

Things To Know About Being Interviewed on TV

BY ELAINE LEWIS

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Recently, three very high-level professionals, a lawyer, a trial consultant, and a psychologist, expressed frustration about TV interviews they had given. One was annoyed that he hadn't been given questions ahead of time. Another complained she wasn't given enough time to make her points. The third couldn't understand why he wasn't included in the editing process.

These statements indicate that there are a number of misconceptions about the entire TV interview process. What follows is a look at the reality of being interviewed for TV, from what to do when first invited to be interviewed, through what happens at the studio, to what can be expected after the interview.

Getting Ready for the Interview

Preparation. Once the time and place of your TV interview has been scheduled, the most important thing you can do to prepare is to start planning some responses you might give to possible questions. Do not expect to be given questions ahead of time. That seldom happens, but you will certainly be informed about the topic on which you will be commenting. Although good interviewees may look as if everything they say has popped out of their mouths spontaneously, it is rarely true. Great quotable phrases, clear statements of a position, supportive details or stories, are examples of things that need to be thought out before the interview. This does not mean you should memorize material. Memorizing results in a very stiff performance. It means think about your topic. Have in mind main points you would like to make, some statistics you could offer, or other information you think might be of interest.

Not everything you prepare will be something you can use in answer to the questions asked of you, but some of what you prepare surely will be. Trusting inspiration, as opposed to preparation, usually results in a less effective, less informative, and possibly even poor interview. One short, pertinent, well thought out and quotable comment can turn an ordinary interview into an outstanding one.

Planning your wardrobe. Business attire is generally a safe choice in most TV interview situations. However, if you are someone who does not dress for business, consider what you would wear if

you were attending a graduation, or going to court, or attending an event somewhat more formal than going to your place of work. It is not a good idea, nor necessary, for you to run out and buy something new. If you wear something you've worn before you will have no wardrobe surprises. If you don't own business attire, wear what you have. What you choose should be something you like, that fits well, and reflects who you really are.

Within the parameters of type of dress, are considerations of color and pattern. You want to look your best, so you need to be aware that there are certain elements the camera does not handle as well as others. Stripes, patterns, and checks (unless small and very subtle) can distort and be very distracting. Some bright reds can be a problem because the edges of the red tend to bleed and fuzz. High contrasts, such as wearing a very dark jacket with a very white shirt or blouse can cause unflattering shadows on your face. The camera does like bright colors, particularly on women. And soft solid colors are always good on both men and women.

Regarding jewelry, if it wiggles, clinks, or is ultra shiny, don't wear it. The focus should be on your message – not what you are wearing.

Eye glasses can be a problem since they are apt to reflect and prevent the audience from seeing your eyes. If you don't really need them don't wear them. However, don't give yourself an unnecessary problem. If you can't see without, by all means put them on.

When you are comfortable with what you are wearing you can forget about wardrobe and concentrate on the reason for your TV appearance.

Preliminaries on Arrival at the Interview Site

Makeup and Hair. Many television stations have people available to do your makeup and hair. Shortly after you arrive, the makeup room will likely be the first place you are sent. Makeup for men is a base that is put on your face to hide any beard shadow and to even out your skin tone. Getting your hair done generally means wispy ends will be sprayed down. Particularly with HDTV, every blemish or stray hair shows. The camera lens is not forgiving.

For women, having your makeup and hair done is a little more involved. Some women, who are regularly interviewed at the same place and know the routine, arrive bare faced and with hair undone, leaving the complete job for the makeup and hair staff. However, for most interviewees, it is a better idea to appear at the studio having done your hair and makeup as usual. This will let the makeup and hair people know how you like to look. Then they will make improvements. You will be seated in a chair in front of a mirror. On the shelf in front of you will be an arsenal of grooming products, including a box overflowing with all kinds of makeup for face, lips, eyes, and cheeks, a curling iron, combs and brushes, and hair spray. The person responsible for making you camera-ready will go to work, right over what you have done. Generally it comes out great.

If there is no makeup department at the location of your interview, you are of course on your own. With women, who arrive already combed and made up, at least you will look like you always look. For men, take your choice. Get a small makeup base compact to take with you, or just let the beard show. If you are concerned, it doesn't hurt to ask ahead of time about makeup.

The Briefing. A production assistant will tell you things such as where you are to sit, when you are slated to appear in the program, whether or not there will be commercial breaks during your interview, etc. Those who brief interviewees often forget to mention everything you need to know, so ask if

you have questions. For example, if you haven't been told how much time has been allowed for the interview, you should find out. If you learn it is to be very short, which is usually the case, you will know to make your strong points almost immediately to be sure you get them in. Two or three minutes can go by very quickly. If you are going to be interviewed over a long period of time, such as throughout an entire program, you will have time and opportunity to say more of the things you planned.

In the briefing, you should not expect to learn much about the questions. Often this is because they haven't been written. Many interviewers prefer to work from information they have been given on your topic and base their questions on your responses. Not knowing questions before hand is really nothing to worry about. You are an expert on your subject or you would not have been asked on the program. With no advance knowledge of the questions, your responses will be fresher and more interesting.

If you are lucky, you may be introduced to the interviewer before being interviewed, but not always. Sometimes you will not meet the interviewer until it's time for your part of the program. If the interview is remote, you may never meet the interviewer in person.

The Microphone. When it is time for the interview to begin, a microphone will be attached to your clothes with a clip in the area of your upper chest. The microphone, a small, thimble-sized device, is very sensitive, so coughing, throat clearing, or rubbing anything across it are all amplified. If you need to cough or clear your throat, turn your head away. (In some situations it is possible an overhead boom mike may be used, but not as likely.)

If you are to make an entrance, the microphone clipped to you will be cordless with a little battery pack. If you will be introduced while seated, it is more common that the mike will have a wire connected to it. You won't be able to walk anywhere once you are hooked up. You may be asked to say a few words so the sound engineer can be sure the microphone is working and that the levels for you are set correctly. You don't have to count, "testing, one, two, three." Just speak in a normal tone. Say your name or why you are there or anything that lets us hear how you naturally speak.

If the person who is to interview you is in a remote location you will also be given an ear piece attached to a wire so you can hear the questions.

The Actual Interview

Your Introduction. The interview will begin with an introduction of you. If the interview begins with you in your chair, you will probably be instructed to smile into the camera when your name is given. If nothing is said about where to look, look to the interviewer with a pleasant expression and wait for the first question.

If you and the interviewer are in the same room, you can ignore the camera and interact only with the interviewer. If the interviewer is in a remote location you will have to look directly into the camera because that is the only logical place to look to appear to be facing your interviewer.

The TV Cameras. In well-equipped TV studios, the cameras do not have an operator behind them. They are remote and move about like robots. If there is more than one camera, you will know which one is taking your picture because you will see its tiny red light turn on.

When you look into the camera you may actually be looking at a video screen in front of the camera lens. What you see on the screen can vary depending on what the control room puts up for you. Sometimes you see yourself, sometimes the interviewer, and sometimes the screen is black. It can be a little disconcerting to be looking at something that distracts you. By knowing that there are options, if what you are looking at is bothering you and you get a chance in a break, you could ask to have it changed or turned off.

Look Your Best When Sitting and Speaking. Be aware of your posture. Do not slouch or slump or shift around too much in your chair. Since most shots of you will be head and shoulders, you run the risk of getting out of the camera's frame if you move very far, either up and down or sideways, leaving viewers looking at half a head.

Speak in a conversational tone. No need to project. The microphone will do the work for you.

Answering questions. The job of the interviewer is to make you the center of focus by asking short questions that will trigger somewhat longer responses. A good target length is around 30 seconds. In a 2 or 3 minute interview, if your comments are much longer than that, you will only get to speak about 3 times. If you are going to do a long interview, your answers can be a little more than 30 seconds, but keep in mind protracted comments can get tedious and turn off viewers. People do not tune in to TV interviews to hear speeches. The best answers are as short as possible while still being clear. There is usually not enough time for you to give a lot of background before making your point.

If your answer length is appropriate, along with being interesting and informative, there is a good chance you will be invited back again when other issues come up in your area of expertise.

Sound Bites. TV loves a "sound bite." It is short, quotable, catchy and/or provocative. Interviews are recorded, and sometimes sections from them are played at other times on other programs. Remember the line, "If the glove don't fit you must acquit."? It was replayed everywhere.

After the Interview

If the interview is done live, the entire interview, including any goof, will have been broadcast. After the interview there is a possibility some of it will be edited for future use. Do not expect to have any role in the editing process. The station will decide what is most newsworthy and this may not necessarily be what you would like the audience to hear. Once the interview is over, you have no part of what happens to it next.

Before leaving, check to find out if you will be given a DVD copy or your section of the program. Not all stations do this, but some do as thanks for your participation.

False ideas about being interviewed on TV can result in unpleasant surprises. Although interviews can vary somewhat in details, the conventions presented here should provide enough insight into what one can typically expect so that your first, or next, TV interview will be a rewarding, successful, and positive experience.