

April 2011

Dear Friend,

OK. So now you know how important articles are to your own marketing. ([January issue](#))

And that research is one of the first things you need to do before you start to write. (Figuring out what your target audience is interested in - and willing to read - is the first item you'll need to research. [February issue](#))

And that research will help you discover which words are the ones your potential customers care most deeply about. Refresh your memory about keywords / care words with the [March issue](#).)

The next step - **The Interview** - connects you with experts on the topic you're writing about. Even if you already know a lot about your topic, interviewing subject matter experts (SMEs) will provide you with a wealth of information you might never have found on your own. *AND* it will provide you with a lot of quotes!

Interviewing people is more than just asking a lot of questions. It requires preparation. Like deciding on the general focus of the interview, writing out the questions you'll be asking, and deciding where the interview will take place.

In this issue, I'll cover not only the basic things to remember when preparing for an interview, but also the types of equipment you may need, and some tips on how to keep the interview "on track" if the "interviewee" keeps straying from the subject.

(Straying from the subject can actually be very helpful sometimes, as long as you know how to work that extra information into your article.)

Interviewing: More Than Just Asking Questions

by Chris Wilson

As a journalism major in college, I got a lot of experience interviewing people. But somehow, it was different when I did it as a reporter out in the "real world."

In the small town where I got my first job with a weekly newspaper, I talked to people from all walks of life: housewives, airline pilots, florists, chimney sweeps, priests, zookeepers . . . and many others. All of those people were willing to talk to me for one reason: they knew where I worked and where my articles would be appearing.

So what do you do if you're *NOT* approaching someone as a staff reporter? What if you're just seeking information on a topic you're writing about for your own business? Or maybe you're writing a book and want to talk to someone who's had first-hand experience in the area you're writing about.

Getting someone to agree to an interview is easy if:

- You take the time to introduce yourself.
- You explain the purpose of the interview and why you think they can help you.
- You set a time limit for the interview and are willing to schedule it for when it's convenient for them.

The Questions

One of the most important parts of any interview is preparing the questions ahead of time. This doesn't mean you can't add some during the interview, but having a list will help keep you on track.

But in order to write the questions, you'll first need to do some research on either the person or the subject matter. Or both.

VERY IMPORTANT: If the interviewee says something you know will make an excellent quote for your article, make sure you get it down accurately. You can even ask them to repeat it, if necessary. Quotes spice up articles and lend more credibility to your information. And they make your writing more personal and readable.

ALSO: If you don't feel the interviewee has adequately answered a question that you feel is important, don't be afraid to ask it again - maybe wording it slightly differently. Being persistent does have its rewards, and getting a question answered to your satisfaction could make the difference between a mediocre article and a great one.

The Medium

Will the information from your interview appear in print, on audio, or on video? Will you be talking to the person face to face, or by phone?

If possible, always do interviews in person. Phone interviews can be successful too, but sitting next to someone you're interviewing can give your story a dimension you won't have when you're just talking to them by phone. The expressions on a person's face, their gestures, or their physical environment are all details that can make your writing "come alive."

The Equipment

A **stenographer's notebook** is my favorite tool for interviews. I can quickly flip a page while the interviewee is talking, without missing anything.

A **camera** is important too, unless you happen to be working with a photographer.

A **tape recorder** is a tool I started using when I began writing on a freelance basis. Those articles were often longer, and being able to replay the conversation often helped with quotes. But I don't recommend using a recorder for short interviews. The time it takes to replay the interview isn't worth it.

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Listed below are some resources that go into more detail on this subject.

RESOURCES

[***You Can Write for Magazines***](#) (Chapter 10: "Interviews That Get People Talking"), by [Greg Daugherty](#). 1999. Even if you never submit an article to a magazine, the chapter on interviewing is an excellent resource, with far more information than I shared in this month's issue.

[***How to Publish Your Newsletter***](#) (pages 134-135), by Carol Luers Eyman. 2006. Even though this book devotes only six paragraphs to the subject of interviews (Chapter 6: "Writing and Editing"), it also mentions several good websites and print resources that can help you prepare for interviews.

[**"13 Simple Journalist Techniques for Effective Interviews"**](#) by [Sarah Stuteville](#). March 26, 2007. An easy-to-read article that breaks down some of the points I made into even smaller "bites."

[**"Ten Tips for a Better Interview"**](#) from [International Center for Journalists](#). October 2, 2007. This article approaches the subject of interviewing differently than the previous one does. Very direct, but also well-written.

If you need help creating high-quality content for your website, please give me a call at **916/801-0480**, or e-mail me at cwilson@worddesign.biz, to set up an appointment for a free, no-obligation hour of consultation.

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