

Bridging

In any interview, the journalist will have his or her agenda and you yours (C-ommunication points). A struggle ensues as to what gets recorded. You can't or trick the press into reporting what you want, so seek the best in the relationship.

Remember, their task is to sell newspapers, keep viewers watching and stop listeners switching to another station. Journalists need you to fill their airtime or column inches, so co-operate in being as interesting as possible.

Ed Gyde says:

in the 'battle of agendas', you need to follow very different rules from a conversation with a friend who you might meet in the pub or in the office. An interview is not like a normal chat – it may look like one but it's run on quite different lines. 'Bridging' is the way you can get back from the journalists agenda, to your communication points. Used properly it is very useful and wholly legitimate. Used badly it's annoying to all concerned. It follows the sequence A-B-C. A stands for acknowledge. B stands for Bridge. C for your communication points.

Don't ignore questions but don't be led by them unless they lead to your communication points. Instead acknowledge them, and bridge away to what you want to say. This needs practising – preferably with a media trainer - as it's not a natural way to talk. It sounds fine in a media interview.

The reason you need to do this is that very few if any questions will either be open – “so tell us all about it” – or appropriate to your communication points. If you are asked nine questions and only one naturally leads to your points, and you answer them directly, the other eight answers will dominate and the audience won't remember your points at all. If you manage to repeat them nine times, they probably will get at least one of them. Bridges are verbal invitations to yourself to make your points.

Some bridges:

“That's an issue but what the public are most concerned about is ...”

“Some say that but what our research shows is”

“Yes that debate will run and run, and today we are focussed on”

“An important point and I'd like to answer it in three ways if I may ...” (high risk as it requires style and confidence but used to great effect by elder statesman who of course never do answer)

“I agree that needs answering and I will in a moment if I may but first I would just like to say ...” (using politesse to take control of the interview agenda)

“That is an issue but the important thing to focus on ...” (very popular but patently judgemental and thus rather obvious)

“Well I think the three main things to focus on are” (double bridge, only viable if the question wasn't very clear)

“Let me be absolutely clear” (not a bridge at all, a smokescreen favourite of Tony Blair which everyone takes as “I 'm not answering that”)

“But what we know works in this field is...” (useful so long as you really do know)

“That's a possibility but what we're calling for is ...” (likewise)

“That's one view but we need to look at how this fits into the bigger picture”

Don't be like politicians and push past the question without acknowledging it, from A to C without B: that's rude.

The temptation may be to bridge everything and never to answer any question directly. That is a mistake. If you get questions which can be answered with a yes or no, do so, and add your key points. If it's reasonable, there's nothing wrong with saying “I don't know but I'll find out and get back to you/the listeners (etc)” – in fact come to think of it, that can be a bridge.