

Module 3.2 - Do's and Don'ts for tough investigative interviews

Hi, everyone, my name's Lee Zurik. I'm the chief investigative reporter and news anchor at WVUE-TV in New Orleans and also director of investigations for Gray Television and InvestigateTV.

In this module, you'll learn about investigating for video. We're going to talk about the do's and don'ts for tough investigative interviews, sometimes confrontational, sometimes an accountability interview where you're searching for important answers.

Several tips to give you just right off the top right here. First of all, prepare, prepare, prepare. You have to get ready for these interviews. You can't just go into a tough interview or a confrontational interview without preparing and making sure you know the information. You need to know the information better than the person that you are interviewing.

Second, rehearse. Get someone to help you through this. Rehearse. What will they answer? How will they answer this question? You need to go in there prepared. And one of the best ways to do it is to have almost a mock interview before you do the actual interview.

Get documents in order. You may want to show the person you're interviewing documents in the interview. So, you need to prepare. Mark the documents up, color code them, organize them, stack them in the order that you might be asking questions. So, there's not a lull in the interview that you can instantly put the document right in front of them.

And maybe one of the most important tips for you. Listen, some of the best questions are not the ones you necessarily prepare going into their interview, but something based off of what the person you're interviewing says in the interview. So, listen to what they're doing and ask follow ups. Based off how they answer your questions.

I want to show you an interview we did with the head of a professional fundraising company. He raises money for charities, but these professional fundraisers end up keeping a large portion of the money. We prepared for several days for this interview, noticed how we challenged him and didn't let him control the interview. One more important tip you'll see in this interview. Use your question. The question can be sometimes the most powerful part of how you put this out in broadcast. How they answer that question may tell more than anything. Think of it this way. If someone just provides an answer. No, I didn't do that. It just says one thing there. But if you ask a question and then they say they do that. That may say a lot. It may show how they answer or even don't answer the question. So, use your questions. As you'll see, we did it several times in this story.

Why can't you tell the consumer approximately 75 percent of the money is going to go to the charity and 25 percent will go to us?

Well, you should ask the charity. But my personal view is, if I told you that I need a new contributor. In order to get you to be my new contributor, a large percentage of your initial donation is going to go to cover the costs of getting you to become a contributor. Would you contribute? You might not.

But is that, is that right? That you have to be, you can't be honest with the consumer to get them to give.

Ask the charities.

I'm asking you.

Well, I don't know what you're the company making the call. Whether I'm making the call. I'm not running the organization.

Another tip. You know, it is incredibly awkward in interviews, but really in life. Silence. Isn't that uncomfortable, it's just uncomfortable sitting there in silence, no one talking. I'm not talking, you're not talking. Think about that. In an interview. Don't be afraid. Quite frankly, shut up and wait. Silence can force answers. If they're not answering a question, just wait. Wait for them to answer the question. Here's one with a board member of the state school system. The board provided little oversight over private voucher schools and we wanted to know why and wanted to know if that board should be doing more. Notice the eight seconds of silence. Eight seconds of silence. We play this this full exchange on our TV station. And the silence really said it all here, as you'll see.

The parents doing the research on whether to send their children there.

So, it's on their parents? It's on the parents?

It's a combination of BESE (Board of Elementary & Secondary Education) and parents. But shouldn't BESE be...

Be the only.? No.

Shouldn't BESE, shouldn't BESE be making sure that the schools who are participating in the program are good schools?

I would say that there should be some steps in that direction. Yes.

Ask the questions again and again. If you don't get the answer you like or you want, go back to it. Here's one of my favorite interviews of all time.

I was not entitled to instruct Derek Lewis and I did not instruct him.

And did you threaten to overrule him?

The truth of the matter is that Mr. Marriott was not suspended.

Did you threaten to overrule him?

I did not overrule Derek Lewis.

Did you threatened to overrule him?

I took advice on what I could or could not do.

Did you threaten to overrule him Mr. Howard?

In accordance with that advice. I did not overrule Derek Lewis.

Did you threaten to overrule him?

Mr. Marriott was not suspended.

Did you threaten to overrule him?

I have accounted for my decision to dismiss Derek Lewis.

Did you threaten to overrule him?

...in great detail before the House of Commons.

I know, you're not answering the question whether you threaten to overrule him.

The important aspect of this, which it's very clear to bear in mind, I'm going to be rightfully rude, but. Yes, you. I'm sorry. It's a quite straight yes or no answer.

And I would give you an answer.

[00:05:56] Did you threaten to overrule him?

I discussed this matter with Derek Lewis. I gave him the benefit of my opinion. I gave him the benefit of my opinion in strong language.

At times you can't get an interview, but you still want to hold them accountable. You might need to confront someone.

Some tips. Always ask first. Don't surprise someone. You don't want to go up to someone in a confrontational interview and then to go, Oh, well, I didn't know you wanted to talk to me. That instantly puts you on the defensive. And also, from your viewers perspective goes, well, why did you give him the courtesy of at least letting him know you wanted to interview him? So always ask first. Put it in writing. So, in a story, you can back it up and show documents where you clearly asked for an interview and were clearly either rejected or ignored.

Know, you're two to three questions going in. You're not going to have a lot. You're likely not going to have a chance to ask a lot of questions back and forth. So, you really need to go into the interview. What's my most important question? What do I want to know? Which number two and number three on the list definitely get two? I usually try to go in with three questions.

Here are some examples of some confrontational interviews that we did.

You or your wife falsify campaign documents?

Who are you?

Lee Zuik with Channel 8. Sheriff, can you tell us if you if your wife had falsified campaign documents? If you did nothing wrong, will you tell us? Why won't you answer our questions, Sheriff Angle?

Well, one thing I don't like you.

Why is that, sir?

Because I don't consider you a very good journalist.

Mr. Thorne's. Hey, Lee Zurik. How are you? We'd like to talk to you about how you haven't paid property taxes in 30 years. Sir. Can you talk to us about that? Why not, sir? Do you think it's appropriate for someone who hasn't paid property taxes in 30 years to sit on the Louisiana Tax Commission? If there is an explanation, we'd like to hear it seriously. If there is an explanation for this, can you please tell us?

An interview can make or break a story. Prepare know the topic better than the person you're interviewing. And remember, ask short, tough, direct questions.