

Podcasting, anyone?

The rediscovery of radio in the digital era is a communication windfall—if you get in on it early

by Angelo Fernando

Brand-name podcasts? You'd better believe it! It's all about access, which translates into retaining existing audiences and growing new ones.

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“Radio in My Head” is the title of a song by the Chinese pop star Pu Shu. But it could very well be the phrase that underscores the reincarnation of radio, as cell phones (which are nothing more than souped-up radio receivers anyway), satellite radio and digital music devices become the new channels for the wireless age.

Cell phones may have changed the way we interact with one another, but it's the MP3 player that has gone to our heads, proving to be more adaptive in a wide range of business and personal communication. Nothing highlights our fascination with audio more than podcasting, which gained its name and notoriety after Apple's iPod burst onto the scene in 2001. (iPods now sell at the rate of 1,900 units per hour.) Podcasting simply refers to the act of making audio programs available for download to an MP3 player. Listeners have an enormous selection, and as the software is refined, both producers and consumers should turn podcasting into a medium in itself, independent of the personal computers and web sites that now act as clearinghouses of content.

In the early days, MP3 players were memory sticks

with headphone sockets. They were receptacles for albums downloaded at home or tracks shared through peer-to-peer networks such as Kazaa and Napster. But that quickly changed as the market recognized that anything that could be digitized could be squeezed into these tiny audio players.

Today there's even an iPod that stores pictures taken with digital cameras. Other MP3 players come with a generous 20 to 40 gigabytes of memory—as much as some laptops—and can store audio books and large PowerPoint presentations. Some players can make audio recordings; several others now come with built-in FM radio tuners, so that the listener can switch between downloaded programs and music available via the airwaves.

Podcast directories

Online directories can help you navigate the thousands of available podcasts.

Here are a few directories worth a visit:

iPodder is a top-level podcasting directory maintained by former MTV VJ Adam Curry. It is also the name of the free software for Macs, PCs and even smart phones. The software allows you to subscribe to podcasts and automatically download them to your MP3 player when a new show is available and you dock your player.

www.ipodder.org

Podshows is a web site set up by two British radio disc jockeys and Podcast.net that lists programs, categorized like a Yahoo! home page. www.podshows.com

Podcast Alley is a portal featuring the weekly Top 10 Podcasts, by Chris McIntyre, a graphic designer and programmer. www.podcastalley.com

SavvySoloCAST is a small-business branding consultancy that uses podcasts. www.savvysolocast.com

Bayosphere. Journalist, blogger and author Dan Gillmor's web site features 60-second podcasts called “A Minute with Dan.” <http://bayosphere.com/node/519>

Supply and demand

The extent of the pod revolution will be determined by the supply of and demand for content. Consider the supply side: Anyone with half-decent recording equipment—a microphone and a PC—can create his or her own program and make it available to the world. Just as home movies shot on digital camcorders trespassed into traditional filmmaking territory, the radio era is about to explode as a swath of new content providers find cheap distribution channels for their products. Some examples include amateur DJs who host alternative radio programs, authors who record their own audio books and companies that use podcasts as a novel form of public relations.

In fact, the potential for advertising and promotion is great. The Pew Internet and American Life Project recently found that in the U.S., some 22 million adults own an MP3 player. While that's still a small percentage of the total number of American adults (there are nearly nine times as many cell-phone subscribers), more than a quarter of those who own an MP3 device have downloaded music—a fact that points to the erosion of the concept of a live broadcast.

As for demand, where broadcasting is governed by the “push” model, podcasting uses the “pull” model—that is, subscription. More accurately, it is called syndication, the same method successfully used by weblogs. One example of syndication software is iPodder, which simplifies how to find and download a podcast to a PC or MP3 player (see “Podcast Directories,” opposite).

Quite predictably, podcasting is challenging the business model of established media companies. This time they are more alert. Still smarting from how bloggers have eroded their audience and punctured their credibility, those that have already gotten in on the front end of podcasting include BBC Radio, which started packaging some of its programs in podcast format. (The trial run will last until December, at which point the BBC plans to introduce an interactive media player for TV audiences.) Similarly, Canada's CBC Radio is running a pilot podcasting program.

Branded podcasts

Where do we as communicators stand in all this? We are in the

Branding with podcasting

GoDaddy.com founder and president Bob Parsons has turned himself into the corporate radio head with weekly podcasts on “Radio GoDaddy.” Go Daddy (www.godaddy.com) is a domain name registration company. Podcast topics include hacking, privacy, Wi-Fi, blogging and e-mail surveillance. It's no surprise that *Inc.* magazine ranked Go Daddy No. 8 among the fastest-growing private companies in the U.S. in 2004.



business of gathering, creating, packaging and distributing information, whether it's re-writing chunks of “corporate-speak” for the intranet, articles to the media or handouts on internal branding guidelines. Perhaps HR and brand managers should add podcasting to their job descriptions. It may be easier to get an employee's attention by allowing him to listen to your newsletter while driving home from work!

What bears watching is how podcasting is poised to become a whole new territory of communication, and how other media are forced to adapt with this revival of radio. Podcasting moves radio into the narrowcasting age. Narrowcasting (which is exactly what the one-to-many model of broadcasting is not) could mean customizing the message to narrower segments.

Consider how podcasting is being used in political communication. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger uses it to package and distribute his speeches—with a DJ intro that reflects the former action star's entertainment-flavored

management style. Should we call it pod-campaigning? Or podvertising?

Major brands might soon employ podcasts as yet another way to microtarget their message. Deloitte & Touche LLP, for example, is a corporate sponsor of Landed.fm, a web site that uses podcasting to provide timely downloadable career advice—an unusual way to differentiate its job search engine. GMFastlane, a branded podcast by General Motors, features segments from designers and product managers for Chevrolet, Pontiac and Cadillac. Brand-name podcasts? You'd better believe it! It's all about access, which translates into retaining existing audiences and growing new ones. (Motorola uses that hit song “Radio in My Head” to advertise its E398 cell phone in China.)

Look out, too, for the wireless iPod that Apple watchers say isn't far away. What would happen then, when all those pods are able to connect to one another? Podcasting to a small-area network of listeners is an exciting prospect. Imagine a daily podcast to employees! **CW**

By the numbers

1,650

Number of students who were given an iPod during their freshman year at Duke University in North Carolina

10 million

Number of iPods sold in three years

Source: Duke University, www.duke.edu/ipod