

# Connect Through Podcasting

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**L**ots of new marketing channels have opened up in recent years, from search engines to Craigslist ([www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)) to social networks. One that has gotten a lot of interest of late is podcasting.

Apple Computer defines a podcast as, “an audio or video program to which a person can subscribe and receive new episodes automatically.” They are like short radio or television programs, or audio or video versions of a blog. Podcasts provide a direct link between you and your customers and employees.

Archived and accessed via the Internet, podcasts can be downloaded to a portable media player, like an iPod. While producing video podcasts is possible at relatively low cost given today’s technology, they still require a fair degree of production savvy to be effective. For those new to podcasting, I recommend starting with the audio version.

## Why Podcast

Podcasts are used today by many types of entities. Major news organizations, like The New York Times and the BBC, have podcasts on their Web sites. Purina, the pet food company, produces podcasts on such topics as how to keep an animal happy and funny things dogs do. IBM has podcasts on various products it sells, as well as interviews with executives of companies that partner with IBM. Some companies use the technology for employee training. The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) has podcasts that provide how-to information and advice on such topics as how to survive in a slowing economy and changes to the SBA’s loan program. At least one printing and advertising company has a short podcast on its Web site that lists the advertising specialties it sells. For examples of podcasts, go to [www.podcast.com](http://www.podcast.com).

Podcasts’ value includes building your brand, keeping your company’s name in front of customers, providing a cost-effective way of promoting your

products and services and helping build a community among your customers. Their potential use extends to internal communications with your employees.

Podcasts can be produced on a regular basis, like a newsletter, or when a need arises or just as a way to talk about certain topics. Podcasts produced on a regular schedule have value because recipients learn to look for them at a certain time, such as every Monday morning. If you do offer regularly scheduled podcasts, do not commit to a frequency – say, daily – you will have trouble meeting. Even a short podcast takes time to write, produce and polish.

Consistency in production values also is desirable. Unless you have a large company, try to have one person be the “voice” of your organization by being in all your podcasts. If you do not personally perform well on podcasts, have someone else in your company do them, or hire a professional broadcast journalist or actor.

If your podcasts tend to run short, around three to five minutes, it will confuse listeners if you suddenly offer a one-hour podcast. Keep the tone, length, voice and organization of your podcasts fairly consistent. If you use a musical introduction, use the same one for each podcast. Just as you would not have one graphic look for your stationery, another for your Web site and another for your printed marketing materials, do not have your podcasts sound very different from each other.

## Brevity Is Key

Observers suggest keeping podcasts fairly short – probably 10 minutes or less is good. They’re often listened to while a person is on the run – commuting to or from work, or during morning, afternoon or lunch breaks – and time is short (they can be listened to or watched on computers, iPods, smart phones and MP3 players, among other devices). A half-hour or hour podcast requires a big time commitment from the listener. The shorter the com-

Podcasts provide a direct link between you and your customers; they can also build your brand and be a competitive edge.



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mitment required, the easier to get the person's attention.

Many effective podcasts have an informal, conversational tone. Mark Bittman writes a cooking column in *The New York Times*. On the newspaper's Web site are his video podcasts. Take a look at one or two. Notice his informal and conversational style. He's talking about cooking, which can intimidate many people, but he's friendly about it, and even shows when he makes mistakes. He seems like an everyday-kind-of-guy, who just happens to know a lot about cooking. These podcasts effectively create a "brand" for Bittman.



#### Producing Podcasts

Producing a podcast is surprisingly easy and inexpensive. You need a computer and a microphone that works with your

computer. You can start with free, open source software like Audacity ([www.audacity.sourceforge.net](http://www.audacity.sourceforge.net)) for recording. You'll probably want to set up RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds to let your audience know when a podcast is available. ePodcast Creator ([www.industrialaudiosoftware.com](http://www.industrialaudiosoftware.com)) enables you to record, upload your podcast and create RSS feeds. It sells for \$67.46. Hipcast/Audioblog ([www.hipcast.com](http://www.hipcast.com)) hosts podcasts for as little as \$9.95 a month.

While podcast technology is pretty simple and low-cost, producing effective podcasts isn't so easy. Generally, you'll want a relaxed tone, with the podcaster sounding like he or she is having a personal conversation with the listener. To achieve this conversational tone requires the podcaster to sound "natural." If you're not an actor, reading from a script can

be deadly; you'll sound like, well, you're reading from a script. Avoid this by not writing a script, but rather writing down a series of talking points to discuss on the podcast. This will force you to make up, as you go along, the words you use to discuss the talking points and to move from one point to another, which will make you sound more conversational. The software you'll use will allow you to edit out "ums" and "ahs," and add such features as music and voiceovers.

Your goal for the podcast should be content that's interesting, even entertaining. If it's just an advertisement for a product or service, you'll lose your audience. Be sure to include useful information and advice that has value to the listener. For more information about podcasting, go to Podcasting News ([www.podcastingnews.com](http://www.podcastingnews.com)).  



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