

From the March 21 – 27, 2003 print edition

Public companies

Always Be Too Prepared for an Interview

by Pam Lagano

Being interviewed is giving a performance. For most of us, it's not something that we are accustomed to and the very thought can make us catatonic. When the microphone approaches, even the most articulate, witty, and knowledgeable person can get butterflies and lose it all together.

If you know your subject, the uneasiness usually dissipates as soon as the first words are out and the answers start to flow. Problems during interviews usually occur because interviewees don't adequately know their subject. The main reason they have difficulties is because they don't have the content down or know what they want to say.

Practice Makes Perfect

Let's assume you know your content, because if you don't you're not ready to be interviewed. So the most important thing is to get the content down. You must know what you're talking about, say it with authority, and be convincing. Some important techniques and tips are:

- ✓ Prepare five points to work into the interview. They should be similar, if not identical, to the main points in your press release.
- ✓ Also have another fifteen to twenty subcategories, or three to four under each of the five main categories, to reel off because you never know how long an interview will run.
- ✓ Anticipate the questions that interviewers will ask and prepare answers that include your main points. Study the host's prior interviews to determine his or her favorite questions and approaches. Ask yourself those same questions and work your main points into your answers.
- ✓ Keep your answers and explanations simple. Complex information tends to lose or bore interviewers and audiences.
- ✓ Never try to steal the limelight from the host or interviewer. Your job is to make them look good.
- ✓ Ask friends or family to grill you. Pretend they are Connie Chung or Larry King.
- ✓ When friends and family question you, videotape yourself or stand in front of the mirror. Be conscious of your posture, facial expressions, and gestures. Work your main points into your answers, and ask your interviewers to critique your performance honestly.
- ✓ When friends and family are unavailable to interview you, interview yourself aloud.

Rehearse to make your interview responses seem unrehearsed. Talk to the audience and interviewer, don't make speeches or lecture them. Reword canned replies so they don't sound automatic or robotic. Give them life. Your goal is to connect with as big an audience as possible. Big words, complex theories, and wordy answers may seem impressive to you, but they put most people to sleep.

It's Your Platform

In interviews, take command. Tell yourself it's your interview, your performance, and your only opportunity to sell yourself. Don't wait for the perfect question, it may never come. Be ready to smoothly swing any question to your main points.

Always answer your interviewer's question. If it doesn't involve your main points, just touch on it and then slip into your main points.

Never alienate an interviewer. Good communicators act as if every question is brilliant or insightful even when they're changing the subject to stress their main points. It's the feeling they convey, the way they look, their smile or expression. Interviewers will give you plenty of slack when you make them look good. Similarly, when you take control, don't let interviewers feel that they've lost control.

Never state "off the record." It usually comes back to haunt you.

Prepare for the Unexpected

Prepare for the unexpected. Interviewers frequently meander down dark, back alleys that don't lead anywhere you want to go. Some interviewers will try finding out your deepest secrets, such as you were once charged with insider trading, you've had seven wives, or you finished third on the *Gong Show*.

Obviously, you can't ignore these subjects, so prepare for them. Confront all your ghosts and the skeletons in your closet; practice brief, responsive answers that are honest and sincere.

Respond briefly to the question and hope that subsequent questions will provide you with openings to make your points.

Knowing how and when to slide into your main points takes practice. So be patient, practice, and conduct mock interviews.

Pam Lagano is with Lagano & Associates, a Clearwater-based firm focusing on strategic, high-impact communications for public and private companies. Her company web site is www.laganoassoc.com and she can be reached plagano@laganoassoc.com.