

Interview Like a Pro

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You've managed to capture 20 minutes to interview your CEO. How do you prepare, if you weren't a reporter somewhere in the past and learned interviewing skills then? And what are your tactics once you get into the executive office?

Step One is to know why you're doing the interview and what you're after. Is it for a personality profile for an employee publication or intranet site? Background for a speech? If it's for a speech, what's its goal?

Step Two is doing your homework, which means finding out everything you possibly can beforehand. It's bad form and wastes time to ask the interviewee anything you could have found out yourself. Things to check out include published biographies, anything the interviewee has published, and his or her CV. Another great source is the executive's administrative assistant, who probably knows him well.

Step Three is developing good, probing questions – preferably ones the interviewee hasn't been asked before. Ask a few warm-ups first. If you know he's from Colorado, ask if he's a hiker or a skier. If he's from Minnesota, ask if he camps or fishes. If he went to Harvard Business School, ask what he liked to do in Cambridge. Next go on to particular parts of his career that you've read about, and ask what he learned from them.

Finally, get to the heart of things: the company's strategy, the subject of this speech, or whatever it is. Often one good, unexpected question is all it takes to get your executive to open up, and you're off on a fruitful discussion. If an answer isn't clear, rephrase he said to make sure you've understood. Watch his body language for signs of impatience, so you'll be ready to skip some of your less-important questions to get to the ones that matter more.

As for *how* you ask questions of an executive you ultimately report to, you'll probably find the answer somewhere between the bulldog tactics of Tim Russert and the fuzzy softballs of Barbara Walters. Ideally, you want not only to leave with great material but to have burnished your own credentials.

Finally, send a thank you email afterwards. Next time, it'll probably be easier to get your 20 minutes.