



20 Essentials For Successful Interviews

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You've just finished your first message point on the morning drive-time radio program and you are feeling more comfortable with the whole morning radio scene. The show host then says, *"Well, thanks very much for being with us Mr. Tomas and for giving us that great insight into refinancing our homes. Right now though, we have to go to Chopper Dan in the WIFM news copter. How's the traffic out there Dan?"*

Wow, you were just settling in and getting comfortable and now you are being escorted out the door. You didn't make any of the 10 deadly mistakes with media people, so what happened? You simply did not understand some of the basic essentials for successful interviews. One of those is to know the time and format for every interview you do. Two minutes on morning drive radio seems to go by in about "10 seconds"!

Aside from interview skills and techniques, you must know these interview essentials to succeed. Much of your success depends on knowing the type of media you are doing. Radio? Television? Newspaper or Magazine? Will your interview be live or taped? Long or short format? Fast news coverage or a long informative, public service type show? If you don't understand these basic elements and adjust your message accordingly, you will find yourself in a very awkward position, perhaps losing the opportunity to communicate.

Here are the general rules for each type of media:

Radio (Live): Be animated and up-beat. Use lots of emphasis and inflection and be conversational. Be informative, fun and even funny if that works for you and

the show (use your own judgment). Remember to use the reporter's or host's name.

Radio (On Tape): Ask the reporter if the interview will be for sound bites for an edited piece later. If so, pause before answering, speak in sound bites, then stop and wait for the next question. If you're on the phone, you may hear some clicking in the background, but don't let that bother you. If the show is live-to-tape, treat it like a live interview, but be sensitive to the host's cues about wrapping up for commercial breaks and for the end of the show.

Television (Live): Speak directly to the reporter or host most of the time, addressing the camera if making an important point or if taking a caller's question. Use visuals; keep answers short but conversational (a live TV setting is not the place for sound bites). Be actively involved, up-beat, and positive.

Television (Taped): Deliver message points in the form of sound bites. Look only at the reporter, and don't worry about visuals since the edited report will incorporate your piece into the video the reporter has already shot for the story. Pause before answering, don't use the reporter's name and don't look at the camera. Try not to use references to time of day or season – the reporter may want the story to be timeless (or at least be usable at a slightly later time or date).

Here are the 20 Essentials:

1. **Know the name of your hosts**

Know your hosts' names and use them when responding to questions. This helps dramatically to connect with the host and shows the audience you are attentive and involved. The only place this does not apply is in a taped

interview, because the reporter you speak to may not be the reporter who airs the story.

2. **Know the format**

Be sure to check out the format of the show in advance and get a feel for how much time you will have. You want to have enough time to make your key points. Frame your answers in a variety of different time settings so you can do short newscasts and longer format talk shows. The worst thing you can do is to get caught up in general “chat” at the beginning of an interview and let your valuable time slip away. Knowing the length of your interview will let you determine how quickly you need to get to your message points, and how long you can spend on each one.

3. **Know what you want to say**

Never go into an interview thinking “I know my subject better than anyone and I don’t have time to practice. I’ll just wing it!” That is a media disaster in the making. You may very well know your subject extremely well in your office or practice setting. But in the highly distracting environment of a television or radio station, it is amazing how key points leave your mind. Make a list of your key points and keep these in your mind (maybe even in your pocket). In every interview you should plan on making at least 3 key message points. If the interview begins to stray from your subject, learn good bridging techniques to get the interview back on your subject.

4. **Be proactive**

It is easy to get involved in a chatty conversation with the show host that chews up valuable media time and steals your opportunity to deliver your message points. If the host does not lead you toward answering questions in your key message area, then it’s up to you to find a way

to deliver message points. Answer the reporter's question quickly and then use some kind of bridging statement, such as "*another thing I want to add is...*", "*and don't forget...*," or "*before we run out of time I have to tell you...*" If you do not master this technique, you will do some interviews that follow only the reporter's agenda. You will look back only to find that you did not deliver your key message points. That ends up being a waste of your time.

5. **Get To The Point!**

The most effective answers in any medium are very short! This will take some practice, because we don't normally speak so succinctly. Sound bites in electronic media are the same thing as good quotes in the print media. Either way, your job is to deliver these in a natural, conversational way that leaves the reader, listener, or viewer, with a short, clear point they will remember. In order to accomplish this important essential, you must "craft" your answers in advance. Careful crafting of message points is extremely important as it becomes the "take-away" message of your entire interview. It takes time, talent and practice, but is essential in the art of delivering memorable points in the media environment.

6. **Buy time if you need it**

If you are caught off-guard, tell the interviewer you don't quite understand the question and ask him to rephrase it. Or you can recast the question yourself; "*If I understand your question, you want to know...*" This gives you a moment to think and perhaps re-work the question so it is more favorable to your position. You can even use this technique to rephrase a question so that it more properly aligns with your message points. But by all means, do not begin to answer a question that you are not sure of, especially when it does not lead in the direction you wish to go. While you must give reporters what they need, you

also need to control the interview to your favor and deliver your key points.

7. **AVOID “ers” and “ahs”**

This is the so-called “Ted Turner Disease.” You have a very brief window to the world and every second counts — don’t waste your time with useless words! The audience will be bored and you might look uneducated or unprepared to the audience. “Ers” and “ahs” occur when you have not properly practiced your delivery and your mind is thinking about what it needs to say. It is very difficult to “edit on the fly in your mind” that is why you must craft answers and rehearse them in advance. When you are well-rehearsed and confident, these problems should begin to disappear.

8. **Have a jargon-ectomy!**

Plan now to get rid of highly technical language. Jargon, or complex words specific to your industry, are wasted seconds in an interview and may tend to put your audience off or, worse yet, make them change the channel! You have years of understanding and deep comprehension of these concepts – that’s what makes you an expert. But an expert communicator knows how to take the “\$50” words and demystify them so that all can understand. This is a talent that comes with time and learning to craft answers. I often use the rule: Say it to “Mom”. If you can take your subject, say it to your Mom, and have her come away with a clear understanding, you have done a good job of communicating. Remember, a TV or radio audience generally has an eighth-grade average comprehension level. That’s what you are shooting for!

9. **Use specific examples**

Where possible use solid, specific examples to help make your point. Instead of saying *“Insurance will pay a certain percentage to the policyholder after certain criteria and deductibles are met.”*; you could use a simple example, such as, *“I recently had a medical case where the bill was \$1,000 and the insurance company paid \$800 of that!”*

Be direct, concise and practical. This too takes practice. If you are abstract, (as many experts are) the audience will not understand you. Audiences do not like to be made to feel stupid. If your audience begins to feel like they are “not getting it”, they will tune you out! Then you will have lost your valuable opportunity to communicate. Specific examples also need to be well written and crafted in advance. Take the time to practice them out loud. Then you will find examples easy to use in your interviews and more people will understand your points.

10. **Be gracious and courteous**

If the interviewer’s question shows ignorance, (and many of them do), be kind. Say something like, *“Actually, that’s a common misconception. The way it works is...”* This is the perfect opportunity for you to smile and deliver one of your well crafted message points. In soft news, most reporters will not bagger a guest for an answer, so you can deliver a message point no matter what is asked. With practice, delivering message points after almost any question will actually become natural and not appear contrived to the listener.

11. **Always be truthful!**

If you don’t know the answer, say so. *“I don’t know, but I can find out for you...”* If you don’t want to answer a particular question say, *“I can’t discuss that because of company policy,”* (or security reasons). No one is going to criticize you for being honest and admitting you don’t know something. Once you’ve said, *“That’s a good*

question, I don't know..." then, bridge to a positive... *"but what I can tell you is..."* Bridging is one of the most important skills you can learn. You should always be able to bridge from a question you don't know, or one that you don't want to answer. And always bridge to a message point!

12. **Arrive early!**

Producers hate worrying about a late guest and the "hole" in their show they will have to fill if he doesn't show up. Also, if you cut your time too close; you are more likely to be keyed up and nervous. Some producers will completely cancel a guest and fill the time with something else if the guest does not arrive by the time the show starts. It helps everyone if you get there at least 30 minutes early. Some producers will ask that you be there 45 minutes to one hour early; usually to accommodate a rehearsal or to check your visual props. When you check in at the front desk, be sure the receptionist lets the producer know you are there!

13. **Bring your visuals!**

Have props, graphics and perhaps even B-roll (video footage) ready for use. Show your props to the producers in advance so that they can begin planning the use of video, close-ups, or even pre-produced graphics. Ask about graphics (lower-third screen name keys, or supers and full screen graphics) so you can correct any mistakes in advance — another reason to get there early! Even without a visual, full-screen bullet points can be very helpful in making sure your message is seen as well as heard. Pre-production visual work needs to be done well in advance and even 30 minutes before the show is too late. Send your visuals to the show several days in advance if you can. If not, then be there one hour before show time and don't expect miracles.

14. **Meet the hosts**

Find out what the hosts are looking for in your interview and check your chemistry. Frame your interaction to match their energy and style. Even if you have to be artificially “up”, it’s best to match their energy level. Otherwise, you might seem dull in comparison. This is the part of giving television interviews that is much like acting. You may be a world-renowned expert, but if you are reserved and quiet, you could come across as dull and slow next to the energetic show host who is hyped on caffeine. Think of this as your opportunity to show the world your enthusiasm for what you do. What you do is fun and exciting – that is how you should come across to the audience. Sit on the edge of your seat to help your attention and energy level.

15. **Dress for TV**

Wear dark blues or grays. Accent your outfit with a bold scarf or tie. Avoid patterns, stripes, red, trendy fashions, logos and big jewelry. Far too many people dress too casually – especially for mass communications. A thousand to a few hundred thousand people will see you. Why wouldn’t you want to look your best?

Few local stations offer make-up, so take your own and make time well in advance to apply what you need. (This is another reason to arrive early.) If you do not know what type of make up to use, ask a professional (or try the makeup counters at large department stores) and buy what you need. For women, your usual make-up, applied a bit heavier, should work. For men I recommend Max Factor Pancake make up applied with a small sponge. I can apply this in less than a minute – and sometimes that’s all you have. National shows will typically send you to make-up and apply it according to their lights and style. I’d suggest you always accept their offer and let the

professional do your makeup. Lighting in studios varies and you could appear off color without the right make-up tint.

16. **Watch your posture**

Many shows have large upholstered chairs and couches. They all seem to put you in a horrible position for giving an attentive interview. If you sit back, you will look disconnected and disinterested. The reaction for the audience is to also become disinterested. Sit up, and act attentive and involved. Sit on the edge of the seat, like you are excited and happy to be there. Avoid chairs that swivel or rock. It's too easy to unconsciously get to swiveling or rocking, making you appear nervous. Lock your feet to the floor.

17. **Be relaxed and alert**

Don't fidget or display other nervous body language (such as nail biting). Deep breaths will help you relax, and coffee will help you be mentally alert. Your mind will have to edit, adjust, and calculate a great deal of information during the interview. Thinking well on the spot comes from a great deal of practice. Keep your eyes fixed on your host to keep you focused. Smiling helps you relax and makes you look accepting. Handling props helps some people relax, while a light "banter" with the host will also help loosen you up. A relaxed delivery is easy on the eyes and ears.

18. **Use gestures properly**

Hand gestures are good and show that you are involved and relaxed. They can even help you make your point and displace pent up energy. However, they become distracting when overdone and may distract from your facial expressions. Use hand gestures moderately and keep your hands away from the space between the

camera and your face. Props and other visuals will help you use your hands naturally and relax you.

19. **Know when to look into the camera**

In most interview situations you will **not** need to address the camera. Keep your eyes focused on the reporter or host and deliver your points through them. Some producers are adamant about this. However, there are some times when looking at the camera is proper, natural and even expected, such as:

- When you are introduced
- When you are making a strong point
- When you feel it is right to include, draw in, or involve the audience
- When taking callers' questions

When doing a remote or satellite interview you should ALWAYS look into the camera.

20. **Send a thank you**

This can help you get your foot in the door for another appearance. Plus, it is always good to have friends in the media! Emailed thank-you notes are fine. You may even follow-up with a phone call to the reporter/host/producer's voice mail thanking them for the segment and offering yourself as a source for similar subject material or future segments.

Following these 20 essentials will help you give successful interviews every time. You'll know you've done a good job when they say it went well and that they'd like to have you back. Congratulations! Get their contact information and send the producer another story idea in about 30 days. Remember, publicity is an ongoing process.

