

What's in Podcasting for Nonprofits?

by Scott Williams

THE DISTRIBUTION OF AUDIO AND sometimes video content over the Internet—also known as podcasting—began largely as an extension of standard text blogging. By late 2004, podcasting had staked out much the same ground as blogs: a scrappy, informal audio alternative to mainstream media.

The mainstream media, however, was quick to pick up on podcasting's potential as an inexpensive way to provide audio content via the Internet. Podcasting now describes content generated by various sources, from presidential candidates to National Public Radio, Rush Limbaugh, and ESPN, as well as the thousands of amateurs who record their enthusiasm on politics, cooking, sports, and all manner of topics.

For better or worse, nonprofit organizations tend to lag behind their for-profit counterparts in experimenting with new technology, and podcasting is no exception. In mid-2005, when Corey Pudhorodsky began his *501c3Cast*—a podcast covering nonprofit issues and technology—there was no content aimed at nonprofit organizations, and almost none produced by nonprofits. Two years later, few nonprofits podcast, but Pudhorodsky thinks that eventually the medium will become “as integrated with [nonprofits'] communication plan[s] as their direct-mail or public relations notifications.”

Pudhorodsky sees podcasting as a

medium uniquely suited to nonprofit organizations. “One of the essential things about working in the nonprofit sector is that you have to be a good storyteller,” he says. With podcasting, “you have that voice that’s telling your story. You can tell when someone gets choked up telling a story, and you can hear the background noise when you’re recording on-site.”

On the whole, podcasting is an easy medium for nonprofits to access. Podcasts are easy to produce, and the costs—at least for now—won’t greatly exceed the staff time devoted. (*For more on the technical steps of producing a podcast, see the sidebar “Recording and Production of Podcasts” at www.nonprofitquarterly.org/section/930.html*). On the other hand, return on an even minimal investment in podcasting can be difficult to measure, and with strapped staff and an increasing focus on outcomes, few organizations have made a commitment to the medium; the tipping point for sector-wide acceptance still seems far off.

Internal investment in podcasting is even rarer than the podcasting itself. Of the four podcasts discussed in this article, only one has received a large organizational commitment; two others are essentially donated. While this might suggest a trend, it also demonstrates that podcasting is open to those with the classic nonprofit combination of more desire than dollars.

The wide range of podcasting content, format, and aesthetics creates an opportunity for an organization of any size to find a niche that suits its communication needs. Authenticity and a good story can offset shaky production values and a less-than-professional sound. At the same time, it is a simple matter to have your podcast listed on iTunes and other directories, where—at least in terms of access—you are on equal footing with the largest commercial sources.

Nonprofit organizations involved in podcasting demonstrate a range of means and ends. Some organizations, such as World Vision or the Sierra Club, repurpose material recorded for radio. Other organizations podcast panel discussions, press conferences, and other live events.

Here we look more closely at four organizations that produce original content exclusively for the Web. Even among this subgroup, the differences are striking. With its *Speaking of Sex* podcast, Planned Parenthood of Western Washington has pursued an alternative channel for content that the mainstream media would not be willing to air, with a format similar to that of traditional radio. The Central North Carolina Chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society views its podcast as a way to expand the reach of programs to people whose illness may prevent them from coming to the chapter’s physical loca-

tion. Its style is more informal. Volunteer San Diego uses its podcast to open a window on the work of the organization and to diversify its tools for recruiting new volunteers. And when opportunities arise, First Book enhances the content of its Web site and blog with audio material.

Speaking of Sex

Speaking of Sex is a 20-minute podcast produced roughly twice a month by Planned Parenthood of Western Washington (PPWW). Its male and female cohosts, Nathan and Malaika, have worked together as educators for PPWW and bring a natural chemistry and comfort with the subject matter. The podcast covers a variety of topics and types of content, including person-on-the-street interviews, on-location recordings, phone interviews with celebrities and researchers, and music.

The format of *Speaking of Sex* is that of professional radio, including a 90-second newsbreak at the beginning of each episode that covers current issues and action alerts when listeners are most attentive. The professional sound is no accident: producer Brian Cutler, who is also the development officer for community relations at PPWW, has a background in commercial radio.

The goal of *Speaking of Sex* is to create a credible, entertaining podcast that provides education and advocacy to those who need it most but who may not know it. Podcasting allows PPWW to have frank, natural discussions about sex without worrying about the content limits of traditional media channels.

From the beginning, *Speaking of Sex* targeted a national audience, particularly in the 18- to 30-year-old age range, which research suggested was the core audience for podcasting. (Though the Arbitron/Edison Internet and Multimedia Study 2007 shows a more even distribution of ages among those who have listened to a podcast.)

Speaking of Sex was facilitated by a strategic plan—also known as Vision

Recording for Multiple Devices

The term *podcasting*, which combines *broadcasting* and *pod* from the Apple iPod, is catchy but misleading. You don't need an iPod or other MP3 player to listen. In fact, somewhere between 45 percent and 80 percent of podcasts are listened to on computers rather than portable devices.

2025—from PPWW's national chapter, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which set out a goal of using cutting-edge technologies to disseminate information about reproductive sexuality. PPWW's vice president of education and training used this strategic goal to help leverage the podcast launch. In July 2005, the organization established a committee to study the possibility of podcasting, and the first podcast was released in August 2006.

PPWW has seen its podcast download numbers grow considerably—from 44 in October 2006, to 500 in November and December to 1,000 in January 2007 and 1,500 in February. The Planned Parenthood Federation of America now links to the program as well, which has resulted in even higher download numbers.

Speaking of Sex is a high-input podcast. PPWW invested about \$2,500 to buy software, microphones, a mixer and flash recorder, and so forth (it already had the computers it uses to edit the show). Cutler estimates that on average each show takes 25 hours to produce, including a review phase by an approval panel (with representatives from Planned Parenthood's medical, public affairs, and marketing departments), which evaluates an outline before the podcast is recorded and listens to the final show. So far, *Speaking of Sex* has been funded largely by a single major donor, who is recognized by name at the end of each show. The national federation now provides financial support as well, and PPWW is seeking additional individual donor

support.

In March 2007, PPWW received an Affiliate Excellence Award in media affairs from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America for *Speaking of Sex*.

Multiple Sclerosis Society

The Central North Carolina Chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society serves a large geographic area in central North Carolina. The organization's constituency comprises those affected by MS, a disease that causes vision and/or mobility problems. Podcasting has provided a means to make the work of the chapter accessible to a broader segment of its core constituency and to reach more people under the age of 40.

The chapter's podcast is about 12 minutes long. Content varies from show to show, sometimes including newsletter items, interviews with researchers, and interviews with people living with multiple sclerosis.

In accordance with its goals, the chapter is pleased with its current audience numbers, which stand in stark contrast with those of *Speaking of Sex*. The chapter sees 50 to 100 downloads almost immediately after posting each show, with an eventual total of 150 to 200 downloads. Live programs usually draw 25 to 50 people, and the podcast numbers represent a considerable broadening of reach with a low level of investment.

The podcast is part of the public relations and outreach services that Altyris Advertising provides for a nominal fee, and the program is produced and hosted by John Mims, vice president of communications for Altyris. The advertising agency has a studio in-house where most of the podcasts are recorded, though Mims says that the chapter makes a conscious effort to create an informal tone for the podcasts. Mims believes that too slick a sound would repel listeners.

According to Mims, his agency's work on the podcast would cost the chapter about \$300 per episode if it paid the full costs. The chapter does some of

Audio versus Video

Given the more recent explosion of video over the Internet, some believe that audio content has already become obsolete. Video certainly has advantages over audio programming of acceptable quality and is far easier and cheaper to produce than an equivalent audio segment.

Both PPWW and Volunteer San Diego want to experiment with short video versions of their content, though they are likely to supplement rather than supplant their current audio podcast.

At the same time, podcasting faces hurdles in its ability to distribute the content to those who listen to talk radio. Some studies indicate that users don't like the process of getting podcasts onto an MP3 player and find it daunting. Playing podcasts in your car poses similar challenges. So the medium may well be waiting for its breakthrough technological advances, with its second-class status only augmented by the competition from online video.

However, for most organizations, podcasts have value over video because producing an audio program of acceptable quality is far easier and cheaper than producing an equivalent video segment.

the work—scheduling the interviews, for instance.

The Central North Carolina Chapter was the first chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society to offer a podcast.

Volunteer San Diego

Appropriately enough, the Volunteer San Diego podcast is produced and hosted by a volunteer: Brent Shintani, who is also a member of the organization's board. Inspired by the *501c3Cast*, Shintani recorded a demo and presented it to Executive Director Sue Carter in mid-2006. Carter liked what she heard, and the podcast launched that August.

The podcast usually features interviews with volunteer team leaders and those served by volunteers and is often recorded on-site. The program has a relaxed, conversational tone and little formal structure. This conversational feel is a bit deceptive, however. Shintani spends approximately two hours editing each program, cutting speakers' hesitations and hums and resequencing the interviews to emphasize the most compelling parts.

"Brent makes volunteering accessible," says Carter. "He's showing that it's just ordinary people like you and [me], . . . and they're talking about how they're making an important difference in the community."

The podcast is part of a broad effort to use technology as well as traditional methods to engage volunteers. "Some people want to have all the instructions written out and sent in an e-mail," says Carter. "Other folks want to talk to a staff member on the phone. Other people want that real-life sense [of] what it is like from the volunteer's eyes. . . . It's like styles of learning: this is another way to give people who have different approaches to volunteering a way to get involved."

The podcast is posted roughly twice a month; most of the programs are five to six minutes long, though some are as long as 10 minutes. Volunteer San Diego sees about 100 downloads per new episode, and the organization continues to get hits on older episodes as volunteers look for information on specific opportunities.

The organization says that the podcast is the only one it knows of that is produced by volunteer centers in the Hands On and Points of Light networks.

While the program is produced externally and at little cost to the organization, Carter has oversight, and the entire staff is engaged in presenting ideas for programs. Carter sees the arrangement as entirely consistent with the organization's *modus operandi*: the staff engages volunteers, then volunteers add value;

had the podcast been added to the duties of existing staff, the show would not likely have been feasible.

First Book

The First Book blog contains updates—activities, thoughts, synopses of children's books, and sometimes guest posts from published authors—about the First Book, a nonprofit organization dedicated to exposing low-income children to reading. First Book occasionally offers a podcast of interviews with authors on its blog, a setup that has allowed the organization to take advantage of recording opportunities without being tied to a schedule for producing content.

According to First Book web manager Clarissa Peterson, the organization records these interviews using a recording feature of its conference call service and posts them essentially as they are recorded, with only the informal beginning and end edited out. First Book does spend time prior to the calls making arrangements with the authors and/or their publishers, and preparing questions, but the time is not accounted for separately, and the recording and editing time is accounted for as part of time spent enriching and maintaining the Web site.

Getting Started

If you're ready to begin podcasting, *501c3Cast*'s Pudhorodsky suggests that you start by making a plan about the story you're going to tell and the content you'll include. Then record some practice episodes and get feedback. Practice is essential; it takes time to find your voice and rhythm. And get in touch with other podcasters—especially members of the nonprofit sector—who can share their knowledge. You don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Most of all, he says, "Make sure that it's fun too. Don't get on a podcast and record your voice just for the sake of doing a podcast. People still listen to podcasts because they're a form of entertainment. . . . Get something that people are

looking forward to listening to.”

Don't be afraid of the technological issues either, he advises. While some tech knowledge is useful in getting the best sound and delivery, you can learn as you go or get help.

You can also look for external help in creating a podcast: enlist an ad agency that wants to add pro-bono work to its portfolio or a “virtual volunteer” who has a passion for your cause and the technology.

As your podcast evolves, you may encounter creative differences with others: “In any media effort, you will find that there are style and taste issues to be addressed,” says Brian Cutler of the *Speaking of Sex* podcast. “There will be disagreements.” Expect these conflicts, and be ready to work through them.

Sources covered in this article:

Speaking of Sex podcast by Planned Parenthood of Western Washington, www.plannedparenthood.org/western-washington/speaking-of-sex.htm

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Volunteer San Diego, vsdpodcast.org

First Book blog, blog.firstbook.org/category/podcast

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