

# LIGHTS... CAMERA... INTERVIEW!

Mark Copeman explains how to conduct the best possible interview with a subject matter expert.



In recent months, I've conducted dozens of interviews on behalf of clients in the UK and around Europe. Today it's an interview in Colorado (via Skype); next week I'll be conducting ten separate interviews in a temporary green screen studio we will set up in London. Some are for case study material, some for internal knowledge share and some are around 'thought leadership' subjects.

I rarely watch TV news in the traditional way – I spend my time analysing how TV is made. Camera angles, questioning techniques, interviewing style and set layout are all I see now. It is fair to say I've become quite obsessed with getting better and better at conducting recorded conversations.

## INTERVIEWING REMOTELY

When you interview a subject matter expert inside or outside your business, you might want to think laterally. With experts spread around the globe, consider interviewing remotely...

Skype announced it would no longer

support third-party recording apps, but changed that decision in December 2013. Software such as Vodburner is a great plug-in for recording Skype video and audio calls. This could change again in the future.

Having tested lots of methods, for me there is only really one answer for recording Skype video and that's to use screen capture software, such as Techsmith's Camtasia. On a PC (with a decent spec) this will give excellent capture of audio and video and allow you to focus on the interview itself. You will soon know if your PC cannot handle video capture, as your recorded stream will have lip-sync problems and will stutter as it drops frames. But with the right spec – this is a perfect solution.

If your subject prefers audio only, then [www.voipcallrecording.com](http://www.voipcallrecording.com) offers a completely free, and reliable Skype recorder I've used many times. Camtasia will work just as well.

Size your Skype window at around 1280 x 720px (or less) and set the recording window to 1280 x 720. That way, when you

export the finished video at the same resolution, you'll get no drop in quality. Also, for audio or video recording, make sure that you enable 'record system' audio – which means you'll record the audio coming into your system via Skype. Don't rely on recording through the speakers with your microphone. You want audio quality that's as good as you can get.

You can learn a lot from the huge volume of podcast interviews around. One of my favourites is [www.freedomocean.com](http://www.freedomocean.com). Listen to the natural conversation between Timbo and James – that's one of the reasons it works so well. Timbo is also a good 'framer' – he puts things into context a lot and is a natural guide, summariser and host.

## FAIL TO PREPARE...

Regardless of whether you're interviewing remotely or face-to-face, if you're going to do this a lot, watch (or re-watch) *Frost Nixon*, the movie. The meticulously detailed planning around the questions was quite extraordinary.

Accept you're going to be a nervous interviewer if you don't do this often, (and even if you do). If you're excited or daunted by who you're about to talk to, you will have some nerves, which will be magnified if you don't prepare well. If I'm about to interview someone of stature in the business world, I still get nervous. I overcome that by being very prepared.

Start with the end in mind. Know where the final production will sit. Understand who it's meant for – is the audience internal or external? Also have an understanding of how you want it to look.

Plan your questions carefully. Have them written in front of you. Think about the different permutations of things you could ask. Phrase open questions – how, why, who, when, where. Know your subject, research them (there's just no excuse for not doing this in today's world) and surprise them with what you know – it's OK, it's not stalking – it shows you care. It will also help to engage with them if you've done your homework. Don't be afraid to write down questions which are more personal to them. Expose their personality – that's interesting to listen to.

Think about how you're going to introduce your interviewee – what's the context, their job title, company name etc...? Script it out

if you have to, and it is great to memorise your first 10-15 seconds, so you can get the first few words out confidently.

#### ON THE DAY

If you've planned well, the interview *will* go well. It may not go how you expected, but because you planned for it – you'll be able to cope with different situations.

Greet your interviewee properly, whether online or face-to-face, and aim to create an immediate rapport. They *will* be nervous, unless they do this all the time. They will be even more nervous with three cameras, mics, a cameraman, a green screen, an Auto cue and a set of lights. Your job is to put them at ease. I like avoid the 'interview' word; it is more helpful to say we're here "for a chat". I tell them to ignore the cameras, lights and crew and delight them by saying that they have to look at me (face for radio) for the next 30 minutes. The key is to get them focusing on you, not the environment they are in.

Brief them. Tell them exactly what to expect and what will happen – guide them through the process. Record nothing to start with. Rehearse the interview through. If need be, do that outside the filming environment, away from the cameras at first. Run through the questions with them and get them to give you a couple of comprehensive answers. You can normally tell within about 20 seconds how prepared and ready someone is.

If they are struggling, keep rehearsing, coach them on their answers, suggest ways they might start their sentences to get them in the flow. If they are clearly on top of their game, let them know that and start recording as soon as you can. This will minimise the time they need to be with you – always be respectful of their time – an interviewee is *normally* doing you a favour.

Here's the next really important bit... ask *THEM* if they'd like to add any questions to the ones you've rehearsed. Typically, they'd like to say something you might not have thought of – give them the option of adding something – it could be a real gem you hadn't thought of!

It's then time to hit the record button, whether on camera or microphone.

#### LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION...

Whether behind or in front of the camera (or working remotely), as an interviewer you need to take control at this point. Have your notes balanced (I use an iPad to rest them on). Have a pen ready in case you need to scribble a note and then be their guide.

Speak your opening words correctly and aim to get them right first time. Second takes are invariably worse than first takes in my experience – everything is 'fresher' first time round. If there is a stumble on a question or answer, of course, pause and redo that part, but keep things rolling... you can edit it later. Get the good stuff 'on tape' first. Act as the host. Guide and prompt your interviewee. Don't be afraid to ask additional/different questions to those you've written down. Thorough planning will allow you to do this.

Use your whole body to engage with your subject... Nod, maintain eye contact, encourage, laugh, be natural. Whatever you do, don't sit and stare at your notes as they're talking (I've seen trained journalists do this!). You must keep eye contact.

*LISTEN* to their answers! React to them – don't just ask the next question blindly. Turn it into a conversation. That's what your audience will enjoy. You'll also find the finished production a lot more engaging when you see the rapport.

When the conversation comes to a natural end, ask your subject how they felt it went, ask if they'd like to re-shoot any of their answers, and see whether you missed anything. Keep talking until you're *BOTH* happy it's worked. Make sure there is a call to action at the end ... "Take a look further down the page at more examples"... "if you'd like to know more – do this"...and so on. Think about that in advance!

#### ROUND THINGS OFF

Thank your interviewee – sorry to state the obvious but this is sometimes forgotten. Explain how long it will take you to complete the edit and explain they'll be able to see/hear it before anyone else, to check they're happy with it... Or ask whether they would like to. Most people don't – if they're happy with their performance, they won't need to.

*Publish, promote, rinse and repeat...*

Mark Copeman is the founder of 8:45 TV  
(B2B video production services, interview  
filming and coaching)  
<http://845tv.com>  
Twitter @mark\_copeman

