

September 2020

ONcall

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Podcasting 101

Podcasts are all the rage these days. Everyone has one. They're attached to each new movie that comes out, and television shows have podcasts about television shows. There are mystery podcasts, sports podcasts, how-to-fix-your-car podcasts and just about any topic you could want to know about.

Podcasts are easy to set up and fairly easy to edit and produce into a high-quality product. This may be why there are so many — they are accessible. You can make a podcast entirely on your phone these days with decent audio. And with just a few hundred dollars, you can make an audio-studio-quality podcast.

With so many podcasts, it's very difficult to stand out in the crowd. There are countless abandoned projects littering the podcast landscape, making it difficult to find new content. And let's face it, a good podcast idea doesn't mean the podcast will be great. Just because you can podcast, doesn't mean you should.

To improve your chances of making a great podcast, here are some things to consider.

Should I start a podcast?

This is not the first question you should ask, but it's often the first question someone asks before diving into the process of creating a podcast. The most important question is, "what am I trying to communicate and why, and what's the best platform for what I'm trying to accomplish?"

Podcasts are a valuable tool for communicating many topics, but it is a storytelling tool. Sometimes those stories contain valuable advice, conversations, or interviews with knowledgeable and interesting people. But you should never start a podcast just because you can.

Some reasons to start a podcast

1. You have a lot of information that isn't enough for a book, but it is too much for social media.

In other words, your content doesn't fit other platforms very well. A podcast still may not be the best tool, but it's one to consider.

A lot of audio content already exists, perhaps from old recordings, speeches and videos. Having audio content that would be interesting to share within the context of your topic can be a strong basis to start a podcast. A podcast might be a good consideration if the limits of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook don't allow you to get the whole package of your information out to a crowd.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

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2. You have access to interesting/knowledgeable people, and you can put them at ease and help them convey that information through conversations or interviews.

Some of the most popular podcasts in the country follow this format. You already have a good social media audience and you plan to leverage that audience for the podcast. Realize that not everyone will become a listener just because they follow you on social media, but having a good base audience to push your podcast can help build your audience through word of mouth.

3. You have an active interest in audio storytelling, interviewing or conversations and a propensity for learning new technology. Producing a podcast requires both technical and interviewing skills.

How to start a podcast

Once you determine that you have good reason to start a podcast, it's important to understand the technology that drives it. In the most general terms, podcasts are audio files hosted by a podcast service that allows the files to be streamed or downloaded — directly or through podcast subscription services like Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Stitcher or Spotify. A person can then access the audio file by streaming it directly from the podcast host or through their favorite subscription service, or by downloading to listen to on a phone or computer.

Equipment: The basic tools

Audio recorder. Your phone will work just fine. You can buy microphone attachments to produce better-quality audio. Inexpensive options for audio recorders that allow you to manipulate the sound-quality levels range from \$100-\$500.

Audio editor. There are inexpensive and even free audio editors out there. Garage Band can be used to edit podcasts, and it is free with Apple phones and computers. Audacity is another tool that is widely used for editing podcasts. It is free and can be difficult to learn, but there are many tutorials online. High-end editors like Adobe Audition can be purchased.

Microphones. If you're going to spend money on anything in the world of podcasting, put some money into microphones. Shure is a good brand that plugs into your phone with an adapter for less than \$200. If you buy a regular audio recorder, the old Shure SM-58 microphones are very hard to beat for quality.

Podcast host. There are a million choices in this category. The main thing to consider is how often you will be podcasting and how long your episodes will be. Some hosts like Libsyn (libsyn.com) are fantastic but costly. The charges are based on how much audio content they host.

Social media. It's important to be able to tell the world when you publish a new podcast episode. Your platform is a great place to ask people to review and rate your podcast.

Podcast format

Pick a format for your podcast and stick to it. A format is a way of putting a podcast together. It can start with music and then an introduction, followed by an interview, followed by more music and then a closing statement, or any variation of this. You want people to feel like they know what to expect when they come back to listen to the next episode.

Work process

Most podcasters end up finding their own production workflow. Creating audio, filing audio, writing scripts, and editing and sharing on social media can take on many different forms depending on the individual.

Here's my workflow as one example:

Create an editorial calendar. I know I have one season per year and generally one podcast episode per week. What do I want to do for the next 50+ weeks?

Plan the interviews. Interviews make up the bulk of my audio-recording projects, so I spend time putting together interview materials, researching and recording interviews with experts in my field.

Manage your files. All audio is filed in a master file for each episode: main interview, artwork, script, supplemental audio and music.

Edit first. I always start by editing the interview first. This allows me to make notes about where I might want to add an aside or perhaps remove or add something.

Produce the show. Once I have all my show files created, I build them into a podcast using this lineup: Intro 1, Music, Intro 2, Interview and Outro. I also add advertisements into the audio at the beginning, middle and end of the podcast.

Convert the master file to MP3 and post it to our podcast host. Wait until it is added to subscription services like Apple Podcasts or Spotify and then share it on social media.

My podcast: The Beaver State Podcast: myodfw.com/articles/beaver-state-podcast

Essential questions

Nearly every specific part of making a podcast can be researched thoroughly on YouTube. In fact, thousands of hours of tutorials exist to help get you started with podcasting. But the main thing to consider before beginning is if you should be podcasting in the first place. Do you have enough interest to keep this going for the long term? How many episodes do you plan to produce? When will you take breaks? If you get bored, your listeners will likely get bored. If you pause too long, people may unsubscribe or give you poor reviews and ratings. A podcast relies on good ratings and reviews to be found in crowded podcast subscription services. The last thing to consider is time. How long will each episode be? Variable podcasts can make it tough for people to binge listen. As a rule of thumb, keeping a podcast under an hour is a good time frame for maintaining a listening audience. A half-hour to 45 minutes allows people to listen during workouts or commutes.

Podcasts are a fantastic communication tool and, created with a lot of care and thought, can build an enthusiastic audience quickly. But they can be a burden when you burn a lot of creative energy on a platform that wasn't the best fit for the kind of information you want to provide.