

Getting Those Difficult Interviews

Before you can get approved copy, you have to interview the study principal or the main doctor. Otherwise your copy remains a draft. But your source is very busy and is proving elusive. How do you get that interview nailed down?

Initially:

- Make this about them, rather than you. Relate what you want to something they need or to which they have a tie. Read their profile and do a background check to find commonalities. I also look for a doc who did work at the University of Michigan so I can “Go Blue!” him or her. One doctor I interviewed at Siteman Cancer Center in St. Louis, then relocated to the Sylvester Cancer Center in Miami and I interviewed him again! The more personal you can make the plea for an interview, the more likely they are to respond.
- Send them an email, copying in their admin and your boss so you have a paper trail of your attempts. (It may help you get paid!)
- Ask them their preferred means of contact: Is email the best, calling their admin, texting them or messaging them on Facebook or LinkedIn. If they get 200 emails a day, yours can get lost.
- Offer to do the interview in person or over the phone, if practical. (I’m working for the University of Miami, so it WILL be over the phone.)
- Phone interviews are sometimes easier to schedule because they don’t have to be at a particular place where they can meet you, and they can do it in their jammies (or in your jammies). For others, camping out in their office until they talk to you works better.
- Explain that you are a freelancer and as such, have very liberal “office hours”. You know they are busy and you want to help them give you this vital information by working around their other obligations. Tell them approximately how much time you need and why their expertise is so important to this project.
- Give them specific days and times you will be available and ask for a specific slot and the best phone number to reach them. I usually list anywhere from 6 AM to 10 PM on days when I can to let them know I am serious. (If possible, don’t have them call you. That takes control out of your hands and if they don’t call, you start all over.). Also, give them only a week or so of availability so they will get the sense that it has to get done soon!
- Give them interview questions and attach any files you want them to review. They should know exactly what you need. They may not be the best person to speak on those issues. Instead, they may give you another source and that can shorten the process for getting your answers.
- Offer to work weekends. I have some of my best and least rushed interviews on the weekend. As a freelancer, I don’t really care.

If you get no response from your first contact or if they schedule and repeatedly cancel:

- Send the next email to their admin, explaining the project and why his or her knowledge of the person’s schedule would really help you get the information you need. Become close personal friends. Again, copy in your boss.
- Contact them again and their admin with your updated availabilities and give them a deadline. You are leaving the country for an extended period or the copy is due to the layout people on a certain date, etc.
- If you are working hourly, you might mention that you are concerned about the impact of these repeated contacts on their department’s budget. (Oh, hello! You are paying for dodging me!)

- If you get another date, email the day before and call the day of to reconfirm the interview time. That way, if it isn't going to happen, you aren't sitting there cooling your heels. In your email, especially if it has been awhile since you sent the material you want to discuss, re-send it. They will have lost it by then.
- If you still get the run-around from them, talk to your boss and find out how we get that person's boss to "suggest" they might want to contribute for the sake of the department. That usually gets their attention.
- Above all, be persistent. Keep emailing or calling to get that interview. They may do it just to make you go away.

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