



VOX POPS

Vox pops and talking heads: Just what the heck are these things?

Well, ignoring the advice to avoid using all Latin phrases *per modos necessarios*, some British folk – back in the 1960s – started using ‘vox pop’ as an abbreviation of ‘*vox populi*’, meaning ‘voice of the people’... So a vox pop is a short interview-like scenario in which people, very often in the street, voice their opinion on camera.

Talking heads, meanwhile, isn’t just a new wave rock combo and a series of Alan Bennet monologues; oh, no... It’s also the name given to a somewhat more formal vox pop style interview in which people, usually pundits or personalities, speak on a subject...

So they’re both types of interview? Yes... And no! Interviews usually feature questions posed as well as answers given. In vox pops and talking heads, it’s more common to have just answers, and – very often – what’s said is short and to the point.

Got it! Grab a camera, shove the mic on; let’s go! That attitude does seem to be prevalent, and even then some people skip the microphone! It doesn’t bring out the best in the people on screen, though, so we implore you to read the rest of this sheet!

Con-sider your-self... Our friend! You’ve probably seen a variety of interview styles over the years... Everybody from Michael Parkinson and Jonathan Ross, to David Frost and Graham Norton! There’s no need for you put on a controversial or entertaining act whilst interviewing, though, since the questions are very rarely featured on screen...

Instead, one secret to vox pop interviewing is a simple one: make the person on camera feel comfortable... Treat them like a friend. Relax them – it’s not your job to poke fun, scrutinise, or shock with your questions; rather, it’s up to you to elicit their honest opinion on a specific subject.

Frankie says: ‘Relax’... It might be worth bearing in mind that, very often, people appearing in a vox pop have never done anything formal in front of the camera before. For that reason, it can be beneficial to give them an idea of how things work without overwhelming them with techobabble!

For example, some of us found, very early on, that interviewees respond quite well when they’re told something along these lines:

“Just so you know, it really helps if, before you answer the question, you just leave a few seconds’ pause – I don’t know why; some technical thing or other... Also, if you can incorporate my question in your answer, that helps, too! Have you got any questions?”

The reason that this seems to work is that you’re able to communicate essential information, such as the next couple of tips, without sounding like a know-it-all!

Why the big paws? In the last point, we mentioned a couple of things that might need expanding on... First, it’s imperative that there’s a short pause between the end of your questions and the start of any answers... The folk who’ll be slaving over a hot edit desk later will be cursing and cussing if this is omitted!



Repeat after me... Next, if – when you were at school – your teacher told you to rephrase and repeat back the question in the opening sentence of your answer, you already know what we referred to a couple of paragraphs back. Using this technique means editors have a lot more room to play with the footage...

Try to encourage interviewees to begin their answer with a pause, then a derivative of the question. If, for instance, you ask your subject: “What are the best things about the new Disney Store?” they might start by saying “The best things about the new Disney store are...!” It’s simple enough, but you’d be amazed how often a terrific sound bite has to be dropped because there’s no context in which to frame it.

Brief the popper: It’s also somewhat astonishing how often somebody asking questions for a vox pop will claim they want to make people feel at ease on camera... And then treat them like cattle in a slaughter house! Next month’s Info Sheet will focus on some tips for people appearing in front of the camera; you should feel free to forward that – or this – to anyone that you’re planning to speak with as part of a brief... And, finally, ask if there’s anything you can do to put them at ease!

Send questions in advance: Part of briefing talking heads, or ‘controlled’ vox poppers, is ensuring that they’re given access to questions in advance. This offers the advantage of helping people relax and, often, reduces the number of non-words – ‘ums’, ‘ers’, ‘you knows’ and ‘innits’ – that creep into people’s off-cuff responses. Even if you’re not able to do any preparation before the day, it’s still quite easy to say “We’re going to ask you...” and give people a moment to think what they want to say. Which leads to this point...

David and Goliath: When David Frost interviewed Richard Nixon for the final time he was desperate to hear *mea culpa* from the former President in some way... It’s not widely known, though, that when that interview was only going so-so, Nixon’s people, off-camera, held up a sign to Frost that said ‘Let him talk’...

By all accounts, Frost immediately took a short break, then came back and, soon after, put down his notes and became more empathetic and conciliatory toward Nixon... Tricky Dicky, who had largely run rings around Frost during their hours together, suddenly began to be more cooperative. The rest is not only history, but also a documentary and a rather good film!

Of course, vox pops and talking heads aren’t usually quite on this level, but it serves to illustrate that, sometimes, relaxing and deviating from what you’ve prepared can be the difference between going for gold and getting it! Prepare and share your questions, but – if it feels right – wing it a little, too! The editor will usually find a way to make it work... Keep your wits about you and remember it’s about opinions, which are heartfelt by nature.

It takes two: It can be extremely helpful, to post production, if you make it clear when you finish a take. Now, we’re of the view that the clapperboard has kind of had its day in regard to doing this in ‘on the fly’ interviews... It’s time consuming to use, feels a bit pretentious and, frankly, is a bit of kit you can well afford not to carry round! Signal you’ve finished the take with a 90 degree swoosh of the camera, or by holding up some fingers in front of the lens instead.



It's all about them. But what about you? While we're at pains to suggest that vox pops and talking heads don't really need the interviewer to appear on screen, there are a couple of things to bear in mind that defy this guideline... The first are the 'noddies'!

Nothing to do with Enid Blyton or Bill Oddie, though... 'Noddies' are simply quick 'cut aways' to the interviewer nodding in interest at the vox popper's answer! As with the next couple of tips, this helps break up the action and keep things looking fresh.

And cut to something else! Similarly, it can be helpful if, when people mention something specific in their answer, you can grab a shot of that, too. It provides a useful cut away which breaks up the piece a little... A good example would be if a person talking about London mentioned a landmark; it'd be a simple thing to insert a shot of the feature itself.

Likewise, most experienced crew know that it can help to get a 'non-synch. wide'. This means a shot of an interviewer and interviewee chatting, but shot at a distance such that you can't see their lips moving! Why's this useful? Well, again, you can use it as a cut away, but it also serves to establish the interview in a broader context... And being at a distance so that no one can see if the lips are out of synchronisation with the sound means it'll cut in just about anywhere!

Set against a glittering backdrop of... Well, whatever you like! Which makes it all the more inexplicable that we've seen vox pops done against brick walls, dank alleyways and men's loos! It seems unlikely there wasn't something more visually pleasing just around the corner... Try and find something interesting, but not distracting, to serve as a backdrop, then bring people to the camera to save time.

Hands or legs? You're going to have the option to take with you a camera tripod – a set of legs, you might well hear it called – on your vox pop/talking heads quest... Is it better to take them or go handheld? Well, if you're literally stopping people in the street and asking questions, you can usually get away with handheld shots – it also bypasses some permit issues and saves you cutting through a lot of red tape!

For things that need to look like you mean business, though, take the legs! You don't have to use them, of course, but things will be that little bit more slick if you do. Also, if you're alone, or with a really small team, you'll not have to hulk the camera onto your shoulder which can become tiresome after – ooh, one or two questions, maybe!

Sound ideas: Sound is easily the most overlooked thing on a straightforward shoot and you need to be warned that, wherever you are in the world and however discreet you are, some wag will be looking for a way to make a disruptive noise or otherwise act the goat while you're recording!

Yes, the inevitable tooting of a horn or pulling of a face will disrupt you... No, it won't be funny! Yes, they'll fall about and do it again... No, you're not allowed to smite them... In any case, you should aim for a consistent level of noise in the background... The murmur of a crowd is fine; one twit shouting out "It's someone off the telly!" is not...



Multiple shots: If there's more than one person contributing in a shot, ask them to bunch in tight. It'll feel a bit odd, but make a better picture; explain that you need them to be heard distinctly and not just natter over each other, too... It's not a chinwag over a cuppa!

You can lead the hoarse to water... You might be surprised to find that some people get a little nervous about speaking on camera. Just as a courtesy, have a supply of water for those that dry up, go hoarse or otherwise feel nervous.

Noises off: This is an old expression, originating in the theatre; it refers to sounds made offstage, usually in the wings, to enhance the action on stage. For example, a clap of thunder, or the murmuring of a crowd, or perhaps the approach of a horse's hooves! These days, though, 'noises off' has also been used to refer to the little noises a questioner uses to coax more out of their subject!

For example, it's not uncommon for an interviewer, hoping to extract more information from their subject, to simply say "Oh?" or "Uh-huh!" with questioning and encouraging looks respectively... This will communicate, very concisely, that you'd like your vox popper to expand on what they've said; just avoid making noises over the subject!

You're going to like it... Nod a lot! One of the most effective interview techniques you can employ is to demonstrate your interest, rather than agreement, by nodding encouragingly whilst an interviewee speaks. As you stand beside the camera, demonstrate your interest in what's being said by nodding occasionally.

Mr. Kipling does make exceedingly good takes: It seems that any time we talk about questions, we refer to Rudyard Kipling's 'Six Honest Serving Men'! We'll just quickly remind you that questions incorporating the words 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', 'why' or 'how' are the basis of open questions... They usually require more than a one word answer or a selection from a limited number of options!

Short and sweet: Remember, though, part of your job is to get everything you can out of everything you've got whilst saying very little! So in the event that your vox popper has made a statement and left it hanging, try to use open question words as concisely as possible. You might, for example, ask "In what way?" or "How so?" Remember that you should pause a little after the speaker has finished talking, too.

"Objection, M'lud!" Have you ever seen one of those courtroom dramas in which a barrister yells this, or something similar, before telling the Judge that the witness is being led? Well, what Judges don't let lawyers get away with in a court room goes on all the time outside of it... And the opinions of people answering are often influenced – intentionally or otherwise – by the simple asking of the question...

For example, let's imagine that two different people are getting vox pop responses to an announcement that the government plans to reassign a number of police sergeants... One questioner feels that it shouldn't happen and writes a question that sounds fair to him; the other feels it should happen and writes a question that sounds fair to her! Here are the questions:

"In terms of front-line policing, do you think the government should be held to account for reducing the total number of active sergeants from 640 to just 480?"



"Given the need to get more officers 'on the beat', do you think the government should redeploy an extra 160 deskbound police sergeants to areas where they can be more effective?"

Do you see how somebody in the street, without any more information, could easily end up supporting either argument, simply because of each question's phrasing? The first question implies wrongdoing and uses minimization – "held to account", "reducing" and "just"; the second question uses presuppositions... In other words, both questions have a strong bias!

When you write any kind of question, it's important that you seriously consider if you've got a bias – and whether or not it matters! Sometimes it's perfectly okay; if you've been hired to promote a product, for example, you're unlikely to need negative comments. In fact, the only product we can think of where a totally uninfluenced sales vox pop would be of any use is the 'love it/hate it' Marmite campaign!

In other situations, though, it's important that you're aware how easily questions can become leading and be mindful of that, particularly if people are planning to act on the feedback of your vox pops such as when doing research.

Bish, bash, bosh: So there we go; a bunch of tips to help you conduct a vox pop or talking head style interview to a certain standard... Remember to check out the follow-up to this Info Sheet, intended for those that are being interviewed, and to take a shufti at 'Conversation Confidence' via www.dmiproductions.co.uk/info.