

Sources and Interviewing

Michael J. Berens

Chicago Tribune

Buffalo 2003 – Better Watchdog Workshop

Good interviewers expose themselves in calculated slices. They are humble and confident, piercingly inquisitive. They never fake, lie or pretend. They care deeply about the story and how they do it. The best interviewers are effective without questions.

Sources are the lifeblood of our profession. But they need constant attention and nurturing. They want to know that you care, and that you can get the job done. Otherwise, they will stray elsewhere in search of another hand to feed them.

Sources should not be mere notches on our journalistic gun handles. More often than not, they are brave and concerned citizens who want to share your passion for a story. Make them feel like your partner, but never let them forget the boundaries. Never stand in the way of their best interests. Once they understand your true concern for their welfare, they will remain loyal to you and to the story.

This handout provides a schematic to some of the techniques that have served me well over the years.

To begin, one must understand the source's motivation. With this knowledge comes the key to unlocking the best information-gathering strategy.

Basic types of sources:

1) ***"Let's Change the World Together Shall We?"*** – socially conscious source

General category: They are motivated to do the right thing, the kind of person who loses sleep over a perceived injustice.

Strategy: Reinforce how your story might serve as a catalyst for change (don't promise). Underscore your organization's unique power to reach and influence the public. Reveal your own passion for the subject by sharing research. Never rush. Listen more than talk.

2) ***"Screw the Boss"*** – disgruntled source

General category: They feel unfairly neglected or abused, perhaps a patrol officer passed over for promotion or a disillusioned bureaucrat nursing a stalled career.

Strategy: Work these sources slowly; they'll push you for instant gratification or revenge. Find common ground involving their situation (my boss is a jerk, too). Make them feel important. Compliment their work, if justified. Be as neutral as possible and don't get caught up in their one-sided hatred; they will respect your neutrality. Demand documentation to bolster their complaints.

3) ***"Nobody Appreciates My Genius"*** – the ignored source

General category: They are stuck beneath people they don't respect, or perhaps they are floundering in a chaotic system beyond their control.

Strategy: These sources love to explain things to you. Ask them lots of questions. Provide compliments involving their range of knowledge (if true). Be attentive to their every word, no matter how boring or off topic. Let them ramble with only gentle nudges. Make sure to thank them for their time.

4) *"I Want to Be a Secret Agent"* – the stealth source

General category: They are mischievous employees who take secret pleasure in knowing their actions impact stories. Information is a commodity, a game to be played. They enjoy being an information broker, and they enjoy the power they have over you.

Strategy: Play the game. Cajole, beg and be playful (come'on, I know you know something – cough it up and help a poor reporter live another day) Be assertive and confident. Let them know your patience has a limit – you'll only play so long if there is nothing to be gained. Trade information (especially effective with police officers hungry for details about their supervisors or planned changes).

5) *"You Wouldn't Hurt a Friend Would You?"* – the investment source

General category: They are highly placed sources professing to be your best friend. More often than not, they are banking on your goodwill should you ever uncover something about them. These sources buy dinners, arrange unique access to files or events.

Strategy: Match their friendliness. But watch your every word; these sources often like to tape conversations for future use – or blackmail. Conduct yourself with absolute professionalism. Don't be trapped into giving your opinion. These are some of the most valuable sources – and one of the most volatile to control.

6) *"I'm Truly Smarter than You"* – the detached source

General category: Typically academicians or highly trained professionals not seeking media glory. These are people who feel above the media, the kind who sometimes demand reporters do homework – such as read all their studies – before granting an interview.

Strategy: Research. Research. Research. You can't do enough of it for these sources. On first contact, quickly impress them with the kinds of research you've done, describe your quest to better understand their world, and explain how you sought them out as one of the most respected authorities on the topic.

7) *"I Need You and You Need Me"* – the circumstantial source

General category: A source of circumstance, such as a crime victim, or someone relevant to a breaking story.

Strategy: Be absolutely honest. You are a reporter filing a story. You would like to provide them the "opportunity" to add anything they feel the public should know. This sends the signal that the story will happen with or without their help. Be gentle, patient and attentive. They know you want to rush away. Disprove the stereotypes of bad reporters.

8) *"I Hate Reporters"* – the belligerent source

General category: People or institutions with something to hide, or those who believe the story may cause undue harm to their reputations or someone they know.

Strategy: Explain that you feel compelled to provide them everything that will be in the story. Tell them everything know, but do it over time. Establish a routine of calling them, even if they say no comment each time, and provide more layers of your research. Make them understand that you are not going away and that a lot of other people are talking. Finally, explain that publication is imminent. A sample pitch: "Readers will be learn about the patient deaths in your hospital. Now I assume negligent deaths are still not occurring, I've heard you've made many reforms, but I don't know that because you won't talk to me. Don't you want readers to at the very least know that you solved your problems, and don't you want to be an example of success in the final analysis?"

9) ***“Don’t Ask Me to Break the Rules” – the principled source***

General category: Spokesmen for law enforcement and government agencies often fall in this category. These are media-friendly people who maintain a strong sense of loyalty to their employer.

Strategy: Never ask this person to subvert their principals. Ask them to find a way to help you get the story right. Stress how “accuracy” is your middle name. Over time, share your own job-related pressures. Appear detached from the story, prove you have nothing to personally gain. Never gloat. These sources respect professional persistence.

10) ***“Grab the Pebble From My Hand” – the unsure source***

General category: These often are highly-placed law enforcement professionals or academics who will toss you a nugget and see how far you can take it on your own. They want to know if you are worthy of their trust.

Strategy: Research, plain and simple. Do it. Lots of it. Impress your sources with commitment to the topic. Don’t showcase your ignorance. Remember the scene from the movie *Kung Fu* when the young apprentice spends years learning to grab the pebble from his master’s hand? Let’s hope it doesn’t take so long in your case.

Cultivating Sources

Deadline is not the time to make sources. The best sources are found and nurtured long before they are needed. Here are some general tips:

- Diagram every department and list every person you know. Identify key departments (when I covered cops, the homicide bureau was our mother lode of information – and the toughest to crack). Target your time and attention to people in those areas.
- Pay attention to all employees, particularly receptionists, janitors, low-level clerks. They often know every nuance of their workplace.
- Write a feature story once in awhile. “Good” stories demonstrate your neutrality; you’re not just looking for the bad stuff. In the course of your feature, you will meet people who will later help you with the more biting and serious stuff.
- Never gloat. Sources hate bias – even sources that hate their bosses and jobs. If you nail a person or institution, don’t strut around. Nobody loves a braggart.
- Show up. Visibly show your investment by showing up to arcane and routine meetings. On the police beat, show up to as many crime scenes as possible. Over time, the street cops will appreciate your hard work. After awhile, they’ll take pity on you and start throwing you some information bones.
- Meet and greet. Reserve time every week to simply go around and say hello to people. You have no mission. Do not ask a single question. Talk about families, vacations – anything but your job. Make them forget you are a reporter.
- Overlook the minor story. Not every violation deserves a story. Prove you are not a compulsive parasite feeding off someone’s momentary stupidity. For example, I was

in a police bureau when an officer's gun fell to the floor and discharged during an impromptu, playful wrestling match. I could have written a brief. I endeared myself to the cops when I shared their little secret. They drew a little body outline around the hole in the floor. The captain, who came in the next day, never figured it out.

- Get a personality. Buy one, steal one, borrow one – just get one. Sources don't relate to robots.
- With public agencies, obtain the roster of all employees past and present over the last three years. Look for recent retirees with many years of service. Trust me. Many are eager to talk, and they have feel absolute freedom to do so. This is especially useful with government law enforcement agencies, such as corrections facilities, juvenile detention centers, etc.
- Without exception, every topic imaginable is a life passion for someone. Find that person. Troll activist groups, crusaders, whistleblower suits. These sources are often portals to dozens of sources. Many likeminded sources form loose networks; many are happy to share their research with a reporter.

Interviewing Techniques

An interview is like playing golf. The goal is to get the ball in the hole, but it takes a combination of short and long swings to be successful. And every hole plays differently on any given day depending on weather conditions to the way the grass is cut. An interviewer, like a golfer, must be prepared to adapt instantly to a shift in wind.

There is no magic interview technique. A good interview is a collection of techniques.

All too often I've watched reporters stick to a predetermined interview format, sometimes nothing more than racing through a list of prewritten questions. Their failure to recognize source type and situation is usually tragic – the difference between a story and a great story.

Here are just some of those techniques:

- **Anticipate falsehoods.** Decide in advance how you will direct the ebb and flow of the interview. Anticipate potential answers, especially in confrontational interviews. Be ready to counterattack, preferably through the use of documentation.

Real life excerpt from a recent taped interview:

Reporter: "Do you tell patients that they are not allowed to know the results of hospital investigations?"

Investigative supervisor: "No, of course not. We advise them on the outcome, I believe."

Reporter: Perhaps I'm confused. But this appears to be your signature on letters I've obtained from patients, which clearly state they are not allowed to know the outcomes of their own investigations."

Reporter displays copies.

Investigative supervisor: "Ok. This is obviously a problem. This should not have happened. I don't know how it happened."

- **Look around.** Offices are designed for display. Anything there is deliberate and for a reason (pictures on the wall and desk; souvenirs; etc.) Find out why and ask questions to break up the formality of your prewritten questions. Sometimes, the items prove embarrassing.

Real life example:

I interviewed a doctor about rampant infections in his hospital. The doctor said infections had been eradicated, in part, because the hospital eliminated all potted plants. Moist soil creates fertile breeding grounds for germs, he explained. Behind the doctor's desk was a long row of potted plants. All looked very moist. He became very red.

- **Promise to review your story prior to publication.** I never provide copies in advance, but I do review adjective and verb choices, quotes and all hard facts – dates, addresses, age, etc. This promise almost always puts a source at ease. It emphasizes that you are interested in accuracy first and foremost.
- **The Columbo approach.** This is a slow-paced and layered interview. You begin with simple requests to explain an issue while burrowing deeper and deeper to your core question. Let the source frame the issue without challenge – at first. Then, once the hole has been dug, reveal your research piece by devastating piece.
- **Start the interview with a monologue.** Many wary sources are deeply curious to learn what you know. They are trying to gauge how to play you, too. Give it to them with both barrels, but in general terms. Recount how you've pulled every lawsuit, every enforcement report. Explain how you tracked down employees and competitors. Detail your pursuit of every applicable document and database. After you've recited a litany of research accomplishments, end with an innocuous remark, such as "I'm sure this is an issue you feel very strongly about." Let the source pick it up. Where the source begins is revealing. They may assume you know much more than you do. At the very least, you've made them think twice about lying. Best of all, they know they aren't playing with an amateur.
- **Stop taking notes.** Use this technique when the interview begins to stray. Sources are unnerved by the fact that their words are no longer important enough to memorialize. They'll struggle to tell you something important.
- **Threaten to develop a hobby.** Admittedly, this is an extreme technique, but very effective with public bureaucrats. If a public agency refuses to hand over records I clearly believe are public records, I begin to pepper the spokesman with other kinds of questions, such as how many trips are made by the agency each year at taxpayer expense. The timing is delicate, but at the appropriate light moment in a conversation mention that since you can't get the desired records to do the desired story, perhaps you will have to develop another story idea, perhaps a background piece on the agency that is denying access. When applied to the right situations, this technique is quite effective.
- **Stay calm.** Don't be baited by questions, especially when a source solicits your opinion. Don't smile after you score an interview point; don't let the source know the extent of the damage.

- **Ask for proof.** When appropriate, ask for documentation. If a hospital says it has eliminated infections, ask for their infection control reports. Be polite but firm. Let them know that their comments will carry great weight if they can convince you – and by extension the public – that they are absolutely open with the facts.
- **Paint a picture.** Many sources refuse comment. Usually this is a spokesman acting as a go between. In these cases, I tell the source that I appreciate their position, but I feel compelled to periodically check in and provide them with an update of my plans and information. I do this with the knowledge that the spokesman is relaying this information to the people I'm really interested in interviewing. Over time, I paint a devastating picture of "negative" facts. Finally, I approach the spokesman and say, "Look, I've already learned every thing is to learn about every bad thing you've done. I know how many patients died from negligence. I know how the germs spread. Now I assume you've corrected problems but I'm not sure because you've decided not to tell the public. Wouldn't it be best if you tell the world how you overcame your problems? I really think this is a vital component of the story." So do they, more often than not.