



Tips For A Something-To-Hide Interview

The phrase “something to hide” makes it sound like we’re talking about interviewing a spy or supervillain about their plans for world domination. But really, “something to hide” interviews are about getting information that a character may be hesitant to share. This doesn’t mean they are good or bad people, but it does mean you should tread carefully when structuring your interview. Examples of “something to hide” interviews include:

- (a) Experts who work in Public Relations (PR) and may try to redirect the framing of the story
- (b) People who have created products or services with controversial/unintended consequences
- (c) People who stand to gain or lose a lot from the interview (good press, bad press)

While it can feel awkward to probe someone for hidden information, know that it’s part of your mission as a journalist to report as accurately and thoroughly as possible. You are doing your readers/listeners a service by asking thorough questions, and getting to the truth is a powerful reward.

We’ve put together some tips for writing questions for a “Something-To-Hide” Interview

Don’t share your questions ahead of time

Many times, a source will ask to get the exact interview questions ahead of time so they can practice. While this may sound like a reasonable request, you don’t want the interview to sound too rehearsed. Instead of giving away your questions, summarize the general topics you’ll be covering. If you’ll be asking about something very controversial, it’s sometimes good to keep your answers vague. Don’t lie – but don’t give too much away either.

EXAMPLE: “What questions will I be asking you? I’ll be asking generally about candy safety and what consumers can do to stay healthy.”

Start with the easier questions

Blurting out your key question can scare or alienate the person you are interviewing. Start by asking them about themselves and their job. Keep the questions relevant, but save the tough stuff for after they’ve warmed up to you.

EXAMPLE: “Tell me about your company – how did you get to where you are now?”

Let the silence do the talking

If you ask a person you know a question and they don't answer immediately, it can be tempting to fill the silence yourself. But sometimes the best technique is to simply sit in silence until the other person responds. This is especially true when you are asking a difficult or emotional question.

EXAMPLE: "How did that make you feel? ... (silence)"

Go beyond the press release

Press releases are structured by companies and organizations to appeal to journalists – there is often a proposed framing and story arc, easy contacts, and helpful information. But while it is tempting to copy and paste the material you've been given, you'll need to dig a little deeper to give a more balanced view of an event or product.

EXAMPLE: "I read in your press release that you are training high school teachers on gun safety. How do you respond to people who say more guns in schools will make kids LESS safe?"

Press for evidence

Just because someone says something is true doesn't make it so. If someone makes a broad generalization or says something counter to what you've heard before, always ask where the information comes from and to give you an example.

EXAMPLE: "How do you know? Who says?"

Play devil's advocate... carefully

It's likely that you'll need to push back on what someone says if you're talking about a controversial subject. Rather than launching a personal attack, redirect the criticism to another source. That will keep the conversation civil and allow you to proceed with more questions. Still, it's good to ask really hot button questions near the very end of the interview.

EXAMPLE: "How do you respond to people who say e-cigarettes encourage young people to start smoking?"

EXAMPLE: "What about the study that was published in last year's New England Journal of Medicine that found that your product might be toxic?"

Give them a chance to respond

Don't get so enthusiastic in your questioning that you forget to let your interviewee express their side of the story. At the very least, always give them time at the end of the interview to say what they feel they didn't get a chance to say earlier. You may learn something important! Also ending on a nice note will make them more willing to talk to you again.

EXAMPLE: "Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you'd like to share that you didn't get a chance to say earlier?"