The Industrial Interview

Contributed by B2B International
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The Industrial interview, Written By B2B InternationalÂ Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â

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There are two extremes of abuse in the types of industrial interview carried out, and unfortunately both are quite common. On the one hand a cleverly designed questionnaire is given to an interviewer who has little background or technical knowledge related to the subject, and the questions are asked in strict order in a monotone voice. The respondent, not unnaturally, feels aggrieved that he cannot express his considered opinions as he is forced to classify his answers in precoded categories. At the other end of the spectrum a person with a good technical knowledge believes that interviewing merely involves contacting a few firms and holding a general conversation on the subject. The absence of a formalised check list or questionnaire is quite likely to mean important points are not captured while quantifying the responses is difficult if not impossible.

Most industrial interviews are semistructured. The interviewer uses a questionnaire or aide memoire but initiative is still required as to the manner and order in which the questions are asked. If a comment leads to a subject of interest, this may well make a suitable point from which the questioning is guided to cover all the other relevant topics.

Industrial interviewing is often carried out over the telephone for expediency and economy. Although there will be some loss of data, the cost will be one tenth of a face to face interview. The telephone handicaps the interviewer and respondent in some ways. One can never be sure that the presence of other people at the respondent's end is not influencing the answers, and both parties are inhibited by their verbal powers of description. As a result the face to face interview is cherished in industrial market research, calling for special skills in both obtaining and conducting the interview.

CONTACTING THE RESPONDENT. Obtaining a market research interview is not easy - the respondent believes (with some justification) that he is giving up his valuable time and may be getting little in return. The best way of approaching a respondent is to be confident, clear, pleasant and businesslike. Respondents do not like to feel they are being singled out unfairly. Thus if you explain that you are contacting all major companies in the respondent's field as part of the exercise, it will increase the sense of security and will help you get the interview.

Allegiance breeds co-operation, and this can be created by saying something like "John Davis, marketing director of Davis & Clark suggested your name and said you would possibly help us in a survey we are carrying out into precision ground bar." The respondent now feels involved as you have suddenly acquired a mutual acquaintance. Be assumptive. If you show any sign of weakness the respondent may be quick to close the door. In the above introduction you will note that the request for help is couched in a manner that assumes it will be given.

Work out what you are going to say before picking up the telephone. This means you will be more fluent, more confident and of course it will make the phone call shorter. Have some suggested dates and times available for your visit and be prepared to be flexible to suit the respondent. If the respondent appears unduly sensitive about confidentiality assure him on this score. He should of course be able to have this assurance in writing.

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS. Unfortunately life is never simple and problems will arise. Sometimes these are peculiar to the survey or the company, and native wit must be used. Nevertheless there are some common problems which can more easily be countered if a prior understanding exists. Some of the most frequently occurring, areas are as follows:

Never accept a meeting as definite that has been arranged by someone else. You may, for example, speak to a colleague in the same office who says he is sure Joe Bloggs will see you if you call in on a certain date and he promises faithfully to pass on the message. It is ten to one the man will be out or in a meeting when you call. Interviews arranged with secretaries are usually acceptable, but make sure you confirm it, preferably in writing.

Don't be put off by people who are too busy. Busy people can always make time if they want to - try for 10 minutes at nine o'clock or five o'clock. If you really need to push it, offer him a bite to eat: even busy people must take sustenance.

The respondent is always in a meeting when you phone. Find out from a colleague when is the best time to catch him. Often it is first thing in the morning when sorting out the mail.

The respondent says your sponsor already knows all there is to know. Explain that you are taking a rather special slant and are looking at a particular aspect of the market that has not been covered before.

The respondent wants to know what sort of questions you will be asking. Never get down to detail on the telephone. It may provide the opportunity for the respondent to say "can't tell you that" or, "I don't know" or whatever. Talk in broad terms, for example "we will be asking general questions on the type of cable you buy."

The respondent asks you to send a questionnaire through the post and promises faithfully he will complete and return it. In our experience this approach seldom works. Explain that the questionnaire has not been designed for self-completion and it just is not possible for the respondent to complete it.

The respondent is always being pestered by researchers and what does he get out of it? Tell him the interview won't take long, that you think he will find it interesting and that this exercise is specifically to help a significant supplier become more efficient in supplying goods to people like himself. Sell the respondent a benefit so that he really does feel he is getting something out of taking part.

IN THE INTERVIEW ITSELF ensure that all the questions are asked and that the interview runs smoothly, by familiarising yourself completely with the questionnaire before hand. You may find it convenient to start on a subject which is half way through the questionnaire, especially if you are led in naturally by the respondent. Be flexible and make the interview as easy and interesting as possible for the interviewee. For example, if you are talking to a buyer who requires frequent and regular deliveries, it may help him to ask his weekly or monthly purchases rather than to talk in annual terms.

Remember that many people believe they don't know the answer when really they do. They think you want to know how many items they buy down to the last ten whereas it may be sufficient to know to the nearest thousand. If a respondent cannot be persuaded to give an estimate, suggest some levels to him - for example "was it less than one million or between one and three million or over three million". Then try and fine tune from there. This may seem like heresy to the researcher who has read in the textbooks that you should never bias the respondent. In practice prompted questioning may be the only way of obtaining a response. Nevertheless you should not lead the respondent into an answer. Introductions like "would you agree that" should be avoided like the plague. As long as you establish a numerical base, for example the monthly purchases, the breakdown by size, shape and class can easily be obtained in percentage terms and worked backwards at a later stage.

The respondent may not listen properly to the question, he may misunderstand or mishear it. You in turn may misunderstand or not hear his reply. There is plenty of scope for error so if in doubt ask again. Keep checking back with a recap on some of the major points and those where you feel you have received peculiar responses. (You very quickly get a feel for what is right or wrong.)

Respondents may give vague answers. For example if you ask why a respondent thinks his purchases will grow over the next five years he may reply "because our sales are increasing." This does not answer the question: probe to find out why his sales are increasing - perhaps his company's product is finding new markets overseas or substituting other products on the home market. Other typical vague responses are "because it is best" (why is it best?), "we always have done" (why have they?), "it's not good enough" (why isn't it good enough?) - the list is endless. Some respondents wander from the subject on the questionnaire and use you as an audience for their petty gripes. Try delicately to steer them back on course. Remember you are there to ask questions and listen - not to talk yourself. Be clear and objective.

Immediately after the interview (in the car if you have time before your next appointment) look through the questionnaire and make sure you have completed all sections clearly and thoroughly. If necessary call the respondent back to fill in or confirm data.

PLANNING THE CALLS. The number of interviews that can be conducted in a day is much more dependent on their location and the position of the respondent than on the length of the discussion. Indeed, it is not unusual for a researcher to spend seven hours travelling to obtain a vital hour long interview. However, in a more typical survey where it is possible to group the calls, four a day is a fair average, and this could rise much further if appointments are not required and the companies are thick on the ground.

IN CONCLUSION, the good interviewer needs to be charming, tenacious, objective, intelligent, thorough, orderly, thick skinned, hard working and self motivating - qualities which any senior executive would be proud to possess. Clearly, interviewing is not a simple task; yet there are rules which if followed will yield dividends in the quality and quantity of information obtained. At the risk of oversimplifying a complicated subject we suggest ten for industrial interviewers:

Understand the subject and the questionnaire.
Find a hook and sell yourself to the respondent as an interesting person.
Be clear and concise in questioning.

Ask if you don't understand.
Show no fear - ask if you want to find out.
Make it easy for the respondent.
Cross check the responses.
Complete the questionnaire thoroughly.
Show integrity.
Leave the door open for someone else to follow.

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