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Interviewing experts: Best practices for broadcasters and experts

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**Introduction**

Interviewing experts adds a lot to your farmer radio program. It gives your listeners reliable information from trusted sources. And don’t forget—some farmers are experts too.

Please note that this Broadcaster-how-to guide is for both broadcasters and experts, because it’s important for both groups to know the appropriate roles and behaviours of the other participant in an interview.

***How can effectively interviewing experts help me serve my listeners better?***

* It ensures that my listeners get the most relevant and up-to-date information.
* It reinforces listeners’ knowledge and experience with references to research and technical information, or to valuable traditional knowledge.
* It can give listeners more confidence that they are using effective farming practices, or help them change less effective practices.
* It can help listeners gain new knowledge and understand new practices.
* It can encourage listeners to speak to extension officers and other experts in their communities.

***How can it help me produce better programs?***

* It encourages collaboration between the radio team and experts.
* It ensures the regular participation of experts in my radio programs.

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

1. Be prepared
2. Beginnings and endings
3. Be respectful
4. Use good interviewing techniques
5. Is there a difference between interviews with experts and interviews with farmers?
6. Conflicts of interest, different perspectives on knowledge
7. Troubleshooting
8. Navigating traditional customs and other kinds of barriers to a good interview
9. Men interviewing women and women interviewing men
10. Build the relationship

***Details***

**1) Be prepared**

*For the interviewer:*

* Decide on the topic and scope of the interview. For example:
	+ - “Today, we will talk about feeding insects to chickens. We will cover the different types of insects used, the most common ways of capturing and rearing them, and the benefits and challenges for farmers.”
* Schedule the interview well enough in advance to ensure that the expert will be available, and let the expert know how long the interview should take.
* Do some research on the topic, so that you are familiar with the most important issues and questions. If you are interviewing an extension agent, try to interview some farmers in advance so that you have questions for the expert that you know farmers want answered.
* Do a little research about your expert interviewee, and his or her area of expertise.
Prepare your questions carefully to guide the interviewee to concentrate on the theme at hand. Otherwise, the expert may dominate the interview and focus on areas that may not be relevant to the topic.
	+ Make sure that the interviewee knows beforehand that the interview will be recorded, and could be broadcast.
	+ Ensure that the expert knows who the audience is: for example, small-scale cassava farmers who may not have spent a lot of years at school, and may better understand a message spoken in non-technical language.
	+ Should the broadcaster send the expert interviewee a list of interview questions? Though many people feel that they should, there are some disadvantages to doing so. Providing the full list of questions beforehand can result in the expert controlling the interview and dictating which questions will be asked—and answered. Also, instead of answering one question at a time (which builds on the audience`s knowledge in a step-by-step manner), the expert may answer one question, then give a speech which includes answers to several other questions, but in insufficient detail, and with no room for follow-ups. Because of these downsides, it is recommended that the broadcaster inform the expert beforehand (for example, when scheduling the interview on the phone) about the topic to be discussed, and provide a short list of the *kinds of questions* the expert might expect. This scheduling conversation should be as detailed as necessary to prepare the expert for the topic to be discussed, but without providing the actual questions.

*For the expert:*

* Study the topic of the interview, in order to have the pertinent facts at hand, and to feel confident.
	+ Turn off your phone before a face-to-face interview to minimize distractions.
	+ You might want to write down your perspectives on some of the key issues in a clear succinct manner to avoid rambling on during an interview, even when you do not have a list of established questions for an interview. However, it is not good radio to read out your answers as if you were reading out a lecture. An interview should be a conversation, so respond to the interviewer`s questions as they are asked, and in a conversational manner.
		- For example, in Uganda, an expert might prepare for an interview by making a list of the top gender-related stereotypes related to bananas: 1) a married woman is not supposed to harvest bananas because she will be regarded as a thief; 2) women are not supposed to sell bananas which produce juice; 3) women do not own banana plantations.
* *Note*: It’s always the broadcaster’s responsibility both to choose the topic and to steer the interview, because he or she knows the purpose of the program and has the responsibility to serve the listening audience with the information they need.

**2) Beginnings and endings**

*For the interviewer:*

*Beginnings*:

* If you have interviewed the expert before, remind the interviewee about your last recording with them. Tell them how useful it was, and, if you haven’t already done this, share any feedback from the audience with them.
* Before you begin to speak, smile at the interviewee to establish a rapport and introduce them appropriately.
* On the recording and when conducting a live interview, give a good introduction to the interview. For example, state the problem that you want to interview the expert about, and the local impact and experience of that problem. Then introduce the interviewee and their connection to and expertise about that problem, and explain that you want to get more detailed information from the expert. For example,
	+ - “*The changing weather* *continues to hit farmers hard, particularly in the drier areas of our region. What methods should farmers be practicing in view of the changing climate? We have Mr. John Phiri, an expert on the impact of climate change on crop production. Mr. Phiri will help us unpack some of these methods*.”

*Endings*:

* Remind listeners of the theme of the interview and summarize some of the information that the interviewee responded to. For example, you could say:
	+ “You just heard Patience Abdulai from Tumu telling us about her experience with conservation agriculture. She said that the three biggest benefits for her are that, because she is pregnant and needs more rest, minimum tillage is much easier. Also, crop rotation has helped her family diversify what they grow, which helps at the market and also for nutrition. And finally, after practicing conservation agriculture for a few years, she is beginning to understand that healthy soils mean better yields, and that even though it took a few years, it is making a difference now.” Do NOT just say: “You just heard Patience Abdulai from Tumu telling us about the benefits of conservation agriculture.”
* You can also ask the interviewee to summarize the most important points you covered.
* Express appreciation. For example:
	+ “*We very much appreciate you sharing your thoughts with us today and hope to have you next time in the program*.” Or, simply: “*Thank you for being on the program today*.”
* Make sure you save your recording, and save it with a name that clearly tells you who you interviewed, the date, and the subject.

**3) Be respectful**

*For both the interviewer and expert:*

* Avoid cancelling the interview at the last moment. Respect that the other person has obligations, and give as much notice as possible if you must cancel the interview.
* Avoid persistently interrupting.
* Be on time!
* Listen attentively to the other person.
* Avoid facial expressions or body language which reflect boredom, frustration, or anger. Avoid shaking the head when not agreeing with the other.
* Avoid denying the other person’s experience, e.g., “No, the farmers have access to seeds. They’re just too lazy to get them.” OR “Experts never pay attention to farmers’ needs anyway, so I’m sure the Ministry won’t do anything about this.”
* Avoid arguments in which each party feels they are correct and tries to prove that the other person is incompetent or ignorant on the topic.

*For the interviewer:*

* Finish the interview at the end of the planned time. If you want to cover other information, ask if the interviewee can stay longer. If not, request another time.
* Avoid asking personal or unrelated questions.
* Avoid continued mispronunciation of the interviewee’s name. If you are not certain, ask the interviewee to pronounce their name correctly before the interview starts.
* As a courtesy, inform the interviewee when the interview will be aired.

*For the expert:*

* Don’t talk on the phone or play with your phone, or read. It’s best to turn your phone off or put it on silent mode.
* Avoid very short, terse answers which give the impression that you want the interview to be over with as quickly as possible.
* Remember that it’s the broadcaster’s responsibility to hold the recording equipment, not the interviewee’s.
* Avoid being sarcastic or ridiculing the interviewer as not knowledgeable.
* Don’t monopolize the time. An interview is a conversation, not a lecture.
* Answer one question at a time. If you bring in information that the interviewer did not ask about, you might throw the entire interview off.
* Show appreciation for the role of the broadcaster in sharing information with listeners, and show interest in the need to disseminate farming knowledge through the mass media.
* It is part of the interviewer’s job to ask probing and follow-up questions. Rather than acting as though you want to discourage them, welcome them.
* Avoid arrogance and giving the impression of being “all-knowing.”
* Avoid changing your mind about the content of the interview and asking for material not to be used.
* Avoid constantly reminding the interviewer of your professional expertise.
* Avoid continually rephrasing the interviewer’s questions. For example, an interviewer might ask, “What kinds of weeds affect maize?” Avoid rephrasing the question as, for example, “So if we talk about the kinds of unwanted vegetation that compete with maize, both pre-emergence and post-emergence, what are the main species?”

**4) Use good interviewing techniques**

*For the interviewer and expert:*

* Make sure that questions and responses stay on topic.
* Think of a radio interview as a one-to-one conversation. Be respectful and friendly, but speak a little more formally than you would when talking with a friend,
* *Length of interview*: To some degree, the appropriate length for an interview depends on the purpose of the interview and the kind of program. In a magazine program, the edited interview has to fit with the other components of the program. Keep in mind that a 15-minute interview on a single topic with an agricultural researcher or extension worker may contain far too much information for a listening farmer to absorb in one listen. Instead, it may be that 3-5 minutes of information is sufficient. Different countries may vary in what they consider an acceptable length for an interview, but keep in mind that the main purpose is to provide useful information that the farmer will be able to remember. Before the interview, tell the interviewee that the slot for the interview is about x minutes long, and then try to record to that time to avoid too much editing.
* For the best radio, experts should speak for no more than a few minutes at a time, without the broadcaster asking a question or making some other kind of verbal interaction. It is the interviewer’s responsibility to break up the interview on a regular basis to ask for clarification, add other points of view, maintain good pacing, and ensure that both the interviewer and the audience understand.

*For the interviewer:*

* Ask the expert to explain issues in clear language, without jargon. Keep in mind that jargon is not just technical language. Any language that is not part of the everyday speech of the audience is jargon. For example, if broadcasters speak in the local language but include agricultural or health terms in English or French, this is jargon to the audience. Always try to find the best word in the local language.
* Give experts enough time to explain issues.
* Avoid pushing experts to take sides on issues, especially when there are strong differences between alternative ways of looking at important issues.

*For the expert:*

* Speak in language that is understandable to the listening audience. For example, instead of saying “The biodata experience is of 100% mortality,” say “All the fish died.” Explain any technical terms that are unavoidable or particularly useful.
* Avoid giving unnecessarily lengthy answers. Tailor your answers to the time allotted.
* Don’t oversell any particular viewpoint. Remember you are on the air to provide useful information to the listening audience.

**5) Is there a difference between interviews with scientific experts and interviews with expert farmers?**

* There is a myth that scientific experts know all about how to do effective, informative interviews. The truth is that some experts are very skilled interviewees, and others aren’t. Those who aren’t—and those who are simply inexperienced interviewees—will need the interviewer’s guidance to help create an interview that will be useful to listeners. For example, scientific expert interviewees may not understand that the interviewer steers the interview and may want to steer it themselves. Or they may not be comfortable with being interrupted to ask clarification questions. Try to brief them before the interview on what to expect, especially if they are inexperienced interviewees.
* Generally speaking, scientific experts’ views tend to be more informed by research, while farmers’ views are driven by everyday knowledge and experience and traditional knowledge.
* Interviews with expert farmers are typically about challenges, struggles, and success stories, while interviewing experts is typically about technical information.
	+ “*The key difference is about perspective. The farmer’s perspective will be based on personal experience whilst the expert’s perspective could be a combination of theory and observation.*”
* A scientific expert quotes research and offers general and agreed-upon information verified by a community of experts, and is expected to be objective. An expert farmer offers knowledge based on personal experience in their immediate environment, and it is expected that there is a certain level of subjectivity.

**6) Conflicts of interest, different perspectives on knowledge**

* When interviewing experts, keep in mind that individual experts may have interests other than the well-being of farmer-listeners. For example, an expert might work for a seed company, and want to promote the company during the interview. In cases like this, it is important for the interviewer to announce that the expert works for a company that is trying to persuade local farmers to use a particular kind of seed.
	+ Also, experts—whether extension officers, researchers, or farmers—may be very knowledgeable, but they are not infallible; they are not always right. And on some topics, there isn’t just one right answer; researchers and extension workers may honestly disagree. It’s the job of the interviewer to bring to light all the important options that might work for the farmers in the audience. Interviewers act on their listeners’ behalf to broadcast the most useful information they can. This may involve asking hard questions, because the most useful information may be somewhat different from what the expert says, or the message that the expert is trying to convey. (See the [F.A.I.R. journalism standards for farmer programs](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/104-post-harvest-cow-pea/f-r-journalism-standards-farmer-programs/), especially the section on *integrity*.)

**7) Troubleshooting**

*What should an interviewer do if an expert interviewee continually gives indirect or evasive answers?*

* Rephrase your question.
* Pause the recording and politely encourage the expert to focus on giving direct answers. Explain that the audience needs to understand his response to the question.
* If rephrasing the question doesn’t work, the interviewer could introduce the question with any of the following: 1) “That point was interesting, but what I think is more important for our listeners to know is …” Or b) “I’m sorry, but I want to get this clear …”
* If the interview is live, finish the interview soon so that listeners are not disappointed. If the interview is being recorded, make sure you interview another expert to fill in the gaps in information.

*What can interviewers do when they suspect that something an expert says might not be correct?*

* Probe more deeply with further questions, and perhaps ask for evidence to back up the information.
* Ask if the answer is a fact or personal opinion and cross-check later with an independent source.
* Wait until the expert finishes, then politely present a different opinion that you have heard from other sources and ask the expert for an explanation.
* Politely ask the expert: “What do you think of the following opinion on this issue as suggested by …?”

*What should an expert do when a broadcaster presents farming information incorrectly during an interview?*

* Simply make the correction in a polite manner, and remember that it’s not about who outshines who, but about teamwork.
* If the interview is being recorded, the expert should explain the situation and correct the broadcaster.

*What should an expert do when a broadcaster asks a question that the expert is not at liberty to answer fully?*

* The expert should give as much information as possible, but explain that he or she is not in a position or not at liberty to respond more fully, and explain as much as possible why. The expert could also direct the interviewee to someone who can answer the question more fully.
	+ Experts should politely decline to speak on subjects on which they are obligated not to divulge certain information, or refer the interviewer to the relevant authority. Depending on the subject, they might also request that the interviewee not record the information or quote them.

**8) Navigating traditional customs and other kinds of barriers to a good interview**

There may be barriers, including traditions and customs, which hinder full communication during an interview. It is the interviewer’s job to be aware of these customs and barriers, and, while respecting them, to try to find ways to get the information to the audience.

**9) Men interviewing women and women interviewing men (see also** [Gender and farm programs](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/package-95-researching-and-producing-farmer-focused-programs/gender-and-farm-programs/)**)**

*Female broadcaster and male expert:*

* Interviewer should dress appropriately and respectfully.
* Choose an appropriate place for the interview where both will feel they can speak freely, and that provide a clear route for the woman to leave the interview if she so chooses, for example, if she perceives threatening behaviour from the expert.
* Ensure that you ask for and use the correct names and forms of address. For example, address people with appropriate terms such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss, Chief, Doctor, Professor, etc. You do not need to add that they are an expert. Rather, simply give their name, title and perhaps their role or occupation. In this way, you can avoid giving the impression that these people are experts and farmers are not experts.
* Avoid gender stereotyping. For example, the expert might provide examples drawn exclusively from domestic and household life, assuming that the female interviewer will not understand agronomical issues.
* Be professional, and careful about inappropriate gestures and body language.

*Male broadcaster and female expert:*

* Avoid gender stereotyping.
* Be professional, and careful of inappropriate gestures and body language.
* Maintain a culturally acceptable distance from the expert.
* Strongly consider conducting the interview during day time.
* Dress appropriately and respectfully.
* Avoid introducing women by referring to their relationship to men (mother, wife, etc.) or referring to their physical appearance (e.g., “attractive”). Instead, simply use their correct names and titles, the way you would introduce a man.
* Acknowledge the expert’s professional status and give her the same respect you would to a male expert.

**10) Build the relationship**

* + Over time, the trust that is built by being and staying on time (for both parties), and the interviewer keeping the interviewee up to date on when the interviews are broadcast will build a strong relationship.
	+ Interviewers should remind expert interviewees to tune in as the program airs, ask for feedback from them, and discuss angles for tackling emerging issues.
	+ Staying in regular contact will help maintain the relationship, and avoid the impression that the expert is of use only when needed for an interview. Include experts in broadcasting success stories.
	+ Regular collaborators become in some ways part of the team, and there can be meetings to discuss possible programs and topics.
* The interviewer should explain that he or she may contact them again for other interviews, and hence may need detailed contact information.
* It may be appropriate to offer a modest reimbursement for expenses such as transport and airtime, but this should never be seen as a form of payment for their participation in the program.
* For regular collaborators, consider bi-annual review and planning meetings.
* With regular collaborators, build in time for feedback, debriefs, follow-ups, and panel discussions.

***Where else can I learn about interviews with experts?***

Nectary, undated. *The Do’s & Don’ts Of Subject Matter Expert Interviews*. <http://nectafy.com/subject-matter-expert-interviews/>

Singer, Warren, undated. *How to Interview Subject Matter Experts*. [http://msatterw.public.iastate.edu/ENG%20250%20Readings/Subject%20Matter%20Expert.pdf](http://msatterw.public.iastate.edu/ENG%25252520250%25252520Readings/Subject%25252520Matter%25252520Expert.pdf)

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**Sources of information**

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