any guidance and just listen, the story can take many surprising twists and turns.

“Journalists need to learn how to make their minds blank. Don’t have any preconceived notions of how you’re writing the story,” said marketing sociologist, [Richard Kelleher](#). “You keep your mind open and you learn so much more. You never know.”

TIP 4: Make them comfortable



Almost everyone who offered up advice talked about the importance of making the interview subject feel comfortable. There are many ways to do this, and it helps to do as much as you possibly can. Place them in a comfortable location with friendly surroundings. Be professional and friendly – not pushy. Let them know if you’re a fan. And when all else fails, tease them a little bit.

[Steve Calechman](#), journalist for *Men’s Health* will joke with his subjects early on to loosen them up. For example, at the beginning of the interview he asks for their title. If it’s really long he’ll say, “Well thanks for the time. That’s all I needed.” A quick relaxing laugh and both are ready for the interview.

TIP 5: Small talk and softball questions



Still running on the “Make them comfortable” theme, many journalists advised a little “small talk” upfront or to throw out a few “softballs” to begin the interview. A “softball” question is simply a non-challenging question that often gives the person license to brag about themselves or their work.

Author Karen Jones of [“Death for Beginners”](#) throws away her first question.

“You don’t really care about the answer, you just try to get the person loose and comfortable with you,” said Jones.

If you’re lucky enough to land multiple interviews with a key subject, organizational communications expert [Cory Kelly](#) suggests you don’t get into your tough questions until later.

“The more rapport you have with your source the more likely you are to get him/her to cough up the sweet stuff every journalist dreams of getting,” said Kelly. “So don’t rush in with the big guns unless absolutely necessary.”

TIP 6: Send a list of questions beforehand or not



Depending on the type of interview and the audience, it's sometimes a good idea to give a skeletal list of questions so the interviewee can prepare appropriately. Some preparation is good so they can have their facts handy. But don't give them all your questions as you still want some spontaneity in the interview.

Prior to the interview, Bill Roth, Founder of [Earth 2017](#) will ask his subjects, "What are the three key points you want to get across in this interview?"

He then discusses those points with the subject and asks, "Are those really the key points and if so, what are key facts or insights that support their point of view?"

Roth says it often helps the interviewee focus and relax and it helps him frame the interview questions appropriately.

If your interview will be on camera and you're looking for reactions to questions, then it's not a good idea to give them questions beforehand.

TIP 7: Let them know what you're going to do



When I conduct an interview I let them know what I want out of the interview, how long it's going to be, and where it's going to be published. This is all important information as to how they frame their answers (e.g., Answer in a sound bite or long form?) and the interviewee knows the audience they're speaking to (e.g., Is it a general audience or an industry-specific audience?).

"If they're plugging their book (or movie, etc.) tell them the ground rules about how you plan to work the mention, website, etc. into the interview so they don't have to look for an opening to plug it, which can throw off the flow," said Robert Dolezal, CEO of [Consultiq](#).

TIP 8: Warn them of the bright lights



I shoot a lot of video interviews and I use a very bright light. Like moths to a flame, almost every subject will stare right into the light if I don't warn them. So I do warn them just before I turn on the light.

But I can't just say, "Don't look at the light" because they won't know where else they should look. Since I like to do a lot of first-person point-of-view (POV) interviews, I'll say, "Look into the lens, don't look at the light" and then I'll turn on the light.

TIP 9: Mimic body language



A few journalists talked about the importance of mimicking an interviewee's body posture and slowing your own breathing pattern. Mimicking can also be that of dress. If they're formal, you should dress up. If looser, adapt to that as well, said Caitlin Kelly.

TIP 10: Ask to spell and pronounce their name and title

Ask the interview subject how to spell and pronounce their name even if you've seen it in print and heard it on TV.

"It might be Journalism 101, but I take nothing for granted and it seems to build a trust and confidence," said Steve Calechman.

TIP 11: Establish reciprocity



There's a great scene in the movie "Tin Men" in which a young aluminum siding salesman is learning the tricks of gaining the trust of a potential customer. The old successful salesman explains that when no one is looking drop \$5 on the ground. Wait for your "mark" to discover the \$5 and say, "I think you dropped this," to which you'll respond, "I know it's not mine, it must be yours." That small investment, and showing real concern for the potential customer, generates an enormous level of trust.

Similarly, Cory Kelly has a trick to "get the interviewee to give you something... anything. I've acted like my pen was broken just to get one from an interviewee. Instant investment."

TIP 12: Record the interview



I'm always stunned when I meet a journalist I highly respect who *doesn't* record their interviews. As someone who can type incredibly fast, I still can never get all the quotes correct. You must record your interviews for many reasons:

- It's the ethical thing to do – Your notes are never going to be 100 percent accurate nor is your memory. When you don't record the interview, you *will* get the quotes wrong.
- You can actually have a conversation – If the subject is constantly waiting for you to finish scribbling/typing your notes, it won't be a natural conversation, and you'll have a hard time pulling out natural responses.
- You can focus on the subject – You need to be looking at the subject when you're interviewing them. If you're constantly looking at your notepad or computer, you can't do that.
- You reduce the fear of being misquoted – “Fear of being misquoted is a key resistance people have to being interviewed,” said Susanne M. Alexander, Relationship & Marriage Coach at [Marriage Transformation](#). “To help people relax and talk to me, I run a tape recorder and I assure the person that I'm taping to be able to quote him or her accurately.”

TIP 13: Don't let them answer off mike



“If it is a ‘live’ interview, don't discuss the main subject before going on the air, as the spontaneity will likely be gone when the mike is live,” said [Bill Jones](#), actor and radio personality.

This is good advice for any interview, live or not, especially if it's being recorded on audio or video. Before I conduct a video interview, I'll chat with the subject as to what we should discuss. If we hit on a subject quickly, and they're excited about it, they'll just start launching into their answer. I will quickly yell, “Stop! Let's get this on camera” as I know they'll only be able to give me one good passionate response.

TIP 14: Test your equipment

Every journalist makes this mistake *once*.



You record an interview, so excited you got some superstar on tape, and then you go back to listen or watch only to realize you screwed up something simple and you've got nothing. Everyone has done this. We hit ourselves and then learn from our mistake. We never do it ever again.

Try to avoid that one bad mistake and *always* test your equipment. Make sure it's recording properly. Do a ten-second recording of your own voice and play it back. If everything looks and sounds good, you're good to go. And repeat your testing throughout the day. Simple things like mike jacks falling out can happen and you end up recording nothing.

TIP 15: Ask open ended questions

Many of the journalists I spoke to talked about the importance of asking open ended questions such as, "Tell me what you saw" or "Why was that a tough decision?" Avoid questions that solicit a yes/no answer. They'll never provide any insight.

Journalist [Sandra Lamb](#) will often quote the interviewee, "You said, '...'" and then ask, "Why do you believe this to be true?"

TIP 16: Don't try to fill the void



Long form interviewing requires a lot of patience. If you traditionally do quick "got to get the sound bite"-style interviews, you may become frustrated with long form interviews.

"Unless you're live, let them answer the question before you interrupt," said Robert Dolezal. "Listen to their answer rather than read your question list."

"Don't be tempted to fill the void with another question if there is silence, give the subject time to answer," advises Leslie Lowes, producer at

Penultimate Productions.

Self-proclaimed washed-up journalist [Karen Gutierrez](#) adds, “What the subject says in that moment could be the best part of the interview.”

TIP 17: Ask the reflection question

Most of my interviews are with people in technology industries that are trying to accomplish something. Any attempts in technology are always fraught with unseen difficulties and wonderful surprises. Two great questions that I ask, that require reflection are “What were some of the unexpected hurdles?” and “What were some of the unexpected benefits?”

Similarly, I’ve heard Jesse Thorn, host of [“The Sound of Young America”](#) advise the use of a “looking back” question. He’ll ask a successful person, “Looking back at where you were when you started this journey, where did you think it was going to lead you?”

TIP 18: Ask questions for which you already know the answer

“Don’t necessarily ask questions about things you can find out on your own, but don’t necessarily shy away from a simple question that may yield a great quote or sound bite,” said journalist Rachel Franco.

I will often prep a question with, “I think I know the answer to this question, but I want to hear your take on it” because even if I do know the answer, I won’t have the interviewee’s insight on it until they answer it themselves.

TIP 19: The interview is a conversation with you



If you’re doing a long form interview, you want to transition from a formal interview to making the subject feel they’re having a normal conversation.

“Make it seem they are only speaking to YOU,” said Bill Jones, “Look the person in the eye.”

To get that natural conversation moment, Star Zagofsky noted how Ira Glass, host of “This American Life,” gets very involved with the story.

“He’s not afraid to interject or put his gut reaction on display,” said Zagofsky. “Instead of asking something like, ‘So what happened next?’, he’d ask something like, ‘Wait, wait...so you were huddled there, and what was going through your mind?’”

TIP 20: Reboot an interview

I loved this technique recommended by Jesse Stanchak, editor of [SmartBrief on Social Media](#):

“If an interview is going badly, I’ll sometimes try to reboot it by thanking the participant for their time, and engaging in a little small talk about when the article is running, other projects they’re working on, etc. I’ll try to keep the small talk going for a little while longer than I would normally. Then I’ll say, ‘Actually, I thought of one more question for you, can we go back on the record for moment...’ Most of the time, they’re more cooperative in the second go around, after they’ve spent a few minutes talking to me as a person. Even though I’ve told them we’re back on the record, it’s often hard for the subject to get their shields 100 percent of the way back up. Of course, there is a very small chance for this technique to backfire, as the subject can always say they’ve got to run when I ask if we can go back on record.”

TIP 21: Ask about feelings



“If you want your interviewee to be expressive, ask about feelings,” said Andy Wasley, Editor of [So So Gay magazine](#). “How do you feel about x? What was it like to do y?”

“Always remember to ask why. Why do you do what you do? What motivates you,” said Karen Gutierrez. “Sometimes the answer seems so obvious you may forget to ask. Yet if you don’t, you’ll find a hole in your story later. It’ll be missing its soul.”

TIP 22: For revealing interviews, share your story first

[Carren Strock](#) interviewed more than 100 women for her book, “Married Women Who Love Women.” She found that by sharing her own story, the women were more comfortable to share their story which resulted in excellent interviews.

“Some women even confided to me that they’d never told their therapists as much as they had told me,” said Strock.

TIP 23: Throw a curve ball



When my company [Spark Media Solutions](#) got the [assignment to cover IndyCar Racing](#), I was very excited, but then realized we were going to hit a difficult challenge. My reporter, Pat Mauro, and I quickly realized we were asking the same questions to drivers over and over again. We needed some more original questions.

Jesse Zitrin, a Ballpark Enterprise Manager for [Juma Ventures](#), says that in sports the questions grow very routine as the same events are repeated regularly.

“But most ballplayers tell us they’ve never been asked questions before about which teammates should go on ‘Dancing With the Stars,’ or what’s in their iPod during workouts, or what rule they’d make as commissioner,” said Zitrin. “In short, think about what they’re likely asked all day, then find something from a different, more imaginative angle.”

TIP 24: Repeat back the story in the middle of the interview

With the writing I have to do for tech industry trade publications, I’m often listening to and then in my writing regurgitating very complicated technical processes. While the person who is telling the story understands what he’s saying, they may not fill in all the blanks when they’re telling their story. Often as we’re part-way through an explanation, I’ll pause the interview and say, “Let me repeat back to you what you just said to me, to make sure I understand.” This is a really good exercise as it requires the interviewee to listen to their own explanation and see if they’ve left anything out. Which they almost always do. But it’s also a good exercise for the interviewer because if you’re lost halfway through, you’ll be

fumbling, tuned out, or not know what question to ask next.

TIP 25: Repeat questions in different ways

Steve Calechman offers up this advice for getting the best information out of your subject:

“I find that good information doesn’t necessarily come at first, so I’ll ask the same question in a different way a few times. I also don’t mind asking obvious questions if I don’t know or understand something. In both instances, I’ll qualify myself with, ‘I know that I asked you this before,’ or ‘This might be a stupid question.’ If I recognize my cluelessness, I find that people are more than happy to help out and appreciate that I’m trying to be thorough.”

TIP 26: Get them to talk about what they really love



Before the interview begins, Mark Grimm of [Mark Grimm Communications](#) likes to probe ahead of time to find out where their passion lies. He’ll ask simple questions such as “So what do you do for fun?” or “What makes you really happy?” to help guide his questioning.

Karen Jones finds that musicians and athletes will have a hobby and “asking about this hobby can lead to answers about who they are as people.”

TIP 27: Trick them into getting the sound bite you want

“If you want something very specific it’s sometimes necessary to use a bit of cunning,” said Andy Wasley. For example, he’ll ask, “Would you say that this was the best event you’ve been to?” If the subject answers, “Yes” then your copy can read, “(The subject) said it was the best event he/she had been to.”

TIP 28: Let the interviewee ask their own question



At the very end of your interview, after you’ve asked all your questions, ask one final question.

“Is there anything else you would like to add?”

Susanne Alexander claims this technique almost universally results in the interviewee providing the best quote.

TIP 29: Let the interviewee review the article for accuracy or don’t

As a journalist we’re always striving to provide the most accurate information possible. So often, after seeing an article in print, people will complain about being misquoted or the information being wrong.

Letting someone review your piece before publication is a highly debatable subject as giving over your article to the subject for review may cause it to lose its actual journalistic flair. But at the same time, if it's wrong, it won't be journalistic at all. It'll simply be wrong and that will be far more damaging.

My personal policy is I'll let subjects, if they ask, review quotes and certain facts I mention in the article. I will not let them review the article. I have though had PR people ask me this and I find that request seriously steps over the line. See my article [“How to make sure journalists get your story correct.”](#)

Bill Roth swears by the review process. The result of this best practice, he says, is that 50 percent of the time the review will result in catching an error made by either Roth or by his interviewees.

TIP 30: Practice, practice, practice



“A lot of experience can be gained by practice. Get a recorder and interview some people you know quite well for practice before trying it for real. Listen back and do the next one better. This will help you gain confidence in your technique,” said Leslie Lowes. “You will know when you have done well, because the material you have obtained will tell you that.”

Conclusion: Now what are your tips?

While this is a long list of tips from a lot of great experts, it's far from an exhaustive list. Remember, I need some advice on how to shake up my own technique. So can you offer up any tips for me and your fellow readers?

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Tim · a year ago

OK, I'm old, so I may see this differently. But when I am being interviewed and someone asks me how I "feel", I say "Thank you" and walk away. How lame to ask "How do you feel" to someone who just witnessed a tragedy, or someone who lost a family member. This kind of question (in my view) just proves how lazy the interviewer is by not rephrasing the question to get