7 tips to create a killer podcast

These guidelines and techniques can help you reach a vast audience with fresh or repurposed content, all at an exceedingly low cost.

By Jim Dougherty

Podcasting has a low barrier to entry, has proven distribution channels, and is increasing in popularity.

Podcasts "are so easy and cheap," says "Freakanomics" author Stephen J. Dubner, "and because there's an infrastructure that's been built by other third parties, I can just be a free rider. I can make my content for very little cost as an experiment, distribute it freely and easily, and see if it works."

Consider the true-crime podcast Serial, which was downloaded 68 million times and was popular enough to be parodied on "Saturday Night Live." That's huge consumption for any medium, and it exemplifies the attainable reach in this channel.

As further evidence of the popularity of podcasts, consider these facts:

- There are over 115,000 podcasts in existence.

- Some 32 million people listen to podcasts monthly.

- The average podcast lasts about 30 minutes.

- Users listen to about 22 minutes per podcast.

- Users prefer podcasts that last less than 16 minutes.

- The average commute time in the U.S. is 25 minutes.

- The most popular podcasts have a disproportionate number of listeners/viewers.

The medium itself is unduly given a lot of credit for podcasts' popularity, however. For every Serial, or Nerdist, or Manager Tools, or Norm McDonald Live (a personal favorite), there are *literally* thousands of podcasts that are far less entertaining to listen to or watch. (Podcasts can be audio or video.)

People don't listen to podcasts simply because they are podcasts; they listen to great content delivered via that medium. It follows that content planning matters.

Recording a conversation involving two or three people isn't difficult. Making that content consistent and compelling enough for a listener to forgo an episode of This American Life or Serial to listen to you during their finite listening periods is *very* difficult.

That's what we'll seek to optimize with these best practices:

1. Respect people's time.

The odds are stacked against you as a podcaster. The most popular podcasts are long form and have an overwhelming majority of listeners/viewers. One way to increase the likelihood that people will listen is to shorten them. (Listen to a few random podcasts, and you'll understand why I say this.) Some popular examples of shorter podcast content:

- The Moth podcast is a popular podcast that lasts 10-15 minutes.

- [Rand Fishkin's Whiteboard Friday](#) runs a little short of 10 minutes. (Note: this isn't technically termed a podcast, although for all intents and purposes it is.)

- Christopher Penn and John Wall's [Marketing Over Coffee](#) clocks in at around 20 minutes per episode.

- [Science Friday](#) podcasts 8- to 10-minute segments as evidenced by the embedded podcast:

People have a limited amount of time to consume podcast content. The shorter your podcast, the more likely it is that people will listen.

2. Plan podcast content.

If you listen to most lesser-known podcasts and compare them against the most popular podcasts, there is a qualitative difference. Although Ira Glass and Sarah Koenig discuss the hours of planning and preparation necessary to produce their content—Koenig spent a year researching the Serial story before recording the podcasts—many people ignore that preparation. They see the success, attribute it to podcasting, and try to emulate it with semi-freeform conversation.

Podcasts are another means to deliver content, so the same process for planning and developing a blog post or paid content would be appropriate for a podcast. Chris Moritz of [Lowe Campbell Ewald](#) recommends doing a "gap analysis" between the content you have and the content your audience needs/wants.

With podcasting, you can repurpose existing content in a different medium. This means PR practitioners can reinforce key aspects of a given message without redundancy.

Glass discusses preparation:

3. Augment your audio with text.

Text is paramount for podcasts. Search engines don't listen to and deduce context from audio (at least not as of this writing). iTunes and YouTube don't deduce context from audio alone.

So text is important for three elements:

- Tags

- Descriptions

- Text (blog post/article)

Tags serve to categorize your content.

Look at podcasts on YouTube, Soundcloud and other popular hosts, and you'll see that tags add appropriate context to the file. For example, Serial tags its Soundcloud posts as *#podcast*, whereas Shane and Friends tags its podcast posts as *#comedy*.

Descriptions serve to explain the content to potential listeners.

Akin to the "meta description" of a post, it is a synopsis of a podcast or of a given episode. A great example would be the [popular podcast Invisibilia, which describes the podcast as this](#):

"Invisibilia (Latin for all the invisible things) is about the invisible forces that control human behavior—ideas, beliefs, assumptions and emotions. Co-hosted by Lulu Miller and Alix Spiegel, Invisibilia

interweaves narrative storytelling with scientific research that will ultimately make you see your own life differently."

Here is a description for one of its episodes:

"Are computers changing human character? Is our closeness with computers changing us as a species? Alix and Lulu look at the ways technology affects us."

Text is a complete transcription of a podcast and serves two purposes:

1. Search engines can understand the entirety of the podcast content.

2. People can save time and read the content (or can reference parts of it without having to skim the audio).

Of course, you can't do this for many of the distribution methods (such as iTunes, Stitcher, etc.), but because you will probably host the file, you can transcribe it as a post or another resource.

Examples of this are [Michael Auzenne and Mark Horstman of Manager Tools](#), who offer podcast transcriptions to their paid premium members, and Moz's [Whiteboard Fridays](#), which are always transcribed at the bottom of their posts.

4. Don't use listener numbers to measure success.

"The [podcasting] format really lends itself to advertisers. When you watch TV, you check out during the commercials. In a podcast …. [you] can stop midway through and say 'I want to mention quickly *blah blah blah,'* and then I'm back to the interview. It's not like people are going to say 'Ah, I gotta speed up [and skip the ad].'"- [Bill Simmons](#)

You can probably find listener or download stats from different sources (Google Analytics if you're hosting the media file yourself), but understanding how many people are listening is a superficial measure of the effectiveness of your podcasts.

The point Bill Simmons above makes is astute: Once a person listens to a podcast she is (more or less) a captive audience. This doesn't mean that you have to sell your audience anything, but you can leverage the same tactics that a sponsor might use to attribute referrals to measure the effectiveness of your podcasts. For example, you might encourage people to subscribe to a newsletter using a unique URL or give listeners a discount using a unique promotion code.

Podcasts enable you to [engineer meaningful metrics](#).

5. Distribute. Promote. Embed.

As Dubner alluded to (in the first quote of the piece), podcast distribution channels are well established. The most prominent of these is [iTunes](#), but sites such as [Stitcher](#), [Google's BeyondPod](#), [Zune](#) and [Miro](#) aggregate podcasts for discovery. As long as you reliably host your media and have a unique RSS feed for your podcast, you should be able to register your podcast with quite a few directories.

Given that you're in the PR/marketing realm, you probably understand that distribution doesn't follow just because you've been prominently placed on a list. You have to promote your podcast in the same manner that you would [amplify written or visual content](#), through social media, paid media, email, etc. If you're devoting resources to a podcast, it doesn't make sense to release episodes without proper promotion.

From a promotional standpoint, one cool thing you can do with tools such as Soundcloud (and native WordPress) is to embed your podcasts. (I've tried to demonstrate this throughout this post.) Amy Porterfield has a really interesting process in which she combines an embedded podcast with a post around the ideas in the podcast (*not* a transcription). The Ready, Set… Podcast crew does a great job of this as well. The audio file can serve as a conversation piece-for you or someone else-without serving as the conversation itself.

One last note: I'm going to assume that your podcast won't be scaled or purposed for podcast networks, but if I'm mistaken here's a primer on how they work.

6. Benchmark appropriately.

There are lots of poorly conceived podcasts. Listening to an hour of a bad podcasting can invoke a hubris that you can do the same thing better. It's important to benchmark against the people who are doing things that you want to do, not against those who are creating bad content.

If you find yourself strategizing a way to do an off-the cuff talk show rather than trying to emulate the storytelling elements that Sarah Koenig used to make Serial so compelling, you're probably benchmarking against the wrong people. Self-awareness and self-criticism are important aspects of any content creation, and podcasting is no different.

7. Master some audio tools.

To be a podcaster, you should sound pleasant. I don't mean the tonality of your voice (though that helps), but your production must be competent. I recently listened to a tinny podcasts, and the poor production spoiled the entire piece. That is unfortunate and entirely preventable.

There are so many best practices and digital tools you could use that I can't do them all justice, but here's a look at my audio setup as an example:

- **Condenser microphone.** I use a cheap condenser microphone. Condenser microphones are powered (versus dynamic microphones, which are not). Most professional podcasts use condenser microphones.

- **Preamp.** This is a device that plugs into my USB port and provides phantom power to the condenser microphone. (I use a Focusrite Scarlett.)

- **Reaper.** This is an inexpensive multitrack recording program for your computer. It's ideal for podcasting, as you can carry on a conversation, process the audio, normalize it, compress it and put effects on it-all very easily.

- **Landr.** This is cheap, cloud-based software that does normalization and EQ mastering for an audio track. It ensures that your podcast isn't too quiet or too loud relative to other audio files. It also gives an audio track a finished sound. Auphonic is a similar service that offers two hours of mastering for free.

These don't even scratch the surface of the available tools, but you don't have to know a lot or spend a lot to make competent, enjoyable audio.

Conclusion

Podcasting is a remarkable way to repurpose content and tell an auditory story to a potentially large group of listeners. Planning thoroughly, recording competently and promoting your podcast can go a long way toward making podcasting a viable content tool in your arsenal.

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