PRODUCING A PUNCHY PODCAST

Podcasting can be a creative, convenient way to get your message out.

BY WILLIAM WYATT

In January 1998, a Hollywood gift shop manager with a computer and an Internet connection posted a story to his website that would turn the world upside down. Matt Drudge had broken the story of President Clinton's affair with a White House intern. So began the era of Internet journalism.

As technology has become more advanced and more widely available, Internet journalism has become mainstream. And it's not just the written word that is having an impact. Relatively inexpensive technology has turned anyone with a digital audio recorder into the next Paul Harvey.

A podcast is a digital audio file made available online for download to a personal audio device such as an iPod or MP3 player. You can take the file with you and listen to it at any time. Although podcasting technology has been around for a while, its popularity has exploded over the past two years.

Today, news organizations, businesses, think tanks and even state legislatures have discovered that podcasting is a creative, convenient and easy way to distribute their key messages to targeted audiences. Launching a podcast takes very little investment and makes an organization look like it is on the cutting edge of communications trends. Here's how to go about it.

1. BUY THE GOODS

Fortunately, podcasting is relatively cheap. You probably already have the equipment you need to launch a high-quality podcast: a computer, soundcard, microphone and speakers or a headset. You'll also need a high-speed Internet connection and a website to host the audio files and RSS feed.

For podcasting, it is important that your computer have plenty of RAM and space on the hard drive for storage. Audio files, depending on the file type and their compression, tend to take up a fair amount of space.

Microphones are fairly inexpensive. Most computers that are shipped with a soundcard include a microphone. For podcasting purposes, these microphones will suffice. However, higher quality microphones are available online and at local electronics stores.

Speakers or a set of headphones are necessary to listen to and edit your audio recordings. Most computers come with one or the other or both.

Optional equipment that a podcaster may want to consider is a portable digital audio recorder. These allow you to take your podcast “on the road.” Portable digital audio recorders allow a podcaster to conduct a show or interview from the field—at conferences, from the floor of a legislative chamber or at a remote location. The audio can then be downloaded to a desktop computer for editing and inclusion in the podcast.

Portable digital audio recorders run the gamut of format, quality and price. Some MP3 players have a record function but sound quality may be lacking. Many manufacturers of audio equipment are beginning to produce recorders that record directly to compact flash cards or memory sticks. These products are extremely convenient and can save a bit of production time.

2. RECORD AND ADD SOUND EFFECTS

In order to record your podcast's content, you'll need some audio editing software. There are many free software options available on the Internet. Perhaps the most popular among podcasters is Audacity, a free digital audio editor. Other software is available for a fee.

After you have recorded your content, you can edit it within the digital audio editor. You can bring in music, sound effects and other audio files that will enhance the production value of your podcast. Finally, be sure to save or export your audio as an MP3 file so that it
is compatible with the many different portable media players that are available.

3. MAKE IT AVAILABLE

Once your podcast is ready to publish, you'll need to upload it to a website where it can be downloaded by your adoring fans. If you or your organization does not have a website, you may consider sites such as Blogger.com or FeedBurner.com. These sites and others offer free portal sites for your podcast but you'll still have to find a place to store your audio file. These usually cost money based on the bandwidth used each month.

Once you've found an online home for your podcast, you'll need to create an RSS feed. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and allows listeners to subscribe to your podcast so that when a new episode is available it will automatically download to their portable media player. An RSS feed is a file written in a computer language called XML, which is fairly easy to code even if you're not a computer programmer. If you need some help, just Google "podcast RSS feed generator" and several free services will appear to help you create your podcast's feed.

After you've created a feed and uploaded your first episode, you are ready for the big time. Be sure that the "show notes" about your podcast are compelling and interesting. The show notes should be updated each time you add a new episode of your podcast. Include links to your organization's website or other websites that are relevant to the show's topic.

Consider writing a press release. New technology can be big news if you're the first one using it. Let your local news organizations know about the podcast and about the type of content they can expect to hear. While you'd love for them to do a news story about the podcast, they're also potential listeners—especially if your podcast gives them more insight into their reporting.

Make your podcast provocative. Sometimes word-of-mouth or viral marketing can be very powerful. If someone listens to your podcast and finds it stimulating, they're probably going to tell their friends about it.

Finally, get to know your community. Figure out what other podcasts are competing for your listeners. Get to know the producers of those podcasts. Trade promotion with them by posting a link to their podcast on your web page. Chances are their fans are looking for similar content and may be willing to give your podcast a shot.

4. PROMOTE YOUR PODCAST

Don't use all your creative juices on the production of your podcast, because you'll need to save some in reserve for promoting it. Getting people to subscribe to your feed and listen to your podcast can be even more challenging than the production of your first podcast.

Make sure your podcast is listed in the major (and not so major) podcast directories—iTunes, Yahoo! Podcasts, iPodder.net, PodcastingNews.com, etc. This can be time-consuming, but these sites serve as a starting point for most podcast listeners. The challenge with these sites, however, is getting your podcast to rise above all the rest. Unique, engaging content should always be your goal. Recycling old information or covering mundane or esoteric topics will not add to your cache of listeners.

Create a graphically pleasing logo for your podcast. Many podcast directories allow producers to submit an image with their podcast feed. Make it something that will catch people's eye and get them to click on your feed.

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