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Podcasting: Take Your Association to the Next Level of Technology

By Jeff De Cagna

For the last several months, there have been many articles and reports in the mainstream media on the podcasting phenomenon. Perhaps you have seen or read some of them. Although such articles are quite useful in explaining podcasting in broad and general terms, they obviously do not address specifically why association professionals should be thinking seriously about launching podcasts for their organizations as soon as possible. This article, however, is written with associations in mind and will attempt to answer the three most fundamental questions that any association leader is likely to have about podcasting today: 1) What is it? 2) How can you create a podcast? and 3) Why should your association care about podcasting?

What is Podcasting?

To establish a common definition of podcasting, let's turn to Wikipedia, the free Web encyclopedia at www.wikipedia.org. It defines podcasting this way:

"Podcasting is a way of publishing sound files to the Internet, allowing users to subscribe to a feed and receive new audio files automatically. Podcasting is distinct from other types of audio content delivery because it uses the RSS protocol. This technique has enabled many producers to create self-published, syndicated radio shows."

Put simply, podcasting makes it possible for anyone to create inexpensively his or her own Internet radio show and share it with others using Really Simple Syndication (RSS). RSS is the key factor that distinguishes podcasting from other forms of Internet-based audio, such as audioblogs. By adding a very simple line of RSS code (or a "feed" in Web parlance), others can subscribe to and automatically retrieve a podcast directly to their computers using an application such as ipodder (www.ipodder.org) on Windows or iPodderX on Mac. This podcast client or "podcatcher" software recognizes the subscription feed, downloads any audio files that are available and uploads them to Apple iTunes or other computer media player. Listeners then upload those files to their MP3 players just as they upload songs, books or other audio files.

One common misconception about podcasting is the belief that it is necessary to own an Apple iPod to listen to shows. In fact, any digital music player will allow you to upload and play podcasts, although a great many people do own some version of the iPod. According to Fortune magazine, Apple dominates the U.S. digital music player market, holding a 65% share, one factor that helps to explain why the term "podcasting" has captured popular imagination. Once again, according to Wikipedia, the word "podcasting" appears to have first been used in a February 2004 article in the British newspaper The Guardian and exploded in popularity in the early fall of last year after Adam Curry (www.adamcurry.com), the former MTV VJ, produced his initial Daily Source Code podcast in August 2004. Curry, along with software pioneer Dave Winer (www.morningcoffeenotes.com/), who wrote the version of RSS that makes podcasting possible, are generally regarded as the founding fathers of podcasting, although the two men currently are embroiled in a bitter disagreement over how commercialized it should become.

Since it began in the middle of 2004, interest in podcasting has grown dramatically, in part because

of the exposure blogs received during the U.S. presidential election. Not wanting to miss "the next big thing," traditional print and electronic media have helped to put podcasting on the map. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, of the roughly 22 million American adults who own digital music players, nearly a third — approximately 6 million people — have downloaded podcasts. This figure does not appear to include the podcast audience that listens to shows directly from their host Web sites or on their computers. And as MP3 players proliferate and the process of creating podcasts becomes easier, it is likely that the growth of podcasting will accelerate significantly.

How Can You Create A Podcast?

In truth, creating a podcast is very simple. I started my podcast, "Associations Unorthodox" (www.associationsunorthodox.com), in February of this year, after a couple of months of reading about podcasting and learning how it works. I am definitely not a techie, and yet I was able to easily record a show, create the right Web code and successfully publish my feed on my very first attempt. Due to space limitations, I'm not able to go through every aspect of how I produce my podcast here, but there are three key points I want to share that should make all association executives feel very comfortable with launching an immediate podcasting experiment in their own organizations:

- Podcasting can be done very inexpensively. It is fair to describe podcasting as a kind of do-it-yourself radio and thus something that can be done without extensive financial investment. I produce my podcast using an open source audio recording and editing application called Audacity (audacity.sourceforge.net) that is available as a free download. Once I've created my MP3, I upload it to Audioblog (www.audioblog.com), a site that allows me to publish the file to a blog that is hosted on a service called TypePad (www.typepad.com). The total yearly cost for these last two applications is less than \$250. Of course, you can spend more if you want (and I have on other audio recording equipment, voiceover pieces and marketing) but the point is that you can keep your financial investment very small and still produce an excellent podcast. (Let me add that what I have described here is simply the way I produce my podcast. Different podcasters use different tools, and, at the time I'm writing this article, there also are some new "one-stop" podcasting production, catching and listening applications forthcoming.)
- Sound and content quality are most important. When I started my podcast, there were two things I wanted to achieve. First, I wanted my show to be provocative, to take a stand on issues of importance to associations and perhaps even ruffle a few feathers along the way, so I knew that the content had to be compelling and valuable. Second, I wanted to be certain that listening to my podcast was not a painful experience, so it was essential that the show have good sound quality. On the content side, I chose to focus the first few shows on the book that was the subject of an ASAE book club discussion I facilitated in early March. As I became familiar with the steps of creating my podcast, I moved into discussing more of my own perspectives, and I've also posted some interviews. To address the issue of sound quality, I decided to invest in a portable MP3 recorder, microphone and pop filter so that the show would sound better. In addition, I learned how to use some of Audacity's advanced features so I can improve my raw recordings. I'm still working on increasing both sound and content quality, and I expect that both will be critical elements of my on-going effort to create the best possible podcast.
- Brevity is a virtue. In podcasting, I believe that less is more. Personally, I prefer to keep "Associations Unorthodox" shows to about 20 minutes, which I think is just about the right length

to deliver solid content before the listener gets bored with you and is ready to move on to something else. Another factor that drives me to keep my shows short is file size: The longer the show, the larger the file that needs to be hosted and the longer the download for my listeners. As bandwidth increases for everyone, this will be less of an issue, but it is still a consideration to keep in mind right now.

Why Your Association Should Care About Podcasting

Every association is looking for ways to get its marketing messages and PR talking points out to its various constituencies in new and different ways that will induce those stakeholders to pay closer attention. Podcasting, along with blogs and other Web tools, offers associations a great opportunity to create their own media outlets through which they can deliver specific information and opinion on a wide variety of issues. In addition, podcasting can be used as an alternative medium for building interest in attending meetings and conferences, and for sharing the educational content that comes out of such experiences. In truth, the only real limitation on how your association can apply podcasting is your own imagination.

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