Additional interview tips from Fred Zimmerman, *The Wall Street Journal*

1. Do research on the interview topic and the person to be interviewed, not only so you can ask the right questions and understand the answers, but also so you can demonstrate to the interviewee that you have taken the time to understand the subject and also that you cannot easily be fooled.

2. Devise a tentative theme for your story. A major purpose of the interview will be to obtain quotes, anecdotes and other evidence to support that theme.

3. List question topics in advance — as many as you can think of, even though you may not ask all of them and almost certainly will ask others that you do not list.

4. In preparing for interviews on sensitive subjects, theorize about what the person's attitude is likely to be toward you and the subject you are asking about. What is his or her role in the event? Whose side is he or she on? What kinds of answers can you logically expect to your key questions? Based on this theorizing, develop a plan of attack that you think might mesh with the person's probable attitude and get through his or her probable defenses.

5. Almost never plunge in with tough questions at the beginning. Instead, break the ice, explain who you are, what you are doing, why you went to him or her. A touch of flattery usually helps.

6. Often the opening question should be an open-ended inquiry that sets the source off on his or her favorite subject. Get the person talking, set up a conversational atmosphere. This will provide you with important clues about his or her attitude toward you, the subject and the idea of being interviewed.

7. Watch and listen closely. How is he or she reacting? Does he seem open or secretive? Maybe interrupt him in the middle of an anecdote to ask a minor question about something he is leaving out, just to test his reflexes. Use the information you are obtaining in this early stage to ascertain whether your preinterview hunches about him were right. Use it also to determine what style you should adopt to match his mood. If he insists upon being formal, you may have to become more businesslike yourself. If he is relaxed and expansive, you should be too, but beware of the possibility the interview can then degenerate into a formless conversation over which you have no control.

8. Start through your questions to lead him along a trail you have picked. One question should logically follow another. Lead up to a tough question with two or three preliminaries. Sometimes it helps to create the impression that the tough question has just occurred to you because of something he is saying.

9. Listen for hints that suggest questions you had not thought of. Stay alert for the possibility that the theme you picked in advance is the wrong one, or is only a subsidiary one. Remain flexible. Through an accidental remark of his you may uncover a story that is better than the one you came for. If so, go after it right there.

10. Keep reminding yourself that when you leave, you are going to do a story. As she talks, ask yourself: What is my lead going to be? Do I understand enough to state a theme
clearly and buttress it with quotes and documentation? Do I have enough information to write a coherent account of the anecdote she just told me?

11. Do not forget to ask the key question—the one your editors sent you to ask, or the one that will elicit supporting material for your theme.

12. Do not be reluctant to ask an embarrassing question. After going through all the preliminaries you can think of, the time finally arrives to ask the tough question. Just ask it.

13. Do not be afraid to ask naive questions. The subject understands that you do not know everything. Even if you have done your homework there are bound to be items you are unfamiliar with. The source usually will be glad to fill in the gaps.

14. Get in the habit of asking treading-water questions, such as “What do you mean?” or “Why's that?” This is an easy way to keep the person talking.

15. Sometimes it helps to change the conversational pace, by backing off a sensitive line of inquiry, putting your notebook away, and suddenly displaying a deep interest in an irrelevancy. But be sure to return to those sensitive questions later. A sudden pause is sometimes useful. When the subject finishes a statement just stare at her maybe with a slightly ambiguous smile, for a few seconds. She often will become uneasy and blurt out something crucial.

16. Do not give up on a question because the subject says “no comment.” That is only the beginning of the fight. Act as if you misunderstood her and restate the question a little differently. If she still clams up, act as if she misunderstood you and rephrase the question again. On the third try, feign disbelief at her refusal to talk. Suggest an embarrassing conclusion from her refusal and ask if it is valid. Later, ask for “guidance” in tracking down the story elsewhere, or suggest nonattribution, or get tough—whatever you think might work.

17. Occasionally your best quote or fact comes after the subject thinks the interview is over. As you are putting away your notebook and are saying goodbye the subject often relaxes and makes a crucial but offhand remark. So stay alert until you are out the door. (Sid Moody of the AP says that interviewing gems can come after the notebook is snapped shut. “I've found almost as a rule of thumb that you get more than you've gotten in the interview.”)