

PODCAST YOUR MESSAGE

With employees across the country — and sometimes around the world — it can be hard to capture their attention. Podcasting can help.

By Adrienne Fox



YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO LEARN that those MP3 players you see attached to the ears of most young people are not just blaring out the latest Carrie Underwood song. Increasingly, users are bypassing music and listening to inspirational speeches, personal finance basics and career-boosting advice.

Many companies are pouncing on this trend, hoping to fill employees' ears with their own messages instead of the latest Top 40 hit. It's an innovative and entertaining way to capture workers' attentions and speak to them in an, ironically, personal way.

WHAT IS IT?

Podcasts are pre-recorded audio or video programs posted to a Web site and made

available for download so people can listen and view them on personal computers or mobile devices.

"It's a warmer communication than a memo or an e-mail because it's an intimate connection when you hear someone speak in your ear through your iPod," said Donna Papacosta, corporate communications and marketing consultant and founder of Trafalgar Communications in Ontario, Canada.

"It can be a way of cutting through the clutter of written communications that we are bombarded with."

Tech-savvy employers, such as Sun Microsystems, National Semiconductor and IBM, already capitalized on the trend a few years ago. Sun Microsystems and IBM, for example, use podcast technology to share best practices, allowing employees to create podcasts and post them for others to learn from. So far, 600 IBM employees have created nearly 3,000 podcast episodes with more than 1 million downloads.

National Semiconductor, maker of analog products, went digital in the summer of 2007 — giving 30-gigabyte video iPods to all of its 8,500 employees around the world to deliver training and communications programs at a cost of \$2.5 million.

Podcast episodes include five- to 10-minute video and audio segments of content such as CEO messages to employees worldwide, video training modules and new product announcements.

For convenience stores, opportunities to leverage this technology are endless. For example, do you want to:

- ▶ Encourage a better work-life balance among employees?
- ▶ Create a program hosted by an expert who takes questions from employees over the phone or from a dedicated Web site?
- ▶ Share how one store manager increased sales of a slow-moving product?
- ▶ Interview a store manager on his or her best practices and feature comments from real-life customers as they come into the store?

If you can answer "yes" to any of these suggestions, then podcasting could be a unique training and educational tool for your business. And it's a great way to add an element of fun to the experience, as listeners will be so engaged, they'll forget they're actually learning something.

PODCAST NATION

The infrastructure is already there; it's just a matter of taking advantage of it. According to a November 2006 Pew Internet and American Life Project study, 12 percent of Internet users had downloaded podcasts, up from 7 percent in February that same year. According to a 2007 Arbitron/Edison Media Research study, 13 percent of America listens to podcasts, roughly the same percentage of Americans who subscribe to Satellite Radio.

The average Millennial — those under the age of 27 — own more than one MP3 player, according to technology research firm eMarketer.com, which could be a result of products becoming more accessible from multiple retail formats, as well as more affordable. Today, a basic audio player can run as low as \$40 and a decent video player can cost as low as \$200. But, most podcasts are downloaded and listened to on computers so all you need is an Internet connection.

GETTING STARTED

Anders Gronstedt, president of the Gronstedt Group, a training and development firm in Bloomfield, Colorado, said most retailers, restaurants and hoteliers have dipped their toes in this technology by providing “how-to” video podcasts for employees. For example, podcasts teach new hires how to prepare a hamburger or train a housekeeper how to clean a room.

These are “unimaginative but logical first steps for a retailer,” said Gronstedt. Beyond that application, he urges companies to reinvent training content to take advantage of the technology. For one retailer, the company created a drive-time, radio-style program that sounded nothing like a regular training program but still served the purpose of training.

“The retailer used three hosts in the store interviewing customers and took questions about a new product,” said Gronstedt. “You can also take questions from employees

over the phone or from a Web site. Then you podcast it and allow employees to listen to it at their convenience.”

Peer sharing is another way to make learning via this platform unique. “In the past, we wanted to hear what the corporate leaders had to say,” said Gronstedt. “Today, peer-to-peer learning is more valuable to the younger generation. It's very important to feature peers in the programming in addition to leaders.”

Adding a social networking element is also appealing. Provide rating features for each podcast where listeners can give the podcast between one and five stars and can post comments. Then feature the most popular podcasts.

The simplest podcasts can be produced at little or no cost. But more sophisticated, multimedia approaches like Gronstedt's can cost several thousand dollars for programming lasting no longer than 20 minutes.

To begin, here is what you will need:

- ▶ A **microphone** can run as high as \$3,000 but you can still get a good one for \$150.
- ▶ If you want to provide video, invest in a **professional camera** for best quality.
- ▶ Free **software** is available from Audacity.com and works well to edit both audio and video.
- ▶ A **server** is needed to host the video or audio files.
- ▶ For companies, a **firewall** is important to keep the files downloadable by employees only.
- ▶ An **MP3 player** and Internet connection allows employees to download and listen or view to the podcast.

MAKE IT SUCCESSFUL

No matter how you build it, employees won't come if it's not compelling material, so invest there. Ask yourself what topics you should cover and how you can make it educational and engaging. Keep the programs light and conversational. Gronstedt has

found that in most companies, ownership of the project falls somewhere between corporate communications and training functions, depending on who in the organization takes charge of it.

How you market the program is as important as the program itself. Employees won't buy into it if they believe it's just the same corporate-speak delivered in a different medium. Provide value-added topics and allow for peer input. One way to generate excitement and awareness for the programming is to duplicate it to a CD and play it in the store, Gronstedt suggested. “If it isn't possible to provide every store with an MP3 player, you can have contests for stores to win one,” he added.

The proliferation of communicating to employees via MP3 players is not a matter of “if” but “when,” said Gronstedt. “The convenience store industry is competing for the same employees as other retailers,” he noted. “If they want people to work for them they will have to provide it. For the young employees, especially, this interactivity and multimedia approach is very important to their recruitment and retention.” ◉

Adrienne Fox is a freelance writer in Alexandria, Virginia, and former managing editor of *HR Magazine*.

LEXICON

- ▶ **MP3:** Derived from the words “MPEG Audio Layer 3.” MP3 is the name given to the types of files used to hold and transfer audio information. Because of its ability to compress information without losing quality, MP3 is the dominant way to store music as well as training materials and other audio content.
- ▶ **MP3 Player:** A device, such as an iPod, that translates MP3 files into sound.
- ▶ **Podcast:** Derived from the words “iPod” and “broadcasting.” A podcast is an audio program comprised of music and/or spoken content that can be heard when played on an MP3 player.