

24 Basic interviewing

A little earlier I talked about setting up interviews, so now let's take a slightly closer look at how to actually *conduct* one. I'll take you briefly through the process of preparing for your interview and how to get the best out of your guest, and then the kind of questions that are best to ask them.

Preparation

This is the most important factor in getting a good interview.

'Sometimes you hear a radio interview with a celebrity and you hear more of the presenter than the star. I do a lot of big pop interviews and I prepare the same way as I would for TV... and keep it all in my head. An interview is a conversation with someone, so don't look down at your notes.

Keep eye contact and you'll get a better interview.'

Katie Hill, presenter Capital Radio, Radio Academy event, November 2005

Get as much information as is appropriate, considering the time you have before the interview and its duration.

You'll certainly want to write some questions to ask your guest. Some presenters say that doing this makes it more likely that they won't listen to the answers and simply work their way down the list. I disagree to a certain extent. Although you should certainly not rely on a list of prepared questions, writing a list of key topics to be covered does several things:

- It forces you to think about the subject...
- the guest...
- and the aim of the interview.
- And gives you a safety net if the interview doesn't go according to plan, for example if either you or the guest clams up.

While you're drawing up the questions think about what you want to know the answer to, and what your *listeners* want to know the answers to. Don't be tempted to take the easy road by following the news release that the guest's publicity people sent you. Interviews are more interesting if they're inspired. Yes, you have to ask the obvious questions, but the successful presenter is the one who goes the extra mile the one who asks the question no-one else thought of, and gets a terrific answer.

More UGC

User-generated content is a great way of asking exactly the questions the audience wants to know the answers to. Opening an e-mail account to which listeners can post their questions, has several advantages:

- You can gauge the top talking topics in which most people are most interested.
- It's a great resource for some more 'left of centre' topics that you may not have considered.
- There's the opportunity for name checks for the listeners and the mention of local places.

Before the interview

Chatting-up or 'shampooing' your guest is a valuable thing to learn how to do. One great and polite way to relax them is by using their name. Don't give your guest a list of questions you'll ask, but do give them an idea of what *kind* of thing you want. They'll respond better if they're prepared but not rehearsed. You may though want to give them the first question in advance, one that you know they know the answer to, so they can get into their stride and 'warm up'. But don't make it too wide that they don't know where to start: 'You've just got back from your tour of America. Tell me about it.'

It's usually best not to have an in-depth discussion before you start your interview as it risks your guest saying, 'As I said before ...'

The length of an interview

On a local music and speech station it's thought that each part of a conversation should last about the same length of a song, so about 3 minutes. You can then play a song and return to the guest for a second bite, but if you keep talking for more than a few minutes you stand the chance of driving away some of your listeners.

The question section

5Ws and an H

The basic 'questioning words' are 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'why' and 'how'. Each of them is used to get a different kind of fact about people, times and places and so on, but perhaps the most underused one is 'why'.

Starting a question with this word will often get your guest to explain themselves, and perhaps reveal a little about their motivation. Any question that gets a guest to open up in this way invariably makes good radio.

Clear questions

Under stress your guest may find it difficult to concentrate on what you're saying: they're in a strange environment and may never have heard or met you before, so make sure that your questions are straightforward. I don't mean that they should be short necessarily (although some of them may well be), but that they should be *clear*. Don't have long rambling questions: 'I wonder what you would say to some people who might think, or even say that, and in fact I think I've read that many people do in fact take this view, that this film,

or indeed the last couple that you've made haven't really been necessarily some of perhaps the best films of this type that, perhaps, could have been made with the budgets available at that time . . . ?

Don't ask more than one question at a time: 'Can you tell me how long it took you to swim the channel and how much money you raised . . . ?'. Which one do you want them to answer first? And when they've done that, your guest may well have forgotten what the second question was!

Another problem for novice interviewers is that they ask questions that, although short and to the point, are simply too wide: 'This weekend's carnival, tell me about it.' OK, it's not really a question but most people would treat it as such and try to answer it. But where do they start? When it's on, what's going to be there, how long it took to plan, the problems they had getting the floats ready on time . . . ? Help your guest by giving them a little bit of focus.

Open and closed questions

Open questions are ones that encourage the guest to speak: 'How did you manage to stay up the flagpole for three days and nights?'

Closed questions are ones that may only get you a one-word answer! 'You were up the flagpole for three days?'

One type is good and the other less so.

Open-ended questions are especially necessary when working with children, as closed questions will invariably illicit a simple 'yes' or 'no' response, although adults will give you a full answer, even if presented with a closed question.

Here are some question-starters to have up your sleeve the next time you speak with little Johnny or Josephine.

- Tell me about . . .
- Tell me how . . .
- What did you see . . .
- Describe it to me . . .
- What happened . . .
- How did that make you feel . . .

Listen for your next question

Listen to what your guest is saying to give you a clue to your next question. This way the interview sounds more like a conversation.

PRESENTER: So when did you become interested in music?

GUEST: When I went to a Tibetan retreat for three years.

PRESENTER: And why the oboe?

The presenter's completely missed a great follow-up question, which could have taken them in an exciting new direction. And that's probably the problem: the interviewer hasn't done enough homework to feel confident enough to leave their written list. They either feel as though they'll lose control of the interview or that they simply won't be able to get through all their prepared points.

INFORMATION FOR INSPIRATION: It's not the quality of the questions you ask, it's the quality of the attention you give the answers.

Active listening

Effective listening will make interviewing easier, because it'll be more productive. You'll ask more incisive and pertinent questions, your interviewee will give better replies, and you'll end up with better audio. You need to listen with an open mind, not jumping to conclusions or anticipating what you think you're about to be told. Psychologists call this 'active listening'.

The tricks include reflecting on what you're hearing and recording it in your mind as a 'headline'. That way you'll end up with a mental list of bullet points.

INFORMATION FOR INSPIRATION: You need to not only hear the words which are being said, but also note what is not being said: the hidden meaning of the reply.

Give the guest your attention. Don't start fiddling, cueing a song – pay attention and practice SOLER.

- o Sit up straight.
- o Open posture (arms and legs uncrossed).
- o Looking genuinely interested, listening attentively.
- o Effective eye contact.
- o Remaining relatively relaxed.

You don't always need to ask your guest questions

Asking questions can sometime seem quite confrontational and can narrow conversations rather than open them up. Here are some other ways you can ask for information:

- o Say what you want to know and why: 'Tell me how you came up with the idea in the first place, I still don't see how a grandmother could invent a revolutionary internet gizmo.'
- o Ask them to elaborate on something they've already said. It shows you're interested in what they're talking about, and that alone should help them open up. 'Tell me more about your plans to tour south east Asia ...'
- o When they've only half said something, get them to tell you more: 'You say you're thinking of quitting your record label ...?'
- o Ask open questions. Ask how they feel about something, their reaction to something, to comment on or talk about something else. We want someone who *reacts*, not just gives us *facts*.
- o Focus on what effect the story will have on people's lives (remember relatability). Are there stories that can be told, or an example they can give rather than facts and figures? Is there a 'worst case scenario' that can be used to illustrate their point? Make the interviewee human.
- o What's their opinion? How upset or cross are they? Or maybe they're pleased about a decision.

Coach your guest

Inexperienced interviewees may need a little coaching to put them at their ease. They may forget what point they want to get across, be unsure where they're heading with a sentence, or talk for a long time but not actually say anything.

INFORMATION FOR INSPIRATION: If someone's story is vague or dull, work hard for clarity and interest.

If you want them to sound up-beat and lively, tell them! If you do it politely and diplomatically they'll invariably co-operate. They'll take it that you're as much an expert in your field, as they are in theirs. (You're doing them a favour – they don't want to sound like a 'suit' do they?)

Ask them how they'd explain their story to the man or woman on the street. Remember, if you don't understand what they're talking about, with the benefit of your research and a distraction-free studio, what chance has someone listening at home with a crying baby, or someone trying to negotiate the rush hour traffic in the car?

You'll also get a better performance from a guest by getting them to, unwittingly, 'voice-match' you. So, if you speak to them in a bright and breezy way, with a lively attitude, and calling them by their first name, they in turn will give a much more lively interview. If you speak with a slow and quiet voice they will come down to match it.

Interview clips

If you're doing a news interview, the newsroom won't want your voice recorded at all. You'll have to keep quiet during the answers, so there's not a 'yep', 'uh huh', 'OK, I see' all the way through, which would be distracting to the listener when the clip is played in the bulletin and the audience wonders where the other voice has come from. This is most unlike normal life where we're encouraged to keep giving signals to show we understand what's being said. Instead use non-verbal communication: keep eye contact with the interviewee, without staring them out; look in tune with what they're talking about – look serious when they're saying something serious, raise your eyebrows and start to smile when they're telling a humorous story; nod from time to time, to indicate that you're keeping up with what they're telling you.

Reflect their answers back to them

Your guest will be much more assured that the interview's going well and they're giving you what you want, if you pick up on what's said, and feed it back to them. 'So, what you're saying is that if everyone in the county donated a tea bag each, we'd be able to save the Hairy Mountain Gorilla from extinction?' It all helps to nudge the conversation along.

You can use phrases such as, 'That sounds important to you' or 'I'd like to know more about that' to show interest and encourage them.

Leave room

Don't feel obliged to jump in with the next question immediately after they've stopped talking. Staying quiet for a few seconds may just nudge them that little bit further to open up a little bit more. People hate silence, and the interviewee will feel as though it's 'their' silence and one that they should fill by talking a little more.

Signpost some of your questions

Your stream of questions should progress in a logical and ordered, albeit conversational, way. If they don't then you need to signpost the fact, both for the interviewee and the listener. 'On a different subject, how's the family ...?'

Two sugars

If you present your interview in short bursts with music in between you may be in a studio having an off-air conversation with your guest for the best part of 15 minutes before they're re-introduced to the listener. That's fine if the guest is interesting and you can easily make small talk, but you may feel your very life force being drained out of you if they're not.

You can busy yourself for a few of those minutes by explaining the desk and the equipment to them, then spend a while cueing the next song or checking the travel presenter is ready. Beyond that you may find that you have to ask them *off air* what you are later going to be asking them *on air*! To avoid this happening (and risking them saying later, 'As I said to you before ...') you may want to set up a secret signal with your producer. This is something that I've done in the past: a call on the talkback to ask for a coffee for the guest and one for me 'with two sugars' (when I usually don't take any) was a signal for them to come in and either talk to me about an important programming issue or to join in the small-talk with the guest. One thing you can't do, of course, is to leave the guest alone in an on-air studio!

Remember to T.A.L.K.

- **Technical** – don't get so engrossed in the conversation that you forget the technical aspects of your broadcast. For example, are the levels still OK? Has the guest moved away from the mic as they became more relaxed? What about the paps? What about the timing of the sequence: are you on time for the travel news? How long have you been speaking for in this segment of talk? Is there enough, or too much of interest to keep this guest for the allotted time? If not, how will you fill it?
- **Aims** – also keep considering what you wanted to get out of the interview in the first place. Are you still heading in that direction and staying on course? There may be situations where a guest says something so interesting that you decide to veer away from your planned question areas to investigate another train of thought. Usually that's OK, but not necessarily always. If you do change course, think how you may want to get back on track to end the interview where you had intended.
- **Listener** – don't forget them while all this is going on. What's actually coming out of the radio? Has the interview got a bit incestuous (you and the guest talking about 'in' subjects which exclude the audience)? Is the conversation flowing logically? Are there too many breaks and are they in sensible places? Is the listener getting from the conversation what they were promised, or what they expected, or is there a little bit more? Maybe a surprise revelation or personal anecdote. Don't forget to occasionally re-establish the name of the station and who the guest is, for new listeners who are joining all the time.
- **Kill** – what are you going to do when the interview ends? Will you merely thank the guest, or do a summary of the conversation, or mention their book or song again? Then what happens? Have you got the next item cued? And what about the item after that (you'll inevitably spend a minute or so thanking the guest off-air and saying goodbye)? If you're going to go straight into another speech segment, how will this sound to the listener? If that item is travel, from a remote studio, how will you be able to dial them up and check the line and presenter's name if you're talking on-air yourself?

At the end of the interview

When you're nearing the end of the interview, don't say '... and finally!' The guest may give such a great answer that you *have* to follow it up! If you do say '... and finally' in a pre-recorded interview, perhaps to signify to a nervous interviewee that you are nearly done, make sure you leave a short pause at the end of those two words, for easy editing. Saying 'briefly ...' or 'one last thing ...' will also signify to the interviewee that you're nearly finished.

Finish the interview on a high note. Most people will remember how it started and how it ended, rather than the bit in the middle.

Copies of interviews

It's very unlikely that you'll ever provide these at your station. It's usually an awful lot of time and trouble to cassette something up, and usually only done if the request comes from a valued contact.

There are various ways you can get out of agreeing to dub-off a copy:

- 'If you'd asked before I could've recorded it as it was broadcast.'
- 'Oh no. Didn't you ask a friend to record it for you at home?'
- 'I'm sorry, we don't keep copies of the interviews once they've gone out.'
- 'We're so high-tech here, you know we don't even use cassettes, so I can't dub off a copy for you.'
- 'I'm so sorry it's been broadcast now and we don't have any copies. Though there is a theory that all radio and TV waves go out into space and it's only a matter of time before they come back'. (This idea is one that scientists seem to agree on: that radio shows from the '20s are coursing through space at around 186,000 miles per second. And if space is curved as is thought and one day we work out how to travel faster than light, we'll be able to hear them all over again!)