



# **50 Interview Tips Only The Pros Understand**

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Giving a good interview is simple, but not necessarily easy or natural. **Here's the mantra: Prepare & Practice, Keep it Simple, and Never Wing It!** It's that simple. But when you actually practice these things with message points, it's not easy!

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Professional spokespeople with years of experience understand these principles along with all the gory details. They understand that the person being interviewed must control the interview and deliver message points while still meeting the reporter's needs. Your goal in an interview is to educate, deliver message points and control the interview while under pressure. This task is about 50% learned skills, and 50% natural ability - "that something special" that makes a good radio and TV presence

### Your goal in any interview is two-fold:

- 1) Meet The Reporters Needs
- 2) Deliver Your Message Points

### 50 Interview Tips That Pros Understand:

1. **The type of preparation depends on the type of media.** Your interview preparation and performance depends on the type of media you are doing. For television, you must prepare differently for a live program than for a taped program.

In a live TV setting, you have to be right on-the-money because there is no second chance. Rehearse more, especially if you have items to demonstrate or use as props. Also time your

rehearsal to be sure you can make your points in the expected time slot.

In a taped setting, find out if the interview will be a short sound-bite type of interview, or a “live-to-tape” longer format. For a sound bite taping, rehearse your message points well so you can deliver them within the context of very short answers. A “live-to-tape” show should be treated as though it were live (so you don’t have to start over).

Get a mental picture of your interview in advance of your interview day. This is done by getting to know the show; watching it in advance. Get a feel for such things as: are the hosts intrusive, or will they let you make your points, will you be sitting at a news desk or in a living-room setting, does the show use a serious news format, or is it more of a “happy talk” variety-format, will your interview be very short, or will you have plenty of time to make your points. The best way to be aware of these important considerations is to watch the show in the days leading up to your interview. Become familiar with the style of the show and what other guests are doing.

2. **Radio is different.** For radio, you must also prepare and deliver differently depending on the format. Live radio is very conversational; you typically have more time to make your points. For taped sound bites, be very concise and wait a brief moment before you answer a question. In contrast, public service shows may run 30 minutes to an hour. You’ll need to take plenty of time developing your topic to fill the time. Morning drive-time shows are crazy. Be ready to match the DJs’ insane level of energy. Have lots of coffee that morning!

- 3. Remember to use visuals.** TV is a visual medium. Without visuals, TV is just radio! You don't want to be just a "talking head". Therefore, plan ahead to bring the best visuals you have. Any producer is going to ask you in advance if you have visuals. Bring product samples, models, video (either a video news release or even raw footage of a very interesting case example), pets, exercise equipment, or gadgets – any items that will help make your segment visually appealing. Using visuals will make the interview go easier! By focusing the viewer's and reporter's attention onto the visuals, you can focus your thoughts onto your message points as the camera zooms in on your item. Use your visuals to drive home your message points.

This also applies to radio interviews. It's amazing how much easier it is to draw a word picture when you have the visual in front of you and the host.

- 4. Make your points early.** No viewer or listener is going to remember more than about 2-3 key message points. As disappointing as this may seem after days of preparation, it is true. You must hone your message to the most important key points and deliver them early in the interview. You will be surprised at how fast 2-3 minutes is chewed up with host happy talk! If you save "the best for last", it may never happen. Get your most important message points in early. It's much easier to "fill" at the end of the segment, than it is to cram in your message points in the last, few seconds.
- 5. Say it simply, but completely.** While visuals are important, don't rely on them to tell part an important part of your message. Many people simply listen to the TV, especially in the morning while the family is getting ready for school or work.

So, make your points simply, but completely, as if your message was only heard and not seen

6. **Know your show and your host or reporter.** It's important to have a sense of the style, format, dress, and nature of the program. Upbeat, serious, fast paced, formal or very informal; whatever the setting and pace, plan and practice your interview that way. By knowing the reporter or host, you already have a great idea of how your segment is going to go.
7. **Know your audience.** If your audience is a group of technical or professional peers, you can be more formal and technical, including more professional jargon. If the audience is customers or clients, your job is to educate, instill interest and confidence, and give them a call to action. If the audience is full of potential adversaries, prepare very carefully, exude confidence, make your well-crafted points and move on.
8. **Remember who you are.** You are THE expert ready to teach a few simple points to an audience full of people that want to hear you. Remembering this will give you confidence.
9. **The host is not the audience.** Remember that the reporter or host of a show is a facilitator, and not the audience. You should not try to convince the host or reporter. Rather, simply use the host as a way to get the information to the audience.
10. **If you don't know the answer to a question, say "I don't know".** It's then a simple step to say "I can get you that answer quickly, but I don't have it with me right now." Many people are very nervous about not knowing all the answers. By knowing you can

always say “I don’t know”, you can remove this anxiety. This also shows your honesty and humility.

11. **Pick the question you want to answer.** If a reporter asks several questions at once, pick the one you want to answer. This is done in politics all the time and usually, the reporter or host will simply move on to their next question. Do not feel as though you have to keep track of all the questions and answer them in order. This will occur more often with less experienced hosts or reporters. They may become unfocused and ask any questions that pop into their mind. You should stay focused and answer the question YOU want to answer – which, of course, will be one that contains a key message point.
12. **In some cases, you should repeat the essence of the question in your answer.** This helps both for editing (if the interview is taped) and as a reminder for over-stimulated viewers who need to hear the question again. It is not a normal thing to do and therefore requires practice. It is mostly important in a taped interview where you know that the reporter’s questions will be edited out, or occasionally to emphasize a point in a live setting. However, for a live setting where there is good communication between you and the host, this is not necessary or even desirable. It would quickly get annoying if you did this with every question.
13. **Craft good message points.** Before an interview, write a page or two of Q&A’s about your subject. Craft clear, concise answers, and then store them in a conversational way in your memory.

This is especially important if you are speaking on a technical subject. Most experts simply know too much to give a good interview! They tend to use

technical terms and give long answers that contain years of historical understanding and insider terminology (jargon). The media hates that.

14. **Give good sound bites.** Speak in sound bites - brief, to-the-point statements that deliver a key message point. Although we don't normally speak this way, it's what the media wants! This takes practice. Even in a longer format interview, sound bite-type answers make for a clearer interview.
15. **In a taped interview, YOU add facts, color and credibility.** In a taped interview, YOU are not telling the story – the reporter is. The reporter wants you to add color, credibility, facts and expertise to his or her story. Therefore give the reporter a “tool box” of sound bites with which to better tell the story.
16. **In taped interviews, take a brief pause before answering a question.** This makes it easier for an editor to create the finished report.
17. **Give good quotes.** Newspaper reporters are looking for the same thing as television or radio reporters, but they call it a good quote. A long, rambling, and unfocused explanation requires editing and often will never see the light of day. Worse yet, it may allow the reporter to interpret and edit your words his way, taking control of the message away from you.
18. **Be enthusiastic.** In everyday conversation, we are usually fairly reserved. That can translate into boring for a TV or radio audience. So, be happy and upbeat, projecting enthusiasm and excitement about your subject. But don't go over the top.
19. **Be proactive.** If a reporter doesn't ask you a key question, bring it up yourself! *“One other thing I'd*

*like to mention...*” or, *“Oh by the way, did you know...”* I also like, *“Before we go I have to show you this....”* It’s hard for reporters to say no to that.

20. **Be truthful.** The worst thing that can ever happen in an interview is to get caught in a lie! A tough interview where you must defend a difficult position or cover-up corporate mistakes is where they separate the “men from the boys”. Carefully craft your answers to all the difficult questions you can imagine and answer them the best way you can – without lying! If you lie, a good reporter will know it and make you look foolish. Reporters love that kind of thing.
21. **Use brief examples or cases to drive a point home.** This simplifies what would otherwise take many complex sentences to explain. Practice “boiling” your key points down to brief, easy to understand case examples. *“I spoke with two emergency room doctors yesterday who report seeing increased numbers of rollerblade-related injuries.”*
22. **Don’t be too slick or over-prepared.** Reporters hate this. Be real, honest and use common sense in your approach to the interview. Although you must practice and rehearse your answers, do not quote your answers by rote memory. Do not keep repeating the same key message point no matter what question the reporter asks. Remember, your goal is to deliver your message points AND meet the reporter’s needs.
23. **Don’t be too anticipatory.** It’s an art to make radio and TV interviews seem like natural and flowing conversations. Inexperienced interviewees sometimes rush into delivering their rehearsed message points without allowing the host or reporter

to establish a conversational tone to the interview. If you anticipate questions you'll seem nervous, over-prepared and artificial. Practicing the interview at home makes this easier and more natural.

24. **Be sure to practice the “hot seat” questions – the ones you most DO NOT want to be asked.** These questions usually have to do with money issues, personal remuneration, and other key areas that you or your company would like not to wander into. If you craft, and then practice your answers to these questions, you won't be caught off-guard when they are asked. You will be ready to answer and then bridge over to a key message point. You should never say to yourself “*Gee, I just hope they don't ask me about \_\_\_\_\_*”. That will only make you nervous and complicate your interview. Practice the “Gee I hope they don't ask me that” questions and you will be confident and polished.
25. **Role-play during your practice.** It's not enough to talk through your Q&A sheet, or read your message points. You must speak the words out of your mouth and get feedback from others as to how you sound. Have a friend play reporter and set up an environment that simulates the interview setting. This helps more than you would expect and will benefit you in every case. Even the pros do this with their spouse, co-worker, or even a mirror if that is all they have. You will be amazed at the helpful critique you will get, and how much better your interviews will go when you do this uncomfortable exercise.
26. **Cite experts or organizations wherever possible.** (For example the CDC, USDA, or FDA.) This lends credibility to what you are saying.

27. **Use colorful comparisons** to make your point. Ross Perot was a master at this. *“Going to Washington D.C. and making that system all work together will be like teaching an elephant to tap-dance.”* Everyone understood what he was saying. At the same time don’t be silly or too corny. If you can think of a colorful comparison that works – use it. If you can’t, then stay away from this. If you overuse this technique, you stand to lose credibility.
28. **Rhetorical questions are okay.** After making a key message point say something like, *“That sounds good doesn’t it?”* Most of the time a reporter will agree with you. Imagine yourself getting your audience to nod their heads. If you can accomplish this, you have just positively reinforced your message. This is a very effective technique.
29. **A relaxed delivery is easy on the eyes and ears!** Relaxation comes as a by-product of preparation and practice. If you are tense, anticipatory, slick, or show other signs of nervousness or fear, you will distract from your message.
30. **Don’t be afraid to repeat key points.** This is especially true in a taped interview setting, where they will only use what you have given them on tape. If you repeat a key point, they will have twice the opportunity to use it in the finished report. You can even repeat a key point in a live interview, if it feels natural - especially near the end of a segment.
31. **Don’t elaborate – make your key point, then stop!** If you begin to expound, elaborate and give more details, you may open yourself up to questions in areas where you do not want to go. The reporter might follow that tangent, and you will get away from your main message points. It also makes editing more difficult. Make your points, stop, and

wait on the reporter or host to move on to the next question.

32. **Practice your bridging techniques.** What happens when the questions begin to become unrelated to your message? Or when the questions start to become negative or leading? **You bridge!** Bridging involves deflecting the question, or perhaps answering very quickly or superficially, then using a bridging statement to get back on message! Examples of bridging statements are *“but the good news is...”* Or, *“but what’s really important is...”* Or, *“but what I CAN tell you is...”* Or, *“but the key point here is...”* This is a very important technique and **MUST** be mastered. Again, this takes practice. Have your practicing partner attempt to lead you astray or ask some unrelated questions, then practice bridging. The real media pros know how important bridging is, and how to do it successfully and smoothly.
33. **Generally avoid certain topics.** Examples are: litigation, trade secrets, finances, confidentiality, or security concerns. Just stay away from these topics. If you are asked proprietary questions directly, simply state that you cannot talk about these matters publicly. **THEN** bridge to deliver a key message point.

Of course, if the reason for your interview has to do directly with these tough subjects, then preparation, message point-crafting and practice will help get you through a tough interview.

34. **Never use the phrase “No Comment”.** This phrase makes you sound guilty. Instead, use phrases like, *“It’s a bit too early to talk about that... (then bridge with)...but what I can tell you is...”* Or, *“I find that interesting, but that’s all I can say at the*

*moment, (then bridge with...) but what I do know is...* Or, *“That deals with just one aspect of the issue (then bridge with)...here’s what I can tell you...”*

35. **Jokes usually don’t work well in an interview.** Even professional comedians find it hard to make an early morning show or noon news audience laugh. The best policy is to stay away from jokes.
36. **Funny analogies are okay.** (*“Teach an elephant to tap dance”*) This falls into the category of “colorful comparisons” and helps drive home an important point. Analogies should be natural and clear, however.
37. **Avoid using too many numbers.** When you use numbers in your answers, round them to an easy to understand number! *“The number 243,350 becomes about a quarter a million”* or *“1,231, about 12 hundred”*. Communication is more important than accurate numbers in most cases.
38. **If you make a mistake, stop and restate!** If it’s a taped interview you can even simply say: *“I’d like to do that over”*. Don’t get flustered. In a live setting simply say, *“I’d like to restate that”* or *“I’d like to go back to something I said earlier”*. These types of statements are perfectly acceptable. In fact, it shows you are paying attention and want to more clearly communicate your points.
39. **Nothing is “off the record”.** Don’t get “chummy” with the reporter - that’s when the “off the record” stuff happens. It helps to remember that it is not the reporter who you are trying to convince. The host or reporter is simply a facilitator for your message to the audience.

40. **If you find yourself getting angry, control it.** When you care deeply about your subject and a host is making light of something in your segment, it is natural to start feeling upset. This can also happen when a reporter decides to be a devil's advocate and take the other side. This does happen and it's always difficult to handle. Stick with your message and deliver your points confidently and with authority. Your confidence and professionalism will come through to the audience.
41. **Relax and breathe.** This sounds simple, but when we get nervous, we have a tendency not to breathe as deeply or as regularly. Simple relaxation and breathing techniques will help you relieve tension, stay focused and deliver your message well. Practice these techniques in the "green room" and take a few deep breaths just before you go on.
42. **Sit on the front part of the chair.** Never lean back, as this makes you look uninterested in the subject. This is especially important when you visit a set with big over-stuffed chairs and couches. Sit on the edge of these chairs and lean toward your host.
43. **Beware of swivel chairs!** These are prevalent in news sets. It is easy to get to rocking or swiveling without being aware of it, making you look nervous. You have to make a conscious effort not to swivel.
44. **Use hand gestures, but use them carefully.** Gestures help you keep a good pace, and make you look alive and involved. But don't over do it. Also make a conscious effort to keep your hands away from your face.
45. **Maintain eye contact with the host or reporter.** This is proper technique when being interviewed

and actually helps keep you relaxed and unworried about the camera and studio.

46. **Don't look at the camera unless specifically asked to do so.** Most of the time as a guest, the host and producers will want you to look at the host. However, in a studio with three or more cameras you may be asked to follow the camera (red "cue" light). Do this only if you are experienced. Otherwise you may end up "chasing the cameras" much of the interview. Following the camera cue is something that requires practice. If you are going to be a regular contributor, ask your producer to let you into the studio during off hours to practice looking into the camera, and perhaps reading the teleprompter.
47. **Exercise your voice before going on and drink something hot.** This helps open up "the pipes". Coffee also helps keep your energy level up, especially in the morning. Stay away from carbonated drinks before an interview!
48. **What to wear?** Wear business or business casual clothing, preferably in dark colors for television. Navy coats are conservative and trustworthy. Don't wear stripes, plaids, goofy prints, red shirts or blouses, clothes with logos or dangling jewelry. And please, doctors, NO WHITE COATS! White coats make you look cold, sterile and unapproachable. Keep accessories to a minimum. Always wear a smile!
49. **Wear Makeup.** Without makeup on a television set, the bright lights will wash you out and leave you looking sickly. Remember, you will most likely be sitting next to Ken-and-Barbie-like hosts. They will look "marvelous"! So you need to look your best. It is important to prevent shine on your forehead and

give yourself a little color. For ladies, normal make up is usually fine, perhaps applied a little heavier. Men can generally use a Max Factor pancake makeup slightly darker than their skin tone. Trim your beard, and use hairspray to fix any fly-away hair.

50. **Become an avid radio listener and TV viewer; listen and watch critically.** Great places to watch intensive interviewing skills are the cable news networks, such as Fox News, CNN and MSNBC. Watch and listen to other people being interviewed, especially professionals. Critique their performance, noting what you would do to improve and what you liked. You will learn a great deal just by understanding the end product of the medium.

What is the bottom line? Prepare & Practice, Keep It Simple and Never Wing It! After almost 23 years and 4,500 interviews I still practice before every interview – you should too!