

APRIL 2017

Interviewing Tips

SECRETS OF GREAT INTERVIEWEES

Control your message

Internalize your message enough that you can weave it into whatever you say. Even if you're asked a tough question, you can use transitions to say what you want to say. Just listen to any skilled politician being interviewed.

For example:

- "Before I answer that question, let me just say..."
- "In addition to your question it is important for people to understand..."
- "That's a good question. Let me frame my answer by saying first off..."
- "At the heart of your question is this..."
- "An important question you have not asked yet is..."

If you botch what you want to say – and it's not a live interview – simply ask to start over.

Keep it focused, keep it simple

More information is not better—you can easily overwhelm, confuse and lose your audience's attention with too much detail. The average audience in the United States has a 9th grade vocabulary. Shorter and simpler is usually better.

Start with your strongest statement

Make your first words the most important and memorable. Studies show that after 20 seconds people's interest diminishes.

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Keep it short

Short answers are almost always best—not more than 30 seconds.

Make yourself quotable

Some sound-bites are more memorable than others. A good quote is:

- Something you can picture, like “Cutting down the Brazilian rainforest for money is like burning a Rembrandt painting for a bowl of soup.”
- Something you want to tell a friend.
- Something anyone can understand with little or no context.
- Something that is free of jargon.

Pair data and statistics with analogies

Don’t lose people with too many facts and details. Create an image in the audience’s mind with a statistic by saying that a new airport runway is 30 football fields long rather than simply citing the statistic that says the runway is several thousand feet long. Use the Google Chrome extension called “Dictionary of Numbers” if you need to put quantities in context.

Tell stories or use anecdotes

People love stories—have a few in your back pocket to share at the right moment. For example, “My grandfather described salmon runs so big that you could walk across the river without getting your feet wet during peak salmon runs.”

Do not be intimidated by an aggressive questioner or interviewer

If someone tries to interrupt your answers with questions, politely tell them you need to finish answering their prior question. If they inaccurately paraphrase your answers or throw out opinions as facts, politely correct them. And, don’t fill in a pause with rambling. That’s when the potential to go off-message is the highest.

Listen as much as you talk

We have two ears and only one mouth for a reason. When people feel heard, they feel respected...and they will like you more and listen to you more!

Practice makes perfect

Prepare, prepare, prepare. Know your message so well that it doesn't sound rehearsed or robotic when you speak.

Be relaxed, don't lecture

Be relaxed and conversational, so that your audience does not feel they are being lectured.

The public knows less than you may think

Do not assume audiences have a lot of knowledge of your issue. Start with the basic "101," not the "201."

Avoid jargon and acronyms

You often talk to other experts who understand the insider language around coastal conservation. For the general public, avoid technical jargon and acronyms. Stick to simple and direct words folks use in conversation and easily understand, or use analogies and visualization to explain new concepts.

Be positive, offer solutions even with grim situational stories

Focus on what you *want* to see happen more than what you *don't* want to see happen. Your audience wants and needs hope and solutions for them to feel empowered enough to engage on your issue.

Wear your passion for the solution on your sleeve, and smile!

Your enthusiasm for your work and your community is contagious—communicate that passion in your words, gestures, expressions and body language.

Make people curious, direct them to more information

After someone hears you, you want them to be curious and learn more about opportunities to get involved. Did you surprise them in some way? If so, point people to relevant sources of additional information.

Once again—Practice

Before every interview, take time to review your audience and your message—then rehearse. Again, know your message so well that it sounds spontaneous. By doing this your audience will hear words that come from your heart, rather than a formal script.

THE SCHEDULED INTERVIEW: BE PREPARED TO TALK

- Know your subject, otherwise have someone else take on the interview.
- Write down your main message and supporting points and stick to them.
- Anticipate the likely questions – write them down and craft answers to them ahead of time (knowing you will want to circle back to your main points regardless).
- Ask the reporter who else they have talked to so far or who they plan to talk to. If the other source opposes your position, formulate the appropriate response.
- Correct misinformation without repeating it.
- Stay positive, don't argue, but be clear about the basis for differing opinions.
- Say what you want to say and then stop. An old trick of good reporters is to ask light-weight questions, get you talking and then sit back and let you "babble on," saying things you wish you hadn't.
- Help the reporter get to good sources. If you have a solidly on-message person who can speak to the issue from a personal perspective, refer the reporter to them; then call that person immediately and brief them.

GENERAL TIPS

- Make sure you understand the question before replying. Ask for clarification if you don't.
- If you don't know the answer to a question or don't feel comfortable discussing a topic, tell the reporter you want to check some facts and will get back to him/her before deadline – then do it.
- Don't let anyone put words in your mouth. If a reporter asks, "Do you mean to say blah, blah, blah," state your message again, in your own words, and don't repeat theirs.
- Don't fall for the "Isn't it true that" (putting you on the defensive) line of questioning. Don't start with "no" or act flustered. Merely correct the record and bridge to one of your main messages.
- If an interviewer or other speaker misstates something or has a fact wrong, don't be polite and keep quiet—speak up.
- Use "off-message" questions to bridge to your point. Use phrases like "That's a good question. Before I address it, I'd like to go back my earlier point..." (Please see "Tips on How to Transition Back to Your Message" below)
- Support your messages with anecdotes, statistics and sound bites.
- Calmness always wins the day. Defensiveness and anger are signs of a person in a weak position.
- Reporters come back to people they can trust as good sources. Be truthful and accommodating, and you'll go into their Rolodex.

TIPS ON HOW TO TRANSITION BACK TO YOUR MESSAGE

When you are in a sticky spot, always bring the focus back to your key points. Here are some friendly, subtle methods:

The Bridge—Answer the speaker or reporter's question in a very brief and concise manner, and then use the opportunity to bridge or segue to your key points. Some popular bridges include:

- "I don't have all the facts to answer that question accurately, but I can tell you that..."
- "That used to be important. What's important now is..."
- "I agree we have a problem and I'd like to go directly to our solution..."
- "Your question points out a common misconception we hear all the time. The real problem is..."

The Hook—Entice the speaker or reporter to ask a desired follow-up question. Some easy hooks are studies, but your own experiences will always work well. For example, “You’d be surprised what our research indicates...” or “Our experience in XX showed...”

The Flag—Help the speaker or reporter remember what you want them to by flagging your point. For example, “The key point to remember is...” or “The most exciting thing about this program is...” or “Don’t forget...” You may also underscore a point with enthusiastic inflection in your voice. Other flag phrases to get the audience’s attention include:

- “If I could only say one thing about this, it would be...”
- “Finally...”
- “The most important thing to remember...”

WHAT DO REPORTERS WANT FROM YOU?

- **Something new:** Reporters need a “news hook.” It’s your job to find and identify what’s new about what you have to say.
- **Something surprising:** Reporters are curious, inquisitive people. You need to find a way to make your subject as compelling as you can.
- **Something relatable:** Your story will lose news value if it only applies to a very small segment of society. Figure out how it will impact lots of people, or why we should care.
- **Something that moves them:** Their job is to make a connection with their audience and make even the most complex or bureaucratic story compelling. Let your passion show.
- **Something relatively easy to digest:** This does not mean “dumbing down” or oversimplifying your material. Highlight only the “best of” your 500-page report.
- **Great visuals:** Sometimes a great visual—live and in-person or captured on your phone, is all that’s needed to get the media’s interest.