Podcasting 101

By Dan Walker

Whether you're a practitioner or a consultant, we all know you've got a very important message to share with your sales organization. You've spent a great deal of time & effort honing your message to a point where you believe it's the best it can be. So can we all agree that it only makes sense to do all we can to make sure you're audience consumes it?

Podcasting your audio message is an incredibly effective way to deliver your most important message without breaking the bank. In fact, once you get good at creating a compelling message, your podcast will cost you nothing more than the time it takes to create it.

What is a podcast you ask? By definition, a podcast is a pre-recorded audio or video message or program, leveraging the Internet to push content out to subscribers. Your target audience can be a group of people around the world who share a common interest in the subject matter, or a select group of individuals who share a common job. By the way, a podcast doesn't have to be limited to audio & video – it can be used to push out software updates, pictures…any kind of file. But the word is now being used to generically describe almost all audio posted someplace online.

Our presentation consists of two main components:
1) Creating the audio message
2) Delivering the podcast to your audience

Creating the audio message:
With today's technology, (and easy access to your nearby Radio Shack), just about anybody has the means by which to record their mellifluous voice and save the recording as a digital file in their computer. Great, that's step one. But let's start by acknowledging that the key to becoming a successful & effective podcaster will be your ability to create a message people will want to listen to! You'll find that stirring up participation in a boring podcast campaign is an exercise in futility. To be fair, there are some great training professionals out there who have managed to bring the same passion & enthusiasm they display "on stage" to the microphone. But for some reason, most people have a tough time getting behind the mic and ending up with an interesting program. Fact is, even if the script you're reading and recording is the most fascinating thing since…fill in the blank…it can get real boring very fast. If you're not careful, your audience will begin to think of your podcasts as drudgery – a place where time goes to die.

A couple of tips for keeping your podcasts compelling:
Add music. Music can range from "bumps" to get you in and out of segments, to a basic background beat throughout the entire talk track. Obviously, you want to be careful not to distract from your important message – it's just something you'll tweak until it sounds right.

Use dialogue. Conduct an interview or role play to get your message across. You can do this "live" using an "in-studio" guest and a couple of microphones, or on the phone – like a talk-radio interview, (special equipment required.)

Keep it short. It's no secret that our attention span has been shriveling over the years, and the distractions are creeping into our culture

at an alarming rate.--- Hold on while I check the scores on my iPhone --- Okay, I'm back. Where was I? Oh yeah, so the point is, if you ramble on much past 10 minutes, you're going to lose your audience. Do your best to keep segments to around 7 or 8 minutes. Now, the exception to that rule is if you happen to be interviewing someone whose message is really compelling, let it go on. You'll know when it happens. If the   message isn't quite so stirring, but you can't get to it all in a short period of time, you have the luxury of being able to split it in two or even three segments.

When The MarComm Store creates podcasts for its corporate clients, they can run in duration of sixty minutes or even more – BUT the show consists of up to 10 different segments – all short & snappy. If the audience has the time and is so inclined, they can listen to the podcast in its entirety. If not, they can listen to a segment or two at a time.

Gear:
We assume you have a computer. Think of that as your production room and radio station   transmitter. The other hardware necessary, that we assume you don't have, include a microphone, recording software, and if you plan to include phone interviews, a phone tap. There are plenty of equipment solutions out there in a wide range of price points. Two of my favorite broadcast equipment suppliers are: www.bswusa.com, www.fullcompass.com.   Both offer bundled podcast hardware solutions, which in most cases include audio recording and editing software. You'll   probably have to purchase the phone tap separately.
Finally, you'll want some music to spice things up and keep your presentation moving. CAUTION: Use commercially licensed music at your own risk! This means music from your personal CD's, iPod library, recorded from the radio, etc.   No matter how innocent your intentions or how   noble your cause, you run

into "fair use" issues and in most cases it's just not worth the hassle. The good news is there are a growing number of resources online where you can grab a few nice cuts of music that will fit your presentation nicely. It's called "Podcast Safe Music" and in most instances it's music created by artists who are really just interested in getting heard and would otherwise never receive exposure outside immediate family and a few close friends. Just Google "Podcast music" and you'll find plenty of options.

Production:
Now the fun begins. We assume you've unpacked all your gear, plugged it in according to manufacturer's instructions, installed the necessary audio recording software, (and figured out how it works), and downloaded a batch of music to help stage and/or punctuate your presentation. Let's get started! First, you should know and be okay with the knowledge that you're not going to be happy at first with the way your recording sounds. Almost everyone who's not in the business hates the way they sound on tape (I know, we're not using tape – it's just an expression.) But as a training professional who's accustomed to presenting before groups, you have a leg up. And let's get something else on the table right away – You can spend hour upon hour attempting to achieve perfection, re-recording your stuff time & time again and still never be happy. Let it go. Just be yourself. You're already passionate about your message…bring that passion to the mic. Easier said than done, I know, but with a little practice you'll be great.

Editing:
In the old days, if you made a mistake during your recording session you had two choices - start over from the beginning or get good at splicing your tape with a razor blade, a splicing block and adhesive editing tape - a tremendous time consuming hassle. But now,

with the powerful audio software available everywhere, you can record your piece - make all the mistakes you want – and edit them out with the greatest of ease. And if you inadvertently edit out something you really meant to keep, just click "undo" and it's back the way it was. It's called "non-destructive editing" and makes removing everything from entire paragraphs to an occasional "um" simple. Fun, too! It won't be long before you achieve the rank of Master Editor.

Multi-track Mixing:

This is the part where you add music, sound effects, interviews and other goodies to your podcast to make it sound like a real presentation. Your audio recording software really gets to flex its muscles. You will now have the power to mix in some sweet opening riff to set the tone of your podcast, add a short stinger to accent each bullet point, toss in a "bump" to separate subjects – you get the idea. It'll prove to be the difference between a possibly very boring ten minute dissertation and a "show." You're bound only by your creativity and imagination. But be cautious not to get too crazy with your new powers of production by throwing in an excess of audio "bling" – could prove to be a distraction. Just because you can doesn't mean you should. Your specific software will explain how to work in multi-track sessions, but for the purposes of the podcast you'll need to learn how to split individual audio tracks, move the tracks around, control the volume of each individual track (volume envelopes), and mix the multi-track session down to a single audio file. So, you've created a presentation on your multi-track stage that you're pleased with. Time to save the mixdown to a single complete audio file. When your software asks what type of file to save yours as, choose ".mp3". It's a small, good sounding format. Other file types such as ".wav" are huge and impractical.

Podcast it!

Now that you've created your highly instructive audio file, what do you do with it? You've got to get it in the hands – into the ears of your target audience. This is the easy part. But a couple of things to know before you post it online:

1) Give the audio file a name that makes sense. Situations will vary, but if you're doing a series on your Widget product line, maybe we should name your file "widget-1.mp3" or "widget12-01-08.mp3". You'll notice I've added a date there after the file name. Just another piece of info that will remind you when you created it.

2) Tag it! This part isn't always necessary, but is helpful for those who listen on their iPods or similar devices. Tags are little bits of information like title, artist, date, genre, notes – even a logo can be embedded. None of this affects the sound of your presentation, it just shows up on the iPod while the audio is playing. One way to tag your presentation is by opening iTunes on your computer, adding your file to the iTunes library, then right clicking the file and clicking "Info." Play with it! If you plan to do a lot of podcasts it's a great way to catalogue & archive your material. Now it's time to post your podcast. You'll need to upload the audio file to a folder in your designated spot in "cyberspace." An example would be "www.abcwidgets.com/podcasts/widget12-01-08.mp3". That's where you'll put all your podcasts. Now, it's time to push that podcast out to your target audience. It can be as simple as shooting an e-mail with a link to your audio file out to your team, but in keeping with the spirit of the true podcast, you'll want to communicate via a Blog (a web log.) That way, everyone who has subscribed to your Blog will instantly get the updated material. Creating a Blog is easy. Most Blogs are text-only communications with maybe a picture or two. Yours will have a brief description of what they'll hear on the podcast, and of course, that same link that you

see above. That way, everyone who subscribes to your Blog's RSS feed will be automatically updated and your latest podcast will magically show up on their computer. If you're not yet familiar with how Blogs work, and what you need to do to launch your own so you can be a podcaster, there are resources all over the Internet.

Summary:
Podcasting is a perfect opportunity to give your training message legs – to keep it alive – and do it on a tight budget. The most important thing to remember is that your training is really only as good as your ability to get your audience to consume it. That's why you need to keep your podcast up tempo, short and fun. The combination of this ever-increasingly competitive sales environment and our currently troubled economy make leveraging the Internet to spread your training message through podcasting a no-brainer.
Best of luck!

Dan Walker
President
The MarComm Store Inc
dan.walker@marcommstore.com
(630) 871-2000