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Podcasting Demystified: How to generate leads and boost conversions with podcasts

Podcasting has become a mainstream B2B marketing tactic. And now podcasts include video also known as “vodcasts,” “vidcasts” or “video podcasts.” But what can podcasts really do for your business? This paper will explore what it is, plus several ways marketers are using podcasts to generate leads and boost conversions. As an added bonus, I’ll uncover a few upcoming trends. Then, it’s your turn. Tell me how you’ve used or plan to use podcasting and I’ll feature it in an upcoming issue of my monthly Integrated Marcom Minute.

What is a podcast?

A podcast is an audio or video file in an MP3 format. Now you’re probably thinking, “I can enjoy audio/video files now from my computer, so what’s the big deal with podcasts?” The real power of podcasting is when it’s combined with RSS. RSS or *really simple syndication* is what makes a podcast subscribable by literally millions of listeners. ([See sidebar on RSS.](#))

Think of a podcast as a radio or TV talk show. Instead of listening over the airwaves on your radio or television, you listen from an MP3 player or your computer’s audio/video player.

The term “podcast” comes from the terms “iPod” and “broadcast.” But you don’t need to have an iPod to listen to a podcast. Any MP3 player will play podcasts – even your computer’s media software, such as Windows Media Player, QuickTime or iTunes.

So a podcast is nothing more than an audio/video file that you stream to your computer or download to your MP3 player. To stream a file means to access it directly from the server. You don’t download or save anything onto your computer. You simply listen on demand... it’s like TiVo.

Where do I get podcasts?

There are thousands of podcasts out there from religion, politics and sex to business, technology, sports and numerous other special interests. Most popular news sites such as CNN, Forbes, USAToday and sports site ESPN offer audio and video podcasts. You can also search the internet for podcasts. Try a search using the term "podcast." You'll be amazed at how much is available.

Another source for podcasts is through news aggregators. News aggregators do just that... they aggregate content from a variety of sources. The advantage of a news aggregator is that it goes out and obtains a wide variety of content and then neatly organizes it for you. So sports is in a sports folder, business in a business folder, etc. It's an interface similar to your email client. And for a monthly fee, some aggregators will interface directly with Outlook. Here are few examples of newsreaders: [Newsgator](#) and [Feedreader](#).) Depending on the version, your browser can store your news feeds too. [Microsoft Internet Explorer 7](#), [Mozilla Firefox 2](#). (You'll find more links to resources at the end of the article.

There are also podcast directories such as [Podcast.net](#), [Podcast Alley](#), [Podcast Pickle](#), [Podcast411](#) and others. These sites host podcasts. One of the most popular sites for downloading podcasts is Apple [iTunes](#). They have more than 100,000 podcasts and most are free. You'll have to download their free [iTunes software](#) to access the library.

Earlier, I mentioned that the big deal about podcasts is that you can subscribe to them. Subscribing to a podcast is the equivalent of opting in to an email newsletter with one very big exception. Unlike email, subscribing to a podcast puts you in control of when you get the content. Nothing is pushed to your in box. This is why some believe RSS to be the answer to anti-SPAM laws because it's 100% opt in. Let's take a look at subscribing to podcasts.

A few words about RSS...

RSS stands for *rich site summary* or the more popular phrase *really simple syndication*. An RSS feed is a set of instructions written in XML and makes the content readily available for publishing on any website and for users to easily access or even subscribe. It's similar to what HTML does for a webpage – it makes the web page appear with the intended colors and formatting. If you've ever right-clicked on a web page and selected "view source" you would see lines of code. That's the html. If you click on the orange and white "RSS" button (also known as a "chicklette") you'll see the same thing – lines of XML code. Your MP3 player or desktop media player converts the RSS feed into a legible audio file.

There's one more thing that RSS does... it let's you subscribe to content so that anytime you access that feed, you'll automatically receive updated content. Some are calling RSS the answer to e-mail SPAM and overloaded inboxes. Here's why... unlike e-mail, RSS is content that you subscribe to and retrieve when *you* want. E-mail is pushed to your inbox regardless of whether or not you want it. RSS is 100% opt in because you access only the content to which you subscribe. Nothing goes to your inbox... you only download what you want and when you want it. While it's not going to replace e-mail any time soon, it's certainly becoming a viable communications channel that may eventually alleviate some of the email traffic.

How do I subscribe to a podcast?

Subscribing to a podcast is easy. All you do is add the URL of the content to your newsreader. That's it! You'll know when a site is streaming content by the little "RSS" button or "chicklette," as it's sometimes referred to. It's usually orange with white "RSS." That tells you the site is streaming content to which you can subscribe. In fact, most sites now include buttons for the popular news aggregators, so when you click on the button, it takes you to that news aggregator and all you have to do is add it to your list of subscriptions.

FYI... don't let the term "subscribe" fool you; most subscriptions are free. However, as with many things on the internet, eventually some of the content will likely be fee-based. So enjoy it while you can.

And remember... podcasts don't have to be subscribable. You can simply make them available as downloads from your website without the RSS. Adding the RSS code to your podcast will make it subscribable and searchable.

Now that I know what a podcast is, how can I capitalize on it?

When you consider the possibilities of podcasting, the marketing potential is enormous. Think about it... your brand can be extended into a weekly radio show! Now I know that sounds really cool, but we marketers need to convert "cool into cash"... or at least good quality leads.

One of the advantages of podcasts is that they're engaging. They put a voice and face to your communications—they add personality. Successful B2B marketers know that keeping prospects engaged throughout the buying cycle can convert prospects into customers. Podcasts offer another way to keep prospects engaged.

So let's take a look at how a few B2B marketers are successfully integrating podcasts into their marcom mix.

How to boost conversions with podcasts.

Consulting firm [BearingPoint](#) and e-marketer [e-tractions](#) have successfully used podcasts to boost conversions on whitepaper downloads and to fuel the lead nurturing database. Here's how it works. The podcast was created as a teaser for a more in depth white paper, and prospects were sent an email with a link to the podcast. The results were remarkable. Conversion rates increased by 200%! But even better, the company was able to track click-through rates by including a cookie within the podcast. Digital marketer, Mike Gauthier, of e-tractions says that any commonly tracked website metric, including click-throughs and conversions, can be tracked in a podcast. Gauthier also ties these metrics into CRM systems. So the effects of podcasts can be tied directly to the sales pipeline. How's that for ROI!

Click the link to hear e-tractions' and other BearingPoint podcasts
<http://www.bearingpoint.com/podcasts>

How to engage the C-suite with podcasts

Podcasts helped HP engage tough-to-reach C-level executives using a series of video podcasts entitled “Change Artists.” The podcasts were produced by HP and CNN with infrastructure and content support from e-marketer [e-tractions](#). Each 30-minute podcast features an executive from a Fortune 500 company discussing how the company manages change. HP added a unique twist—during the live version, they included a phone number for viewers to ask questions. e-Tractions senior executive Krishna Krovi says the call-in feature was very well received. Now Krovi is adding language translations, so viewers can watch the podcast while reading a subtitled script in their native language.

Engaging the viewer is all about creating a good user experience. Click the following link to preview the HP “Change Artists” campaign – <http://www.hp.com/changeartists> (*You’ll need to register to see full-version podcasts... it’s worth it!*)

How to increase readership with podcasts

Now imagine what a podcast can do for your e-newsletter or e-zine. Existing e-newsletters are perfect venues for a “message from the editor” or engaging Q&A interview-type podcast. And that’s just what e-communications provider [IMN](#) did in their e-newsletter. They were announcing the new addition of podcasts to their e-newsletter service. So what better way to do that than with a podcast. IMN found that the podcast was more than twice as popular as any of the text or graphical content in their newsletter. IMN also suggests using podcasts for client testimonials – nothing is more potent as a marketing vehicle than when your clients rave about your product. And for you ROI-conscious marketers, IMN also offers tracking capability in their podcasts.

Podcasts can boost open and click-through rates on your e-newsletter. Plus, they create another way to engage subscribers by *listening* to content that may otherwise sit in their inbox and eventually be deleted.

How to boost natural search rankings with podcasts

A podcast is just like any other content—searchable by web crawlers (*the metadata, that is*). Successful podcasters include keyword-rich metadata such as titles and descriptions relevant to the subject matter so search engines can deliver your podcast to people searching for it. In addition to the podcast file itself, it’s a good idea to include a keyword-rich description on the web page linking to your podcast. Another way to optimize search ranking with podcasts is by including the podcast script on your website—the more keywords, the greater the relevance and the higher your ranking. Of course, publishing your podcast on public sites such as iTunes, Google and Yahoo can also boost your ranking.

Upcoming trends in podcasting

The possibilities of podcasting are only limited by your imagination. Here are a few considerations for podcasting that you could implement today.

➤ **Training your mobile workforce**

Podcasting is a great way to train your mobile sales channel. More importantly as marketers, it's another way to capture greater mindshare from your channel partners. You can create 15–30 minute training briefs that your sales and channel partners can download and listen to on their MP3 devices. It's another way to announce special incentive programs. You could even use the incentive program to launch your new podcast training modules. Remember, MP3 is becoming more pervasive than just iPods and other similar devices. Mobile phones and even USB flash drives now have MP3 capability – that could make a clever gift for your sales force.

➤ **Generating leads by offering information products**

If your company prides itself on information and industry know-how, a podcast is the perfect way to attract qualified leads. Most people in B2B are looking for information on how to save money, stay competitive and increase productivity. If your products help them accomplish this, then why not use podcast snippets to promote your knowledge offerings. Offer these snippets as a teaser to a more in depth white paper or case study. Use podcasts as brief advertisements to an upcoming webcast, seminar or speaking engagement. And if your products cater to Apple users, such as graphic design software, then you've already got a built-in potential customer base of more than 50 million, thanks to the Apple iPod. Granted, many of those users are teen music enthusiasts. But still, who can afford to ignore a market of over 50 million users?

➤ **Keeping in touch with the media via podcasts**

Today, more journalists subscribe to RSS feeds than before and the number is growing – particularly in the trade media. So why not make it easy for them to cover news about your company and its products with podcasts. You could offer your latest press conference or analyst call via podcast. In fact, make your next in-person press conference more exciting by giving away an MP3 compatible USB flash drive to each editor with the contents of the press conference. You could also stream a regular monthly or weekly podcast to which journalist can subscribe and receive up-to-the-minute company news. The best part for journalists is that your news isn't competing with all the other information that's crammed into their burgeoning email in-boxes. Now's the time to get them hooked on your feed.

➤ **Integrating podcasts with your other marcom media**

Podcasting offers an intriguing way for clients and prospects to interact on a more personal and unobtrusive level with your brand. Podcasting can be another way to drive prospects and customers to landing pages and micro sites. A podcast could be embedded within an electronic brochure to provide value added content, such as a thought leadership interview. You could also stream live podcast feeds from your trade show booth on an event that occurred at the show – a speaking engagement, for example.

➤ **Selling information products with podcasts**

The podcast is the perfect medium for information products. A podcast is to information marketers what free taste tests are to your local deli – a way to sample before you buy. And if you have an entire suite of information products, a regular podcast served via RSS is an excellent way to stay in touch with customers and prospects for up-selling and cross-selling new products. You could also consider affiliate programs or sponsored advertising spots on your podcast to generate additional revenue.

The possibilities are practically endless!

OK... I'm intrigued, but how much does a podcast cost?

Several internet marketing firms have told me that the range for a five- to seven-minute professional audio podcast runs from about \$3,000 to \$5,000, with video podcasts ranging from \$5,000 to \$7,000. The prices include more than production and editing time. They also include various levels of podcast marketing such as uploading to the popular sites including Google, Yahoo, iTunes as well as others; optimizing them for search visibility; and hosting the podcast. Professional voice talent and script writing may also be included.

Most internet marketing firms offer package deals. Let's say you want to create a series of podcast episodes. You can save a little money by recording them all together. Of course, there are many do-it-yourselfers who have successfully implemented podcasting at a small fraction of the cost. If you've got the time, talent and equipment, this could be the answer for you.

So where is all of this going?

According to a November 2005 Bridgeratings.com study, there are over 5 million podcast users in 2005, and more than 20% of those users listen on MP3 devices. Their study projects 63 million podcast users by 2010. One thing is clear... podcasting is definitely going mainstream.

Case in point... "podcast" was one of the top search terms on NPR.org. As a result, National Public Radio launched its first podcast in August 2005. Their "Story of the Day" became the most downloaded podcast on iTunes.

An important point to remember is that MP3 players are becoming as ubiquitous as email, and I'm not just talking about iPods. A growing number of devices that you use every day are including built-in MP3 players – devices like cell phones, PDAs and even USB flash drives. In fact, some music download sites are partnering with cell phone manufacturers to combine their services with the phone service.

As more marketers find opportunities in the niches, technologies like podcasting can help them develop relationships with these highly focused audiences like no other medium. Technology providers will begin integrating newsreaders into their operating systems, browsers and email clients. Once this happens – and by the time you read this it will probably be available – marketers will have a more effective way to reach and capitalize on numerous niche markets. For now most of the information is free. But as the technology becomes more widely used and understood, look for paid subscription models to emerge. Currently, advertising opportunities are available. Similar to the radio model, you can purchase ad spots on podcasts specific to your target market.

So where is all of this going? It's anyone's guess, but it's fair to say that it will definitely influence the marketing communications mix. If you take away anything at all from this article, it should be that podcasting is not a mass medium. And marketers who continue to provide relevant, highly targeted information will be more likely to succeed with podcasting.

Links to more information:

Hear a real B2B podcast...

<http://www.bearingpoint.com/podcasts>

<http://www.hp.com/changeartists>

Podcast readers and directories (*most are free, but make sure you read the fine print! You can also upload your podcast to these sites*)...

<http://www.apple.com/itunes> (*for MAC or PC, great for managing podcasts as well as music*)

<http://www.podcast.net> (*good podcast directory including lots of podcasts from all genres*)

<http://www.podcast411.com> (*lots of information podcasting and some interesting content*)

<http://www.podcastalley.com> (includes helpful links on podcasting and, of course, podcasts to which you can subscribe)

<http://www.podcastpickle.com> (fun site, lots of podcasts and a really cool tee shirt)

<http://www.podcasts.yahoo.com> (lots of information on creating and uploading podcasts – a good place for beginners to start)

<http://www.google.com/base> (Google's upload area for all types of content and allows you to make it searchable via Google search)

Newsreaders and Syndication sites:

<http://www.feedburner.com> (excellent information on monetizing podcast content)

<http://www.feedreader.com> (easy web interface)

<http://www.newsgator.com> (popular news aggregator with an easy web based newsreader)

Tell me what you think about podcasting? [Click here](#) or email joan@jdamico.net.

About Joan Damico...

Joan is an author and independent copywriter with over 15 years' experience in business-to-business direct and internet marketing for high tech and industrial companies. A former marcom manager, she's developed integrated direct marketing programs that generate leads and boost sales for her clients. Her work has appeared in trade journals here and abroad serving a variety of global industries. She offers monthly marketing communications tips in her newsletter, "Integrated Marcom Minute". You can sign up to receive Joan's tips at www.jdamico.net. Joan can be reached at joan@jdamico.net or phone (845) 778-5095.

