Interviews: Ask the Right Questions

I just finished teaching a one-week class on creating mini-documentaries at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Aspen, Colorado. (They called it “Visual Storytelling,” I called it “Making Mini-Docs.”)

The class was divided into teams of three people and, each day for four days, each team would plan, script, shoot, edit, and export a four-minute documentary which was due the next day. (I’ve learned that tight deadlines encourage students to focus their thoughts on the task at hand.)

There were two key elements I stressed during the class:

- Set a goal for your documentary before you start shooting.
- Choose your interview questions so that they help you achieve that goal.

Interviews: Ask the Right Questions

PLAN

Planning is not as sexy as production, but it is just as essential. When time is limited – and when is time NOT limited during production – you can’t afford to wander around trying to discover your subject during an interview. You need to have a goal in mind. This doesn’t mean you can’t explore subjects that arise during the conversation, but the best interviews are ones where the interviewer has a clear idea of where the conversation is headed.

In my mind, there’s a difference between planning and scripting. If I am interviewing an artist, I have no idea what they are going to say. But I do have an idea about whether my mini-doc is going to talk about his life, his work, his achievements, or his personal life. Because this mini-doc is only four minutes long, I need to focus my questions to get to the meat of the matter as quickly as possible.

Between my broadcast career and my podcasts, I figure I’ve interviewed on-camera or on-mic well over two thousand people. Almost all of them were not professional actors, but subject-matter experts who are rarely interviewed. Almost all of them were nervous. Almost all of them were convinced they would do a terrible job and didn’t want to be humiliated. ALL of them needed reassurance that, when it was over, they had done a good job.

HANDLING GUESTS

Get all your tech checks done before the guest walks onto the set. MAKE SURE the mic is working properly and recording at good levels. (For my work, I record interviews around -12 dB.)

Before the guest enters the set, I’ve worked out camera angles, framing, lighting, and mic issues with the crew, so once the guest is on set, I just need to verify that the shot looks the way I want once the guest is in place.
Also, before the guest enters, we work out a subtle hand signal to tell the camera when to roll. Shouting “Roll ‘em!!” may be satisfying, but your guest will instantly tense up. We also have hand signals to tell the camera operator to zoom in or zoom out, as well as warn the mic boom operator to get closer or farther away.

Once the guest enters, direct your full attention to them. Introduce the crew, then, let the crew focus on getting final tweaks made. As the interviewer, you need to build a relationship, a rapport, with the guest from the moment they walk in.

Explain the general process of the interview, tell them where to sit, where to look, and reassure them that they won’t die. (Don’t laugh. You’d be surprised at the looks of relief I get when I tell a guest: “And, you don’t need to worry. I haven’t had anyone die on camera…. this week.” They laugh, but they also relax.)

NOTE: I never share questions with the guest in advance. The guest will try to memorize answers, which always sounds terrible. I will share general subject areas, but never questions. Also, if a guest totally blows an answer, I won’t ask the same question again, the second answer will always be flat. Instead, I’ll ask the same question a different way.

I get the guest settled into their chair or location as quickly as possible, while continuing to chat about nothing in particular. This allows the crew to check lights, framing and levels without disturbing me or the guest too much.

NOTE: I can already hear readers saying, “But, Larry, I’m a one-man band.” Its true, many interviews are shot by one person. But I can say from experience that they won’t be as good from either a production or content point of view as an interview where one person is worrying about content and another person is worrying about the tech.

GETTING STARTED

Asking questions is part art and part science. The art is really listening to what your guest is saying. Actors call this being “in the moment;” focusing intently on your guest and what they are saying. The science is in how you construct your questions.

The only way to really be able to listen is to write down key questions in advance. (I tend to write them exactly as I want to say them.) This means that in case I am listening so intently to the guest that I forget my next question, I’ve got it written down. This prevents me from panicking because I don’t know what I’m going to say next.

NOTE: I never hesitate to ask a question that seems relevant. And, if I get really lost, I only need to look at my questions to instantly get back on track.

However, I rarely ask my questions in the order I wrote them, and I often ask questions that aren’t written because they spring from our discussion. In other words, the written questions act as a prompt when I need it, but they are only a prompt, not a crutch.

NOTE: For a fifteen minute interview, I try to create about 18 questions. My general assumption is that it takes about a minute for a guest to answer one question. For live shows I use all of each answer. For taped shows, I select the best parts.

Just before the camera starts rolling for a taped interview, I remind the guest to include my question in their answer. More times than not, they do. And, in almost all cases, their parroting of my question is terrible. BUT, as soon as they repeat the question, they always pause, and, 95% of the time, the next words out of their mouth are a perfect start for the answer. I don’t know why, it just is. In 40 years of interviewing, I’ve
Once the camera starts rolling, I always ask the same first two questions:

- “Even though you are sitting here, under these lights and in front of a camera, I just want to confirm that it is OK to record our conversation.”

Every guest is nervous and every guest feels that they are not in control of the interview. By asking this question, it helps them feel that they are in control, that nothing will happen without their permission, and, in almost all cases, I see them smile and relax. (By the way, no one has ever said “No.”)

- “Just for the record, but not for the interview, may I have your name, title, and company?”

Of all the softball questions, this is the softest. While I’ve had many guests stumble over their title, everybody has a pretty good handle on their name and company. By leading with something this simple, I get several benefits:

- They relax, thinking, “Hey, this isn’t so bad. I know the answer here.”
- I confirm the correct pronunciation of their name, title, and company.
- In the event that I don’t label the clip properly, I can always go back later and figure out who this person was.
- The audio guy can confirm that the levels are good, without jeopardizing any significant questions.

Everybody wins.

At this point, the interview dance begins. And I view it as a dance — I’m leading and they are following.

ASKING QUESTIONS

For me, an interview has an emotional arc, the same as a drama. I always start with easy questions which I never expect to use:

- Tell me about your company?
- What do you do there?
- What got you started in your career?

Simple stuff. Stuff they’ve been talking about forever. Easy questions with easy answers.

Then, I move into the WHAT, WHERE, and HOW questions. These cause the guest to describe specific problems, actions, behaviors. These set up a problem and what was done to solve it. I use these for the body of the interview. I also use “For example?” a lot during this section to drill down into specifics.

Then, I wrap up with WHY questions. These always elicit emotional responses. I never ask a guy a question like “How do you feel?” Very few men are capable of describing their feelings. But they are very good at answering questions like: “Why was this so important?” or “Why did you care?”

The secret code between me and my camera operator is that What/Where/How questions are shot on a medium close-up. But with Why questions the camera needs to zoom into a close-up, because Why questions bring emotions near the surface, where the camera can see them. Close-ups amplify emotions.

Sometimes after an almost-but-not-quite-good-enough answer, I’ll just ask: “Why?” and stay quiet. Generally, by this time in the interview, the guest is comfortable talking to me and wants to show that they
are working with me to create a great interview. That solitary “Why?” causes them to reach down and reveal the emotional core that I’m after for the interview.

During the interview, I’m always listening for that sound bite that starts an interview and the sound bite that ends it. The first bite is almost always in answer to a What question. The closing sound bite is almost always in answer to “Why?”

**QUESTIONS I TRY NOT TO ASK**

I try really hard not to ask questions that start with:

- Could
- Should
- Do
- Can
- Or any other question that can be answered “yes,” or “no.”

Partly this is due to not wanting yes or no answers, which are uneditable. But there’s a deeper reason and it gets back to the goal of the interview that I mentioned earlier. Almost all guests want to please the interviewer. It’s human nature. But they need to be told what would make us happy.

If I ask a guest: “Could you describe the problem?” they don’t know whether to simply say “Yes.” and wait for more instructions, or try to describe the problem. Generally, they stumble during the answer and you get a weak answer with no strong beginning or end and which is very hard to edit.

The way you ask the question determines the answer you get. Ask a wishy-washy question and you get a wishy-washy answers. The only exception to this rule is if the guest has been interviewed by so many ill-prepared hosts that they figure you’re just another dolt and they’ll give you the answer they want, regardless of how you ask the question. Politicians are past masters at this; so much so that it has a special name: “bridging.” Bridging means to “bridge” from the question you were asked to a different answer that you actually give.

At which point, you’ve lost control of the interview and the guest is running amok. I hate those situations!

What / Where / How questions tell the guest you want descriptive answers. Why questions tell the guest, subconsciously, that you want emotional answers. Ask the right questions, and you’ll get the right answers.

Works like a charm.

**WHEN THE INTERVIEW IS OVER**

Just before calling “Cut!,” but when all my questions are done, I always ask the guest: “Is there a question I should have asked that I did not?” This gives them a chance to reflect to see if they want to add, or modify anything. About a quarter of the time, the guest will suggest a great question that I hadn’t thought of.

When the interview is over, the very first words out of your mouth, after “Cut!” should be to the guest. Even if they were a train-wreck, congratulate them on doing a great job. Let them know how good they looked on camera. Reassure them that they did a good job.

While there is a fine line between flattery and down-right lying, telling a guest they were terrible won’t improve your interview. So, you might as well make them feel good as they leave the set.

Only after the guest is gone should you discuss technical issues with the crew.
NOTE: The exception to this is if there is an audio or video problem which occurs during an interview. In which case, I instruct the crew to stop the interview at the end of a guest’s answer so that we can fix the problem. Don’t interrupt the guest during an answer, because it will destroy their concentration and make them all tense again, because they will feel the problem is their fault.

SUMMARY

An interview is a formalized process of sharing information with an audience within a very limited time. When you do your homework, set a goal, write down questions, make your guest feel comfortable and ask questions that generate solid answers, both you and your viewers will benefit. And your guests will think you are a genius!

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