

How to Conduct Excellent On-Camera Interviews

By Jim Staylor

What makes a good on-camera interview? To viewers, a good interview is both informative and entertaining – it contains something they want to know presented in an appealing manner. The interviewee appears comfortable, credible, and cogent. If the content is important enough to them, viewers may even overlook or forgive lower entertainment value.

To the interviewer, a good interview involves the right person in the right environment with the right crew and equipment. Unfortunately, when you need someone to share thoughts or feelings in an on-camera interview, a lot can get in the way. This article contains ideas and insights to help eliminate obstacles and set the stage for your success.

THE INTERVIEWEE

A good interview starts with the choice of your subject. Ideally the person you interview is the right stakeholder with appropriate experience or investment in the topic. It helps if he or she has some “stage presence” and is comfortable on camera. Give your interviewee a general sense of what you want to discuss, but unless you want a rehearsed or canned answer, try to avoid giving the questions ahead of time. Spontaneous answers – straight from the heart -- always sound more genuine. If, for whatever reason, you are required to provide the questions ahead of time, strongly encourage interviewees to not memorize answers. Recommend bullet points instead.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Interview locations and backgrounds help set the stage, provide context, and reinforce credibility. You’ve seen lawyers interviewed in front of law books and doctors near credentials. Interview a train conductor on or near a train. Interview a musical conductor on stage or out in front of the concert hall. You can use an office to show where someone works, but dress it up to make the environment more interesting. Remove messy piles of paper (unless the story is about messes or how to organize, etc.) Move plants and furniture around to create suitable space for your equipment and to manage the foreground and background. Cast a light with patterned shadows along the back wall. It’s often better to have an executive sit on the front edge of his or her desk rather than appear “trapped” behind it. When a good location is not readily available, B.Y.O.B. – bring your own background. For example, drape a large piece of material over some stands or tape it to a wall. Be creative when you select interview locations.

LIGHTING FOR INTERVIEWS

Have a consistent process. Position your camera and subject and use a monitor to see what’s happening as you build the lighting. Video cameras requires sufficient light to record a decent picture, so you will always have a better image when you add and manage lighting – even when using modern digital camcorders that claim to work in low light situations. With basic 3-point lighting you place a key light slightly above and to one side of the camera. Normally the key light is on the side where the subject is looking. A fill light on the other side will counter some of the shadowing created by the key light. The backlight should create a rim effect around the head and shoulder of the subject to provide separation from the background. Sometimes it’s sufficient to have a single

soft light with or without some reflected light filling the other side. Set up your lights and move them left and right, up and down, closer and farther one at a time until you achieve the desired affect. Create a more dramatic effect by experimenting with conventions. Outdoors, you can use sunlight and a reflector. In certain outdoor situations, it works nicely to place the subject in a shaded area and indirectly reflect the sunlight.

AUDIO FOR INTERVIEWS

On the fly, newscasters may use a handheld microphone stuck in the face of someone, but ideally a small lavalier mic positioned in the center of the chest works best for most interviews. Place your lavalier microphone on the subject during make-up to be less invasive. As a safety back up, record the other channel with a shotgun mic either on the camera, mounted or boomed toward the subject. Always have someone monitor the audio for technical quality and noise while you are setting up and during production.

SUBJECT AND CAMERA PLACEMENT

Where you place the camera in relation to your subject and background has a profound effect on the look of your interview. Nothing spells amateur more than a perfectly centered head in front of a generic background. To determine the best screen placement for your interviewee, use the rule of threes. Imagine two horizontal and two vertical lines on your monitor or viewfinder dividing the screen into thirds in both directions. Position your camera so the subject’s eyes are at the upper left or upper right intersection of the imaginary lines. This applies to full body wide shots to extreme close ups.

Consider camera height relative to the subject’s sightline. You can increase or decrease perceived authority by how high or low you set the camera. When a camera aims down on the subject, he or she appears subservient. A lower camera looking up to an interviewee, gives greater perceived authority and credibility. You can play with exaggerated camera angles and framings to create an interesting effect. There’s a school of thought that says, unless the camera is moving the whole time, the shot will not be interesting. (see sidebar) Experiment with this after you have mastered solid, standard interview camera techniques. A straightforward informational interview will be more readily accepted by the viewer, however, when you keep the camera close to eye level and relatively neutral.

When there’s room, place your subject far enough in front of the background to throw the background slightly out of focus. In addition to keeping shadows off your background from the lighting used on the subject, this helps draw more attention to your subject rather than his or her surroundings. A professional videographer will know how to adjust the iris and control the camera’s depth of field to manage which parts of the image are in or out of focus,

Some sort of foreground element is a nice touch to help frame your interviewee. Consider flowers on a low table, a branch reaching into an upper corner of the screen, or anything else pertinent to the interview, such as trophies, products, etc.

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ADD APPROPRIATE MOVEMENT

Move the camera – When motivated by subject matter or audience expectations, you might venture a zoom in or out, pan left or right, tilt up or down on your subject during the interview. Consider changing the physical position of the camera with a truck closer or farther, dolly around, or pedestal up or down for a new and interesting angle or framing on your subject.

Move the subject – If you’ve lit a specific area to conduct the interview, you’ll want to stay there, but no rule says you must restrict an interview to one place. To help illustrate the topic, you can present different answers from different locations. If it makes sense, you can move and talk with someone on a horse, bike, racing car, escalator, or whatever.

Move the background – Again, pertinent to the topic, show some action behind the interviewee unless it might become too distracting. Examples: skater near a busy skate park, zookeeper near active animals, traffic official near a busy street, etc.

INTERVIEWER PLACEMENT

Unless your subject is a professional spokesperson or being interviewed remotely, don’t have them look directly into the camera. Many people are not comfortable talking to a camera. Save them the discomfort and get a better interview by having them focus on answering your questions as if the two of you are just having a conversation rather than how they are supposed to look into the lens, etc. You’ll also make them more credible since they won’t look like they are trying to “sell” anything.

If you are the interviewer, you should sit or stand next to the camera with your eyes in line with the center of the lens. Check the monitor to make sure you are getting a good angle and the desired look.

COACH FOR OPTIMAL SOUNDBITES

(see separate interviewer guidelines)

To get brief, complete, stand-alone answers, you will likely need to coach your interviewees. I try to cover these points before every interview with something like: Since I won’t be in the interview, we need your answers to be self-contained. Please include the spirit of the question in your answers. Don’t just repeat it but blend it into your answers. For example – If I ask “what color is the sky?”; You might say, “The sky is blue.”

If you forget to ask for this, you’ll have a lot more trouble when it comes time to edit the interview during post-production. Some people talk in continuous compound sentences. They use “and,” “but”, and “so” and never come to a clean end of a thought before connecting to the next one.

I once interviewed a guy who was so wound up with all his planned answers that when I asked him to tell me his name and title, he did so, then – in a series of rapid fire “ands” with no room for me to cut in – he proceeded to describe his job functions, how each impacts the company, how the company is doing, their plans for the future, and more. I let him keep going because I wanted to see how far he’d go and we had the time. A few minutes later I thanked him and said, “But all I asked for was your name and title.” I knew he had a good sense of humor and would take it well. We all laughed and then conducted the interview with short, sweet, single topic answers.

If you want the interviewee to appear credible, notice and correct the situation when he or she keeps trying to talk to the camera or make eye-contact with the camera operator or anyone else in the room. When someone’s eyes go back and forth between you and anything else, they look shifty and less credible. Some people feel intimidated by cameras and lights. You may need to occasionally remind them, “It’s just you and me talking”, “ignore the camera equipment”, or “never mind the man behind the curtain.”

DESCRIBE THE PROCESS

As you are about to begin, let your subject know how the interview is going to go. Mention such things as: With all these machines – camera, lights, microphones, etc. – we may need to stop temporarily for technical reasons or pause for some environmental factor such as noisy airplanes, etc.; We may even ask the same question again with a slightly different angle: We will need to record “room tone” when you are done so the sound of the space can be added to cover edits if needed.

WARM UP

To help put your subject at ease, ask some lightweight innocuous questions, such as: Where are you from? or What’s your favorite restaurant around here? You may find interviewees too concerned about how they are doing. Be prepared to offer encouragement. Let them know they are doing great and they can focus on answers rather than process stuff.

GET WHAT YOU NEED

Of course, as a good interviewer, you will have all your questions prepared ahead of time. But you need to be in the moment and spontaneous. Ask follow-up questions. As the interviewer, it is your job to get good useable answers. Redirect or re-phrase a question to get a different answer if necessary. Ask for a clean start if the interviewee begins an answer with “um” or anything else that might prevent your video editor from finding a good place to cut. Reframe the camera every once in a while to vary the look of the answers. You may occasionally need to cut from part of one answer to part of another. By changing the shots you can go from one framing to another framing without a jump-cut.

WRAP UP

Ask if there is anything else they would like to add and give them an opportunity to do so. Thank them and get the microphone back. Tell them when and if they might be able to see the finished results. You might also ask if they would be okay with you coming back in case you missed something important.

If you are interviewing someone for one purpose and there could be other reasons to have this person saying something on camera later, consider covering other topics while you are there and already set up. For example, you might interview a corporate executive about a new product for a promotional video and have him record a message to employees, investors, etc.

Choose your interview subjects wisely, manage the environment, place your equipment and self appropriately, and coach for success. You too can work very hard to make it look very easy and get good on-camera interviews.

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