

Powerful Q & A

**W.C. O'Donovan, Publisher
The Virginia Gazette
216 Ironbound Road
Williamsburg, VA 23188
757-345-2351
bodonovan@vagazette.com**

**Presented to the Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium XI,
co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media
at Kansas State University and the National Newspaper Association Foundation
NNA Convention, Milwaukee, WI
Sept. 29-30, 2005**

Powerful Q & A

By W.C. O'Donovan

When he was running The Washington Post, Ben Bradlee used to have a file marked "Too Hard" for stories that were just too complicated for the reader to digest. Small newspapers have their own challenges with "too hard" stories, but there's a way to make them work.

We have a great opportunity through technology to amplify the traditional Q&A into a full-blown interview that enhances readership by covering a tough issue in-depth with short questions and answers. The trick is to exploit e-mail.

The premise is deceptively simple. Start with a topic that needs exploring and find a willing (and expert) source.

By using e-mail, get the source to agree to take a few easy questions and a few hard ones in writing, and ask for response by "Reply." Follow up with more questions that can be inserted as you go along, and break into the responses to interject follow-up questions. Set a one-week (or one day!) deadline to avoid procrastination and to give some semblance of spontaneity.

The key to this artificial spontaneity is to execute the follow-up questions, and quickly. Some seek amplification or explanation with a simple, "How does that work?" Others challenge ambiguous assertions, albeit politely. "But you said earlier..."

At The Virginia Gazette in Williamsburg, we've found that sources like the e-mail approach. They appreciate the premise of detail, brevity and clarity. They can take time to answer without feeling under pressure. They vastly prefer verbatim publication to get their points across. And they feel like they have more control over the process.

Readers benefit as well with bite-sized questions and answers that are easier to read. Complex issues are broken into their component parts. We rigorously edit out self-serving,

lugubrious, extraneous sentences, making the interview tight.

The e-mail version is convenient for both parties. There's no need to schedule a sit-down, or several of them, to cover the territory. Many more questions can be fielded easily this way than with a conventional Q&A. And without the need for cumbersome transcription, reporters and editors will find the process easier to execute and thus pursue it more frequently.

Admittedly this is not a perfect system. Spontaneity is traded off for precision, and the "gotcha" question doesn't work in this format.

The Gazette is doing one Q&A a month, with varying results. During last year's controversy over a \$40 million referendum on a third high school, the Gazette published a series of three Q&As covering discrete sectors of the issue. The referendum passed with 70%, and the Q&As were singled out by school officials as a big factor in educating the public.

More recently we did 50 short questions and answers with a longtime college president upon retirement. We did 30 questions contrasting the challenges of Gettysburg with Colonial Williamsburg. And we did 20 questions about the future of the college's business school. In each case, the questions were precise and so were the answers. Some answers went longer than others, for good reason. No effort was made to summarize the outcome or tie it all up in a clever lead. Instead, a one-sentence italic bio led right into the first question.

Now we're working on a fellow who was present at the creation of the atom bomb 60 years ago and spent his entire career in the government nuclear program. He never wanted to be interviewed before because it was too complicated, but he likes the e-mail format.

Call it "explanatory journalism" or call it convenient interviewing. Either way, the reader gains new insight in an easy format.