

Guerrilla marketing

Part three: getting the most out of interviews

Tom Chance

Interviews are a mainstay of the media. For journalists, they're an excellent way to check facts, get some nice quotes or structure an article. For free software projects looking for coverage, they're an easy way to write your own article and get it published. But getting the most out of an interview can be a fine art; journalists can misunderstand or even misrepresent what you say, and you can ruin or make your image in the eyes of the audience. The third article in this series suggests some strategies to adopt to make every interview a marketing success.

Opportunities and hazards

Before I discuss how to conduct yourself in interviews, it's worth considering why interviews are used. If you know what the journalist is trying to achieve, or what you want to achieve in doing an interview, then you're better placed to develop a winning approach. The most important thing with interviews, given that you're communicating directly with the journalist, is to remember that they will publish based on their impression of you, so be polite and helpful at all times.

The most common reasons for an interview are for short articles. Journalists will often receive your press release or some other news item that mentions you and want to check their facts, get a response to some allegation or just get a nice quote. Articles that have been well researched, with plenty of quotes and input from relevant groups and individ-

uals, always read better. So if you're being interviewed for a short article, it's your opportunity to get one or two points across in your favour. You can correct misunderstandings, give them a few choice soundbites and help them go beyond the information they've gleaned from press releases. Journalists are often very lazy, so you'll have a good opportunity to feed them important information that they've not bothered to research themselves.

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Another reason is to create a feature article based around an interview, or sometimes a series of interviews. This is an easy way for a journalist to structure an article, since they can just run through the themes that you talk about and write it up. They can be far more readable than a block of prose if you come across as friendly and interesting. And if the journalist makes the effort to write it up properly (as opposed to simply formatting the question-answer structure) then they can present you and your project in an informal manner, be it warm or hostile.

Whatever kind of article, the journalist will be looking for certain information from you. If they're friendly, help them out. If they're hostile, be wary and try to stick to your key messages without annoying them; we all know how annoy-

The essential interview checklist



ing it is when people refuse to give straight answers. The crucial point, as ever with guerrilla marketing, is to stick to your key messages. Even a friendly interviewer can trick you into talking about something you don't want published. You're always within your rights to refuse questions, or to simply avoid contentious issues, but doing so will annoy the journalist. It's a fine line that you have to walk.

Interviews

Not surprisingly, the most common form of interview for free softies is by email. These are easy, a gift to you and to friendly journalists. You get to spend time considering your response, drafting and refining it until you're absolutely happy with the tone and detail. The journalist gets to simply copy and paste your responses, rather than transcribing recordings or trying to read rushed scribbles.

Before you start the interview, perhaps when you're first asked if you'd like to do it, find out what the audience is. With this information you can tailor your answers, for example to other developers, to a user magazine or to academics. Also ask what the focus of the article is and why you're being interviewed for it. Work out how you want to frame your responses or, in the case of a feature article, how you want to frame the whole thing, taking into account what the journalist seems to be after, in order to avoid being antagonistic.

Once you have your frame worked out you need to pick your key messages. By now you're probably getting bored of reading this - "how hard can it be to pick three things", you

say? Well in the case of interviews it's much harder because the journalist won't know what your messages are, and he or she will ask you lots of things that don't map onto your messages. So you really want to be clear about what they are, and how you can make anything the journalist throws at you fit them.

Once you have the questions, read them, re-read them and read them again. Think about what the journalist is trying to learn from your answers, and either help them out if they're sympathetic or warily respond with your messages if they're hostile.

And that's it. Email interviews are really fairly simple. Give the journalist your key messages whilst making them think you've given them exactly what they want, and you can't go wrong.

One step up: talking to journalists

Being interviewed over the phone or face-to-face is a lot harder, though the same basic lessons apply. Because you haven't got time to think the questions over, go and make yourself a drink, come back and carefully draft your response, you need to be much clearer about your messages, your frame and your goal.

Rehearse your key messages, and try to think of good answers to questions that the journalist is likely to ask

Rehearse your key messages, and try to think of good answers to questions that the journalist is likely to ask. Get a friend to help you with this, and make them ask you really tricky questions to hone your ability to remain calm and on-topic. Leading questions, where the question assumes some unproven fact or response, are especially difficult. For example, if I were to ask you: "Don't you think it would be a good idea to warn users of the number of bugs in your software?", you should challenge the assumption that your software contains many bugs that will concern users. That's an easy example, but they can be much harder. Watch some interviews with politicians to understand how clever journalists can be in trapping their interviewee this way.

If the interview isn't live then you can always ask to start an answer again, so don't worry too much about messing

up. If you think you're going off topic or aren't giving a satisfactory answer, just ask to restart. But beware of doing this too much – you'll give a bad impression.

3... 2... 1 and we're live

Being interviewed live is the hardest media task of all. You'll have a small window into which you have to squeeze your messages and no journalist to distill what you say and make it more presentable. For this reason, you need to do *even more* work on your key messages, making sure that you can deliver them with confidence, extremely concisely. Often you'll only actually have a ten or twenty second clip, unless you're being interviewed for the whole show, so one or two well rehearsed lines can make life a lot easier.

There are a few other things you can do in preparation. The first is to ask the interviewer what the first question will be. Unless they're hostile, they're likely to tell you since you'll be able to answer better, making the programme sound/look better. The second is, if possible, to talk to the interviewer a little beforehand to make yourself more comfortable talking to them. You don't want a loose tongue, so don't go and get drunk or become best friends in five minutes, but you also don't want to sound stiff and nervous. Finally, if you're going to have more than a minute to talk and you know the audience, think of an anecdote to tell. Don't try to be funny unless you're genuinely hilarious because you'll probably sound lame, but it's good to come in with some conversation that'll enhance your messages.

There's one other consideration that's unique to radio/TV interviews. The audience isn't going to remember what you say half as much as they'll remember how you look and sound. If you come across as nervous, arrogant or evasive then they're unlikely to take what you say too seriously. Practice in front of a mirror, try recording yourself, watching and listening back, and get your friends to help. Look out for bad body language, messy or suspiciously smart clothing, voice faults and funny expressions. You don't want to look and sound like a robot, or too professional; just act naturally without being *too* weird!

Rolling your own

OK, so being interviewed can be really difficult, especially if you're not too good at thinking quickly and responding

well. But even if you're hopeless at *being* interviewed, conducting your own interviews is far easier and it's a handy way to get some coverage. Most free software publications, especially those online and the magazine you're currently reading, will happily take a well written interview. And best of all, since most of the text of the interview will consist of the responses from the person you're talking to, you don't need to write a lot!

The best way to get into writing interview articles is to pick a topic you're familiar with. So if, for example, you wanted to promote something to do with the Xfce desktop environment and you follow the developers' blogs, pick one or two developers and interview them about some new features they're working on. The research will be easy - just look over the blogs, pick the topics you want to focus on and compare Xfce with its competitors. Think of how you want to frame the article, and what sort of information you want out of your interviewees. This process is just a matter of reversing the checklist you use when being interviewed.

With the basic research done, you need to do the interview. Think of between five and ten questions, ranging from the obvious ("introduce yourself") to the basic ("explain x, y and z") to the more interesting and searching questions. Email them off to the interviewees with a brief explanation of your article idea, and if possible follow it up with a phone call or a face-to-face meeting. It's always best to email the questions ahead if you do talk to them so that they have more time to consider their responses. When you get some answers, try to follow them up with some supplementary questions. Interviews that follow a stock format and never really get into the issues are *extremely* boring, and will make most editors yawn.

With your answers in hand, you need to write it up. There are two ways to do this: as a question-answer article, or as a conversation piece. The former is easiest – you just format it as question, answer, question, answer and so on, then check for spelling mistakes, introduce it and you're done. A conversation piece is harder but will read better. You need to work out one or two frames and then write up a short story about your conversation, including background information where relevant to draw out those frames, interspersing your prose with their answers as quotes. For both kinds of articles, have a look at examples on the web to get a feel for what works and what doesn't.

Finally you need to get the article published. You should

know the kinds of publications that might be interested in the interview, and that have audiences who represent the best marketing opportunities. Unless you have writing experience, you're best off simply emailing the finished product to some editors straight off, with a brief introduction. Make the email like a semi-formal letter and sound polite and professional. Sometimes publications have submission guidelines, so read them carefully and format your text appropriately. Then sit back and wait.

Let the karma flow

If you've read all three articles in this series, you should be well placed to promote your free software project and product in the marketplace. You'll know how to develop a good media strategy, how to announce news to the community and the press, how to conduct yourself in interviews and how to write your own.

Marketing isn't a science, and I'm certainly no expert on the subject. But by learning from others, undertaking a little training with a campaigning group and actually working "in the field", I've managed to build up a portfolio of articles and press coverage that, I hope, has helped to move some free software projects forward a little. You can do the same. Just dive right in and, with a little care and a willingness to learn, you may just put your project in the limelight.

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