From bright ideas to compelling copy

Interview Primer for Marketing and PR Professionals:

10 information-gathering tips to put the siZZle in your communications

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Introduction

The purpose of this primer is to arm you with the skills and tools necessary to put the *sizzle* in your marketing communications or public relations piece. By *sizzle*, I mean information that makes prospects and current customers pick up the phone to talk to you about purchasing your products and/or services.

When you conduct a directed interview intelligently, you'll be able to differentiate your company from your competitors by gathering:

- Prospect-influencing quotes that ring true to potential customers
- Credibility-establishing performance metrics of your products/services
- Hard-nosed benefit statements most relevant to your prospects

Anyone can talk to a customer about their experiences with your products/services.

In *10 Tips to get the information that puts the siZZle in your communications* I show you how to gather the content that will help you rise above the communications clutter in your space today.

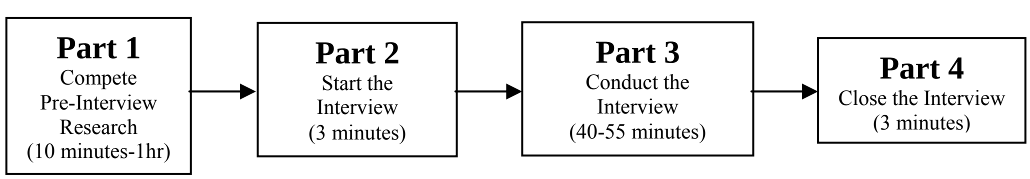
These tools will help you differentiate you from your competition and convincingly answer every prospect's fundamental question of "Why should I use *your* products/services?"

The Interview Process

The purpose of a customer interview is to collect the relevant information and quotes necessary to complete a compelling marketing communications or public relations deliverable. Whether you're working on a brochure, case study, white paper, advertisement, by-lined article or press release, customer information and quotes add the sizzle to the steak.

In order to best achieve this goal it is necessary to follow a structured process that guides the interview from beginning to end. [See Figure 1 below.]

Figure 1: The Interview Process



Part 1: What to do Before the Interview

Goals:

- To collect information that presents your company in its best factual light
- To collect basic information that would otherwise waste valuable interview time

Tip #1: Do your homework before the interview.

Being the methodical professional you are, you'll start at square one by determining the communication goals and objectives of the piece you're developing. At the minimum, you'll want to detail the content slant and the major points to be covered. This will influence the types of questions you'll ask your interviewee and ensure your research is relevant and complete.

A value-added step to complete at this point is to decide how you will *use* the final deliverable. Will you simply post it to your website? Make it available to your sales force? Pitch it to journalists? For example, if your creating a by-lined article you'll want to have a plan for leveraging the piece. This would take the form of a hit-list of potential venues to place the article.

Now that you have a clear picture of what you want to talk about and how you'll use the final written piece, you're ready to focus on the interview.

Collecting basic information about the customer *before* the interview is a vital step. One benefit of doing this is that you can then spend more precious interview time getting information only the customer can give you.

A second goal of pre-interview research is to acquire the information necessary to present yourself as someone who is knowledgeable about the interviewee's business issues, company, and industry. This helps build rapport with them and gives them comfort that you're not wasting their time.

Completing the checklist below will help you meet this objective.

<u>Pre-Interview Action Item Checklist</u>

- ❑ Review the customer's website to understand the basics about their business. The most relevant sections are "About us" and the "Press Room" (i.e. press releases). The company's annual report, usually under the "Investors" tab, presents an overview of the company's business including major objectives and industry trends.
- ❑ Go to Yahoo.com/financial button to bring up the corporate profile for public companies. You can typically find other information about the company such as annual revenues, number of employees, articles about the company and other basic information.
- ❑ Interview the employee in your company most knowledgeable on the account to learn the basics.

- What's the story behind the deal? What motivated the customer to choose your product/service?
- What specific company solutions did the customer purchase?

Part 2: How to Start the Interview

Goals:

- To establish rapport with the interviewee
- To set the stage to then guide the interviewee through the interview process
- To outline the big-picture content you want to discuss

Easing into the interview

From the moment you pick up the phone to dial the customer, or meet with them face-to-face, it's important to remember that *you* are in charge of the interview.

It is your responsibility to lead it. Customers will look to you to provide guidance on the process, so you must drive the interview from beginning to end. There are several reasons for this.

If you *don't* take charge of the interview and lead it, then you run the risk of running out of time before collecting all the information you need. That's because customers tend to go off on tangents and talk about things that don't really matter to the story if you let them.

Tip # 2: Get the interviewee to trust you.

When you confidently lead the interview, you also inspire the customer's confidence in you. Establishing good rapport with the customer will mean the difference between a great interview and a terrible one. Simply put, if they trust and like you, they will offer more information of higher quality and spend more time with you. If they don't, they will try to get the interview over with as quickly as possible and you will be left with lots of missing information and a boring story.

When you first get the customer on the phone introduce yourself and thank them for taking time out of their busy schedule to help you complete this deliverable (brochure, press release, case study, etc.)

Next, give them an overview of how the process will work to set their minds at ease. For example, you might say, "After we complete this interview, I will write the piece, review it internally at my company, and then submit it to you for your company's review and approval. After I incorporate your changes, we'll place the deliverable in layout and be ready to 'publish' it."

It's critical that you emphasize that they will have an opportunity to review the deliverable prior to publication (to the Web, your sales staff, a journalist etc.) and that you require their approval on the content. Customers speak much more freely about their experiences when they know they'll have a chance to review the material.

Now you're ready to transition to the meat and potatoes portion of the interview. A good way to set the table for this section of the interview is to outline specifically what you'd like to discuss. Your preamble may go something like this:

"Jim, I'd like to discuss the challenges you faced that motivated you to go with the solution. Then I'd like to confirm the specific solution you implemented. After that, I'd like to discuss the financial, business and technical benefits you achieved and why you went with ACME company. Why don't we start by describing the challenges that you faced that motivated you to use our company's solution?"

Your goal is to discover the customer's motivations behind the selection of your products and services as well as flesh out the benefits they received from using them. Usually, you can categorize the customer's answers into business, financial and technical buckets. And you'll want to fill each of those buckets with rich testimonial gold ore.

Part 3: How to Conduct the Interview

Goals:

- To get the customer talking about their issues, concerns, and experiences
- To get the customer to confirm specific details
- To lead the customer to give relevant, usable quotes

Now that you've started the interview, the remaining tips offer global guidance on how to complete an interivew that efficiently gets the information you need to write your marketing or PR piece.

Tip #3: Ask Open-ended Questions

Your goal is to get the customer to paint you a picture of their challenges and how your products/services solved their business issues. Asking open-ended questions will get them to give you much more information to work with. By researching to a level deeper than what the piece will be written to, the end result will strike a chord with prospects.

Open-ended questions often start with:

"Describe…"
"Tell me about"
"What were…?"
"How did you…?"
"Why did you…?"

Examples of close-ended questions are:

"How many widgets did you buy?"
"When did you go live with the solution?"

Start with open-ended questions and use close-ended follow-up questions as required to collect important details.

Tip #4 Ask "single-topic" questions

When you ask compound questions, i.e. two questions in one sentence, most interviewees can't adequately answer both of them. They work hard to remember the "second" question while answering the first, which results in much lower-quality answers to your questions.

Examples of multi-topic questions are:
"Which of our solutions did you implement and why?"
"What were the challenges you faced and how did our solutions help you overcome them?"

Instead, ask questions that focus on a single topic at a time.

"What motivated you to go with our product(s) and/or service(s)?"
"Tell me about your project requirements for the solution implementation."

Tip # 5 Get ALL the details

Often, the customer has more than one answer to your question. For instance, when you ask them to "Describe the financial benefits you achieved with our solution" they may or may not list all of them.

Usually, they will give you a single answer. It is up to you to then ask follow-up questions to get the additional answers. Your magic wand to achieve this is to use the words "else" or "other".

For example:

"What **other** financial benefits did you achieve with our solution?"
"How **else** did our solution contribute to helping you achieve your business objectives?"

You will know that you have gotten all the information you're looking for when the customer says things like, "That's everything," or "I can't think of anything else."

You may also *choose* not to continue asking "other" and "else" questions if you feel that you've gathered sufficient information to write this part of the marketing or PR piece.

Tip #6: Get specific answers

When I was earning my undergraduate degree in Psychology, I created and performed an experiment. The results clearly showed that court "witnesses" who were *more* specific in their answers were perceived as being *more credible* by "jurors" than witnesses who were vague. Because a global goal of all marketing/PR pieces is to establish your company as a credible solution provider, you'll want to get specific.

Often, an interviewee will answer a question in a vague way. For example, they might say something like, "We love your solution." Or, "We got good results from the solution implementation."

To be blunt, this type of quote is useless in marketing deliverables because it fails to differentiate your solution from the competitors.

Your task is to have the interviewee expand upon their answer to give you meaningful information and quotes.

Examples of questions that expand upon vague answers include:

"When you say you love our solution, what do you mean by that?"
"When you say you love our solution, why is that?
"When you say that you got good results with the solution, how so?"

Tip #7: Get performance metrics

When it comes to getting quotes for your marketing communications and PR materials that create interest in prospects, reporters and analysts, NOTHING is as effective as a customer who states specific performance metrics. The information you're looking to collect usually revolves around:

- **Savings:** in time, money, or personnel to manage networks
- **Increased performance:** faster, better, higher productivity
- **Increased revenues:** by enabling new product/service offerings to be rolled out

You have a lot of leeway in how you can express metrics. For example, you can state savings either in terms of percent savings or actual dollar costs. On the rare occasion when a customer specifically asks that you not include actual dollar savings, you can *still* work the metric into the story by telling them "No problem, I'll just write in the percent savings if that's ok with you." Nine times out of 10 the customer will have no problem with this.

Sometimes customers are very specific about how your solution helped them. They say things like:

- "Your widget increased our software application performance by 50 percent."
- "Your service reduced our administrative work by 1,000 hours annually," and/or

- "Your solution helped us complete our operational efficiency project to achieve $325,000 in annual savings."

Congratulations, you have done an excellent job of collecting a specific measurable result. The next step is to ask questions that tie this metric to helping the customer achieve the specific objectives you asked the interviewee about earlier. By doing this, you will be collecting the information you'll need to paint a full picture that illustrates how your product or service delivers results that achieve business objectives.

So, for example, you might ask:

"I just want to be sure I'm clear on this point. How has a 50 percent software application performance enhancement helped you meet your business objectives?"

Sadly though, the most frequent interviewee responses are vague and/or incomplete. Fortunately, I'm going to give you a tool that's tailor-made to solve this problem.

The BEFORE/AFTER Tool

One very effective tactic to overcome the "vague answer" challenge is to "construct" the basic picture of the results the customer achieved. If you capture two key pieces of information, you'll be able to calculate metrics on your own. These pieces are the BEFORE metric and the AFTER metric.

For example, when you ask a customer to describe the financial benefits they achieved from your solution implementation, they might say something like, "Well, our ongoing maintenance costs have decreased by $50,000 per year," or "We now only need one full-time administrator to manage that project."

These metrics are OK by themselves, but to give them much greater impact, you need to provide context in the form of a BEFORE/AFTER comparison.

So when the customer states that they "decreased their ongoing maintenance costs by $50,000 per year," you might ask "What were you spending previously on ongoing maintenance?" If the answer is $100,000, then you can calculate that your solution contributed to a 50 percent reduction—a significant figure and one you'll want to tout.

If, however, the answer is $500,000, then the overall cost reduction was only 10 percent—a less notable figure. So within the story, you may wish to mention the $50,000 savings.

The goal here is to present your solution in its best *factual* light. This is a critical point and I diligently apply this standard to my metrics calculations. For example, I use generally accepted principles of rounding.

How to round numbers refresher.

- Make the numbers that end in 1 through 4 into the next lower number that ends in 0. For example 74 rounded to the nearest ten would be 70.
- Numbers that end in a digit of 5 or more should be rounded up to the next even ten. The number 88 rounded to the nearest ten would be 90.

Source: www.aaamath.com/B/g32_rox1.htm

Often, customers will cite a statistical range. They may say something like, "Our absenteeism has decreased from 10-15 percent." To eliminate any appearance of impropriety, I *always* use the lowest numbers in given ranges. Serious prospects may break out the calculator to make computations of their own and I want them to see that there's no Tomfoolery in the numbers.

As a further example, to the answer that "we only need one full-time administrator," ask "how many administrators were managing the project previously?" Again, with the BEFORE/AFTER figures, you can calculate percentage decreases in the number of full time equivalents dedicated to managing the network.

Sometimes getting performance metrics will require a lot of work on your part to get them. Often, you can successfully get these numbers by asking questions that require the customer to think about the results in a different way.

As an example, customers might say something like, "Your solution has saved us a lot of time," which is a useless statement all by itself. So to capture a usable metric your line of questioning might go something like this:

YOU: "So how many labor hours per week would you say you're saving?"

THE INTERVIEWEE: "Oh, I have no idea."

YOU: "Well, would you say that you're administrators are spending 25 percent less time managing the project?"

THE INTERVIEWEE: "Oh no, it's more like 35 percent."

Tip #8: Use the customer's language

As a self-confident professional, you are totally at ease speaking with the customer. It's important to keep in mind that your interviewee may often be nervous about the interview and find it stressful.

One of your tactics to further build rapport with the customer and set them at ease—remember, relaxed customers share more information with you ☺—is to use the customer's language.

When a customer says something like "Your solution has been a lifesaver for my staff," you repeat part of their answer in your follow-up question, i.e. "How has our solution been a lifesaver for your staff?" You wouldn't say, for example, "How has it helped your staff?"

When you repeat what the customer says back to them, you also communicate to them that you are listening to what they are saying. When interviewees see that you are listening to them, they feel that you are making valuable use of their time. This builds good rapport, keeps them talking and share information that will make your story sizzle.

Tip #9: Lead the interviewee to make statements that support your messaging goal

As a responsible interviewer, your goal is to collect and use information that is accurate and complete. You also have a responsibility to your company to meet their communications objectives.

So, for example, if the slant or theme of a marketing communications or PR deliverable is how your solution solves the business issues of the day of your customers, your goal is to draw out quotes that support this concept. If the interviewee fails to use specific wording to support this idea, you must "encourage" them to do so.

Fortunately, it isn't that hard to do this. All you have to do is use the magic words, "Would it be accurate to say that…?"

Let's say that the slant of your piece is about the idea of business operational efficiencies. You've had a good interview so far, but the customer hasn't said anything using this concept or words. To get them to do this, you might use the following questions:

YOU: "You mentioned previously that one of your goals was to streamline your loan submission process. Would it be accurate to say that our solution has enhanced your business operational efficiencies?"

THE INTERVIEWEE: "I hadn't thought about it in those terms, but yes, that would be an accurate statement."

Or, for example:

YOU: "When you said that our solution helped you achieve A, B and C, would it be accurate to say that it also helped you meet the business objective of boosting your operational efficiencies?"

THE INTERVIEWEE: "Absolutely. That's correct."

YOU: "Would it also be accurate to say that our solution helped you roll out new applications that are contributing to your revenues?"

THE INTERVIEWEE: "Well, that's the case for our new ATM software application, but not our other applications…"

Tip #10: Digging for gold: How to use the closing minutes of the interview to get exceptional quotes

You've just completed a great interview and have excellent rapport with your interviewee. At this point, interviewees are usually very relaxed. They behave like, "Whew, I'm relieved that's over. Now I can let my guard down."

Let them.

And pay particularly close attention to what they say at this point in the interview because this is the time you will get GOLD NUGGETS of information.

To get those gold nuggets you might ask:

"Do you have any final thoughts?" or "Do you have any final comments?" Then sit back, listen and take notes. Ask follow-up questions to expand upon the most relevant customer statements.

Part 4: How to Close the Interview

You must do your best to keep the interview length to the time you promised, which typically does not extend beyond one hour. Interviewees get tired after an hour and you'll want to maintain rapport with them by keeping your promise.

You might use a closing statement like this.

"Well Tom, we're out of time but I want to thank you for sharing your story with me. [Shows consideration for them.] I'm going to take your responses and write the story [press release, brochure, whatever] now. [Reinforces the process.]. You should be seeing a draft within about two weeks." [Establishes a time frame for when they can expect to see it.]

"Would it be best to contact you by phone or e-mail if I have any follow-up questions? [Let's them tell you how best to communicate with them.] "Thanks again Tom and have a great day." [Closes the conversation by reinforcing your consideration for them.]

Why is Write Concepts so good at interviewing for results? My Story

In the waning days of the Cold War, I trained as an Army interrogator at Fort Huachuca Arizona. People are often surprised to hear me describe the skills I learned there as a cross between a used car salesman and a reporter. That's because collecting information from the battlefield means saying about anything to get the prisoner talking, then applying the fundamental questioning process of who, what, where, when, why and how to gather relevant information.

Little did I know that the skills I learned in the hills of Sierra Vista would be directly relevant to my career as a marketer and freelance business writer. I've found that on-the-mark communications don't just materialize. They require thoughtful planning on my part beginning with an understanding of my customers' target audiences, their products and services.

Over time, I've also discovered that my approach to collecting and incorporating customer information makes my clients very happy. I favor the use of customer quotes and performance metrics that highlight the benefits end-users will receive from using my clients' offerings. Any freelancer can deliver quotes to be sure, but to stand out with exceptional quotes and prospect-swaying copy, I've relied upon the hardnosed interviewing skills my dedicated Army instructors imparted upon me.

About Write Concepts, Inc.

Write Concepts is a communications company that helps marketers, public relations gurus and entrepreneurs translate their ideas into powerful tactical communications.

Whether you're building out your communications infrastructure, or adding pieces to support marketing programs, Write Concepts helps you achieve your goals to generate more leads, close more sales, and capture more positive references from the media.

About the author

Brad Chittim, Chief Scribe, Write Concepts, Inc.

Brad is a graduate of the U.S. Army Intelligence School's Interrogator Basic Course. He applies his skilled interviewing techniques to gather information, metrics and quotes that make marketing and PR materials sizzle.

Brad has seven years of freelance copywriting experience with expertise in business planning and analysis, marketing communications and public relations. Clients like his ability to grasp strategic business concepts and key messaging and use them to create on-the-mark tactical communications.

Brad earned a bachelor of arts in psychology from the University of Colorado at Boulder and is a graduate of the Defense Language Institute's Russian Basic Course. He graduated summa cum laude from Boston University, Frankfurt, Germany with a master of arts in international relations and a minor in strategic studies.

Contact Information

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