

How to Interview Your Executives to Get The Best Stories



07/10/2017

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When it comes to securing press coverage, nothing sells a reporter on a story better than a good, juicy angle. Of course, this varies based on the publication you're pitching, but a good rule of thumb is to ask yourself when pitching, "Would I find this interesting?" Often what is needed is to beef up a simple promotional angle and infuse it with human emotion. This and more will help change your pitch item from a collection of facts into a story.

But it's not always easy to get the good story lines from executives – in some cases, it can feel like pulling teeth. Executives generally are busy and, in many situations, reluctant to toot their own horns. It's our job to act as investigative reporters and draw out details we need to construct a good pitch. Here are five tips for interviewing people you work for and with so you can craft interesting pitches.

Facilitate open, transparent conversation

It's important to make your interviewee feel comfortable, so don't dive right in with the questions. Treat it like two friends sitting down for coffee (if you're in the same city, maybe do just that) to chat. Begin the interaction by talking about whatever you have in common – if nothing else, talk about the weather or sports. Be warm, inviting and open and show your subject that you're there to listen – chances are, he/she will get the same good vibes from you and reciprocate with a transparent conversation.

Create a guide but let them lead

Come to the conversation with a goal in mind, such as the type of pitch, byline or story you're trying to draft, and several questions already created to keep the interviewee on track, but don't ruin the rapport you've already built by getting to know them. Begin with some open-ended questions (“What made you want to get into sales?”) and let them run with it. From there, let the conversation flow naturally.

Ask for specifics and don't be afraid to be annoying

Most people are hesitant to talk too much about their merits – especially entrepreneurially minded people who have a strong team behind them. Keep digging until you get the specific information you need – maybe it's a list of awards or honors they've won, milestones they've reached or adversity they've overcome – and don't be afraid to be a little pushy about it. Many executives are media trained, so they may be equipped with canned answers – ask for specifics. Help your interviewee push past uncomfortable feelings about bragging too much and let him/her know that you're simply trying to get some background information to help you decide better how to attract media to the subject. This usually loosens up executives. Some people simply need more time to warm up to a topic or might respond better if the question is worded differently.

Endure awkward silences

This is one of the best tips: Let the silence play itself out. Counterintuitive though it may seem, don't fill the silence with chatter or keep asking questions to make your client feel comfortable. If you're getting a rehearsed and generic answer, sit quietly and see what comes next – this can result in very interesting responses.

Let them have the last word

Journalism 101 says that after the interview is over, ask your interviewee if there's anything else that wasn't covered that he/she would like to add. This is sometimes where the most information comes out, because people feel like the formal part of the interview is over and they can be themselves. Listen closely and you might get a great story from this question.

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