

Telephone

In Theory...and in Practice

By Christopher P. Norris, CFI

The changes that I have witnessed in the loss prevention industry over my twenty-year career seem to be endless. As the world of loss prevention evolves, so do the resources available to LP professionals to resolve integrity issues in the workplace. Resources like digital CCTV, point-of-sale software, exception reports, global positioning devices, electronic article surveillance (EAS) technology, currency validators, electronic access control, radio frequency identification (RFID), and the telephone have entered our kaleidoscope of new tools. That's right; I did just say, "the telephone."

Yes, I am aware that it was 1876 when Alexander Graham Bell uttered the famous words, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you," and the first voice over telegraph or "telephone" call was made. Though it's been over 130 years since then, the telephone seems to be a newly discovered tool in the loss prevention professional's arsenal as an investigative device and means to interview employees regarding their poor decisions at work.

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Interviewing



By Frank Borecki, CFI

A few years back, I was asked to conduct my first telephone interview with an hourly employee. He was suspected of merchandise theft and my supervisor insisted that I conduct the interview over the phone as the suspect was 800 miles away in another state, and the case value was expected to be low. How was I going to secure an admission if I couldn't look him in the eyes, observe his body language, and gauge deception in all the ways interviewers are traditionally trained?

Until then, I had never heard of a telephone interview and, admittedly, I was resistant and skeptical of the idea. The whole concept that a phone interview would net any kind of an admission was the craziest idea that I'd ever heard. How would I evaluate this person's behavior? How would I know when he was in a submissive place and ready to admit? How could I possibly take a written statement over the phone?

After some cajoling on my boss' part, I resigned myself to the idea, trusted the process, and conducted the interview. Much to my surprise, it worked. The suspect admitted to the theft, I walked the manager on site through

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We live in a remote world with remote offices, remote communication through email and text messaging, remote surveillance on high-speed Internet platforms, remote learning via webinars, and even television remotes on my beloved NFL Sunday afternoons. So, why can't interviews be remote as well?

Let me start by saying that I am an advocate of face-to-face interviews, as they have proven to be the most effective way to get the truth and discuss and resolve integrity issues in the workplace. Having said that, there is certainly no reason to simply dismiss the use of the telephone for investigative interviews, including the accusatory interview or interrogation.

Working as an investigator and trainer for Wicklander-Zulawski & Associates for nearly nine years now, I've always seen it as my responsibility to introduce investigative and interviewing theory to those people who attend our training seminars and webinars. In addition to teaching theory, I also believe that it is my responsibility to instill the confidence necessary to go out and execute that theory. This segment of this article will hopefully help you with your confidence in interviewing suspects over the phone.

Getting Past That Initial Hurdle

Let's start by taking a big step back to the spring of 1996 when I was thrust into the world of telephone interviewing, a world in which I had absolutely zero confidence in being successful. I had been recently hired to start a loss prevention program and department for an international logistics company providing home delivery for retailers. I had North America as my territory with approximately 350 locations and over 1,600 delivery trucks and teams on the road daily who crossed the threshold of over 30,000 consumers' homes every day. All of this and I was working as a one-man show. I needed help, and I needed it quickly. I found that help in the form of Ma Bell.

As I embarked into the uncharted territory of telephone interviewing, I thought to myself, "There is no way this will work. There is no way I can get someone to listen to me ramble on the phone for a bit and then confess to his wrongdoings."

However, much to my surprise and utter amazement, it did work. Not only did it work, it was much easier than I had thought and went rather smoothly. There I was in my office in Naperville, Illinois, staring at the phone, a case file, and assembly of investigative facts in front of me to review. I sat all wobbly kneed, butterflies floating through my inner core, and sweaty palms. I could hardly swallow. But guess what, my suspect did not know any of this because he was in South Florida, over a thousand miles away.

As nervous and insecure as I was about conducting this first phone interview, it worked and my confidence began to grow. I *could* actually get someone to stay on the phone with me and confess and corroborate the facts of my investigation.

Soon I was conducting phone interviews on a regular basis and with great success. I began resolving cases throughout the United States and Canada from my office, warehouses, hotel rooms, and my home. Despite where I was conducting my interviews, I was still able to have a direct impact on those three

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core areas where we in loss prevention tend to get evaluated—case resolution, impact on shrink, and management of our own P&L and budgets. My confidence in the process of phone interviewing began to soar, and I grew quite fond of the idea of interviewing someone over the phone.

Now that I work in the capacity of training others in the art of interviewing, and particularly the subtleties of phone interviewing, I like to share my experiences to help overcome the perceived obstacles to the phone interview. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard, "I would never want to do a phone interview," or "No way a phone interview works," or "I could never foresee someone confessing over the phone," I would be a regular at Augusta National or have a permanent seat in a quaint pub on the west coast of Ireland.

I believe the reason most loss prevention professionals are afraid of phone interviews is simply due to inexperience, a lack of confidence, and a limited understanding of how the process works; just as I was when I dialed the phone for that first phone interview in 1996.

Yes, there are a few disadvantages to the phone interview. We miss the suspect's non-verbal behavior. It may be more difficult to assess deception in our suspect. We have limited control over our suspect and the environment in which he is seated. The suspect may be in a comfort zone on his own territory. The witness may be instructing him as what to say and do. It may be more difficult to develop rapport and show our personal side.

But there are a number of advantages that we can apply to the process if we make a decision to interview a suspect over the phone.

Exploiting the Advantages

The first thing to understand about the telephone interview is that it is most often a collaborative effort. Collaboration between the loss prevention department and the on-site management team is essential. Issues during the interview that we take for granted may be a completely new experience for them. The local management team needs to know where the conversation should take place, how to set the room, what sorts of notes, if any, should be taken, how the statement-taking process will work, what the disposition will be with or without a confession, and if the issue will become a criminal matter, what their role in that process will be.

Because this is a collaborative effort, preparation and pre-planning on the part of the interviewer, along with the management team may have a direct impact on the success of that particular interview as well as any subsequent interviews at that location. A bad experience, or any unwanted and

unnecessary surprises, may add to the reluctance for future participation on the on-site management's behalf.

Though there are disadvantages to the phone interview, the advantages to the phone interview are many. Whether you are doing a scheduled phone interview, quickly reacting to an "action case," or helping an on-site LP manager recover from an interview gone bad, we can use these advantages as allies.

First and foremost, I found it quite easy to minimize the issue to my suspect. I might say, "Think about it; if it were really that big an issue don't you think we would make efforts to resolve this issue in another manner other than simply talking on the phone?" The suspect often accepted the concept and seized the opportunity to confess since it was perceived as a minor issue.

The phone conversation can be much more intimate and far less intimidating to the suspect as well. Your voice is in his ear, not bouncing off the walls of the manager's office, and he may find it easier to open up on the phone, a conversation he has every day, as opposed to the fear-factor that goes hand-in-hand with the face-to-face conversation, a conversation he may have never had to have in the past.

During the interview we can also have easy access to investigative resources, such as the new technology that I mentioned earlier in the article. In addition to those resources, we may have an outline or script we want to follow during the conversation at our fingertips or even a simple list of questions we've deemed necessary to ask during the interview.

The fact that the suspect can't see us may be beneficial because we don't show our own nervousness, frustration, size, or demeanor.

These advantages along with many more may make it a wise decision to interview the suspect over the phone. Now that we recognize there are advantages to conducting a telephone interview, the next thing we must ask is, "When should I do it and how?"

Deciding When to Use the Phone

The decision on when it is appropriate to conduct a phone interview will be related to organizational protocol, but there are variables to consider. Variables such as the potential size of the case or on the surface case value, the amount of evidence currently obtained, the cost of travel associated with the interview, the suspect's tenure and position within the organization, the potential of co-conspirators, and the need to react immediately may influence the decision to conduct the interview over the phone.

Early in my telephone interviewing career I was very black and white regarding the above variables, but I soon learned that any investigation and case could be interviewed over the phone if necessary. Rather than taking a clear-cut stance on when it would be appropriate to interview a suspect over the phone, I considered each of the variables and evaluated the case in its totality before making the decision. I do want to say though that



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I would not recommend doing “cold” interviews over the phone, although that would be an organizational decision as well.

Interview Tactics

Tactically there are subtle things we can do as interviewers to become effective at obtaining confessions over the phone.

First, we must consider the importance and value of our initial contact and introduction to the suspect along with our tone. Tone establishes everything, including our ability to gain credibility with our suspect and, more importantly, develop rapport with them.

We must be effective listeners and have the ability to read the suspect’s behavior in both what he is saying and how he says it to us. Sure, we can recognize when someone is being dishonest by what he is doing in front of us, but can we *hear* dishonesty in his voice? If we listen hard enough, we can.

We might also consider the use of a speaker phone during the interview versus talking into a hand set as a tool to have an impact on our suspect. There is an impersonal side to a speaker phone conversation, but that can be altered by picking up the phone at a key point in the conversation.

We have found that admissions often come more easily over the phone. Since subjects do not directly face the investigator, they tend to be more comfortable with confessing over the phone.

During the interview we must also keep the suspect engaged into the conversation to ensure he is listening to us and getting the message that we are trying to send—the value of sharing the truth.

We must engage the suspect in a way that we don’t invite dialogue, a dialogue that could result in a denial from our suspect.

We also need to ensure we are asking the questions in the correct manner and at the appropriate time, similar to a face-to-face interview.

I have worked with several companies and individuals recently in building their confidence in the use of the telephone as one of those new found resources and investigative tools. One of those individuals is Frank Borecki of Steve and Barry’s, who offers his insights into telephone interviewing in the second half of this article.

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the appropriate paperwork, and in about an hour it was over.

Since that day, I have conducted hundreds of phone interviews successfully. From the comfort of my office, I have completed as many as seven phone interviews, taking six admissions, in a single day.

Recently, one of our investigators took a \$24,000 admission by phone. That suspect implicated five other dishonest employees at that location. Those five employees admitted to a total of \$19,800 in theft. The total investigation netted \$43,800 in admissions...all over the telephone.

Doug Rose, one of our regional investigators, is on track to log over 250 cases this year alone. He is able to accomplish this extremely high rate of productivity because 85 percent of his cases are taken over the phone. He does not have to spend much of his valuable time and energy making travel arrangements, driving to stores, waiting in airports, sitting on planes, renting cars, finding stores, and dining out. This travel is time-consuming and energy-draining for any investigator. It can also take a large chunk out of any annual LP budget.

In addition, phone interviews are particularly beneficial for new investigators who may find it helpful to use notes or an outline to guide them through the interview process. Without having the subject in the room, the investigator can use and take notes more freely and with less distraction.

Conducting the Interview

I spent much of last year teaching the process of phone interviewing to other people in our department. We require that all of our investigators attend Wicklander-Zulawski (W-Z) basic and

advanced courses on interview and interrogation techniques in addition to participating in a W-Z telephone interviewing webinar.

At present, we conduct a majority of our interviews over the telephone. When we interview by telephone, we still follow the W-Z method and change our interview very little from a traditional face-to-face interview.

During a phone interview, we consciously engage the subject in conversational questions a little more than we would in a face-to-face interview by using techniques designed to ensure that the subject is paying attention and is engaged in the conversation. For example, we might ask,

- “Do you know what I mean?”
- “Do you follow me?”
- “Wouldn’t you agree?”

These type of questions elicit short “Yes” or “No” responses. This is a not only a way to check in with them and see if they are paying attention, but also a method to take their verbal temperature.

If their response to the engagement question is cooperative and clear, this is an indication that they are paying attention and being cooperative. If they take the opportunity to say, “Are you accusing me of something?” this indicates that they might be feeling some anxiety.

Even though we invite them to talk a little more during our introductory statement on the phone, we still maintain control of the conversation. This process helps to replace some of the loss of reading behavioral cues that would be present in a face-to-face interview.

With practice, I have found that I can read almost as much from a person’s tone, pitch, volume, and speed of voice on the

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phone as I can observing their physical behavior in a face-to-face interview.

Using a witness for a phone interview is as easy as placing a three-way call.

Handling the Admission

We have found that admissions often come more easily over the phone. Since subjects do not directly face the investigator, they tend to be more comfortable with confessing over the phone.

Once we have fully developed the admission, we then ask the subject to open the office door, allow the manager to enter the room (with a minor we ask that the manager stay in the room for the duration of the interview), and invite the manager on the phone. We inform the manager of the admission and ask to be placed on speakerphone so that we can secure the verbal admission again in the presence of the manager. We email the appropriate forms to the manager and have the manager assist in the process of completing them while we are on the speakerphone.

Using a fax machine, we are able to proofread the statement and other forms. We ask for any corrections and initials while we are still on the line. When complete, we have the manager escort the employee out of the building or call the police. The whole interview from start to finish takes about the same amount of time as a face-to-face interview.

The Benefits of Phone Interviewing

Generally speaking, a face-to-face interview is preferable over a phone interview for local work, major cases, and when economically feasible. A face-to-face interview gives us the advantage of observing behavioral cues, facial expressions, and eye contact, all unavailable during a phone interview.

We prefer our investigators to visit stores and conduct face-to-face interviews for internal blitzes, general loss interviews, complex cases, and major cases involving higher level executives. These situations require a physical presence that phone interviews cannot offer.

The bottom line is our use of phone interviews has resulted in less loss to the company in terms of higher investigator productivity, lower operating costs, and a better quality of life for our investigators.

However, given the current economic conditions in which most retailers find themselves operating and given that most have a geographically distributed workforce, telephone interviewing provides an attractive alternative to the traditional face-to-face method, benefiting companies and their employees.

In order to travel long distances, investigators often cost their companies significant sums of money in terms of airfare, hotel accommodations, rental cars, and meal reimbursements as well as substantial time and energy that the investigator could better use in the pursuit of investigative research and the development of additional cases.

Utilizing phone interviews is a time-efficient, cost-effective way to interview with substantial benefits to the department, its employees, and the company. We now measure reaction time to internal theft callouts, such as hotline calls and management tips, in minutes and hours rather than days and weeks. This helps to minimize the amount of time we leave a dishonest employee unattended, thus reducing our exposure to further losses.

We have saved our company several millions of dollars over the years with the increased productivity and reduced travel expenditures that telephone interviewing offers. Furthermore, we have reduced the pressure of constant travel on the investigators that can contribute to loss of productivity, increased stress, and burnout.

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FRANK BORECKI is director of internal audit and compliance at Steve and Barry's. He has worked in the retail industry for twenty-four years and has executive

experience in both store operations and loss prevention. Borecki can be reached at 972-539-4684 or via email at frankborecki@steveandbarrys.com.



CHRISTOPHER P. NORRIS, CFI is a consultant and seminar speaker for Wicklander-Zulawski & Associates where he has trained thousands of security, LP, and law enforcement professionals on the art of interview and interrogation.

His nineteen years of experience includes positions with Mervyn's, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Merchants Home Delivery Service. Norris can be reached at 800-222-7789 or at cnorris@w-z.com.