

Training on IPODS (Aug 06)

A reader delivers sales training to a group of approximately 130 sales and customer-service representatives and is considering using podcasting to broadcasting product-development updates, time-sensitive information, content that is subject to change, and other items. "If successful, we might even do a monthly 'radio talk show' broadcast focusing on items that are important to the field."

"Is anyone out there doing this in a corporate setting? If so, what are they using it for? What equipment are they using? Did they purchase a high-end system, or did they use freeware and an inexpensive microphone with their existing PC? What are their lessons learned/success stories?"

DON'T HIGHJACK YOUR CASTS

A number of sales organizations are podcasting successfully to their reps, including EMC, Xerox and Prentice Hall, says podcasting vendor Anders Gronstedt (anders@gronstedtgroup.com).

"The reason (podcasting) hasn't grown more (in popularity) is that many training organizations hijack this medium for time-shifted lectures, which is a sure route to failure."

The most successful podcasts, he says, are carefully crafted "edutainment" shows that sound more like talk-radio programs than training sessions. "The casts can be 'theater of the mind,' complete with field reports, exotic imaginary locales, humorous 'commercials,' inspirational vignettes and subtle spoofs on the competition. Some programs we custom-develop for sales organizations feature running themes, jokes and cliffhangers that make reps look forward to the next program."

Among his other tips?

- Don't take a course approach; make it a regular program.
- Don't hide podcasts in your learning management system (LMS); make them available on a blog to transform them into a two-way, listener-driven medium.
- Don't expect your reps to use their own players; give them each an iPod or other MP3 player.
- Don't put out audio books and other generic content; custom-develop the casts for your organization. "Generic off-the-shelf programs only work for generic off-the-shelf companies."

www.gronstedtgroup.com

Gronstedt is president of The Gronstedt Group Inc. in Broomfield, Colo. Prices for the firm's custom podcasts typically range from \$1,000 to \$3,000 for 30-minute programs.

PODCASTS GAINING GROUND

In the two years since Duke University pioneered the use of iPod learning, the

medium has caught the imagination of both the academic and business sectors, says Mark Aberdour (markab@epic.co.uk).

"It has become clear that digital music players are being used by learners to listen to much more than just music, with spoken-word content becoming firmly established on the iPod. Education and learning have become common categories on Web sites such as Podcast.net, and many major universities have signed up to Apple's iTunes University to deliver podcasts on everything from campus life and current affairs and events to faculty lectures and books. iPod learning is now widespread."

For sales and product training, Aberdour suggests considering personal digital assistant (PDA) delivery -- "particularly for product-knowledge topics where graphics and animations may add value. (Flash on PDA is coming on in leaps and bounds.)"

At Epic, where he works, Aberdour has seen the corporate world moving "enthusiastically" into the wider mobile learning space over the past 12 months, and the company has completed an increasing number of PDA and iPod learning projects for clients. "Some projects have been prototypes for clients evaluating new learning ideas and devices in their organizations; others are for wider rollouts where mobile devices already are well-established." Management, sales, product-knowledge and compliance content, he says, appear to lend themselves particularly well to PDA and iPod delivery.

Finally, some advice: If the reader wants podcasts to supplement his or her PC-based e-learning and instructor-led training, a good deal of thought must go into achieving the right blend of content for each type of delivery. On the equipment side, the reader mentions wanting staff to record their own podcasts. "In my experience listening to (these) podcasts, the quality can be poor (e.g. low volume and muffled), but I will happily listen to a low-quality podcast if the content is thought-provoking and engaging." Development of some simple guidelines for staff to follow on effective audio-recording techniques, he says, should enable decent-quality podcasts with a fairly low-end kit.

Aberdour is a technical producer at Epic, a learning consulting company in Brighton, U.K.

Dan Epstein (danepstein@comcast.net) has worked with companies to produce Webcasting programs using a radio talk-show format. In two instances, in-house studios were installed to produce the programs. "We didn't go the freeware route," says Epstein. "Instead, we outfitted the studios with professional equipment and software usually associated with home or project studios" -- including a Mackie 12-channel compact mixer, a Tascam digital audio tape (DAT) recorder, a set of "sturdy" AKG condenser microphones and a computer running SoundForge.

"Computer audio applications are certainly stable enough now that a separate DAT or other digital recorder for studio work is no longer necessary. This level of gear is more than up to the task and allows you to edit and repurpose your content while maintaining your source material at a high level of quality."

Epstein also notes that the studios created were centered around a round table fitted with microphones mounted on standard boom arms. "This way, our host and guests could face one another. We also applied some acoustic materials to the walls to reduce the echo typical in most offices and conference rooms."

If the reader can't or doesn't want to go the studio route, mobile gear can be used, such as a small mixer, microphones and a separate hard-drive recorder that creates audio files that can be transferred to a computer for editing and encoding. "You can purchase digital audio interfaces from vendors such as M-Audio and Presonus, among others, that allow you to use professional microphones and record direct to a laptop via Firewire or USB."

The gear is the easy part, says Epstein. "The biggest challenge is making your content sound like a real radio show." His recommendation is to listen closely to talk shows to hear "what's really going on." (The magazine-style show typical of National Public Radio is a good model, he says.)

Also make sure that your host is engaging and credible. "If you're working with sales, find a rep or manager who is well-known and respected. Make sure your host can ask direct questions that allow the guest to provide a narrative response, not just yes or no answers. Also make sure the host is able to generate an actual conversation with the guest. Your listeners don't want to hear a lecture or canned marketing pitch; they want to be party to an informative, engaging and entertaining conversation."

One technique to consider is the pre-interview, says Epstein, which the host or a producer conducts with the guest some days before the recording or broadcast. "This helps identify the key points and allows you to help the guest stay on point. It also helps uncover issues you might not find during the actual interview. Some producers don't like to conduct pre-interviews because it can detract from spontaneity, but in a corporate setting you probably want to go for a bit more control and prevent surprising your host."

Epstein is an independent consultant and producer specializing in e-learning and Web media development. He is located in Chicago, Ill.

POINTS TO PONDER ...

Voice-over actor and podcasting veteran Karen Commins (voice-overs@mindspring.com) offers this advice:

- Equip your reps with iPods (or a similar device). Part of the reason companies such as CapitalOne and IBM have enjoyed success integrating podcasting into their corporate training environments, says Commins, is that they equipped their mobile users with iPods. Not everyone has portable players, says Commins. In addition, "employees may have some resistance to using their own portable devices for playback of company training messages."
- Deciding to provide audio content means other training issues must be addressed. "Not everyone has the same level of computer skills or the same level of expertise in using them." For example, how will you demonstrate the process of accessing the audio files and copying them to myriad laptops or portable players? Who will provide support when the employees experience problems? Since the recordings will be internal training products, how will you notify employees that new audio content is available?

- Determine whether podcasting is even feasible. "Your IT or finance department may not have the resources to purchase the same device for everyone," says Commins. Additionally, the IT department may have instituted security restrictions that prohibit downloads of .mp3 files or the connection of personal devices to corporate computers. "For these reasons, I recommend that you fully involve your IT department in your plans."
- Post .mp3 files on an intranet in conjunction with a blog or user forums. "A blog is short for Web log," says Commins. "Once the software is configured, designated authors can rapidly post content to a Web site without knowledge of HTML or any intervention from your IT department." Blogs, she says, can be maintained and archived by date and categories so that the remote workforce can quickly see new postings and find relevant past articles. "In the blog, you could post your short time-sensitive updates, product development updates, answers from instructor-led sessions and other items that require more frequent updates and interaction with your sales force." You can also set up the blog so that comments are allowed, says Commins, which enables the remote workforce to respond to postings with questions and comments. ("The questions and comments might highlight areas requiring additional explanation that would be suitable for audio content. The blog could advertise new audio content as it becomes available.")
- Everyone will be able to listen to the audio content when sitting at a computer. At a minimum, however, Commins recommends publishing instructions so that all employees are able to burn the files to a CD so that they also can listen to them in their car or elsewhere. "Those employees who know how to copy the audio files to their own devices can do so and build buzz for the portable training efforts."
- Audio content could be focused on new training topics as needed and the monthly talk show that is envisioned, says Commins. "In your talk show, you could interview and feature people from different facets of the company. You may even think about replacing all of your internal newsletters and funneling that content into your talk-show program. Another interesting use of audio content might be a short segment that summarizes all of the blog entries for the week."
- Once you have decided to create audio content, you have a couple of options for creating the actual file, says Commins. ("Technically, the file is not a podcast unless it is automatically syndicated over the Internet.") If you plan to produce recordings in-house, she says, make the commitment to invest in a quality microphone and software that will allow you to record and edit the audio files.
- Spend the time necessary to learn the software so that your recordings sound polished. "You are competing for the attention of busy people, and your recordings should sound as good as anything they would hear elsewhere. You may wish to integrate music and sound effects into your recordings. Also, like any training delivery method, you don't want to transmit your content to the learning community unless the message is clearly articulated and easily understood. The audience could become confused and frustrated listening to audio with poor sound quality."

- If you outsource the audio-file creation process to a professional voice talent, request that perspective voice talent professionals submit a short audition from your script so that you can select the voice that is most compelling for your copy.
- Keep the length of initial recordings to 15 minutes or less. "You will need to evaluate each part of the process to determine the best method to produce each recording, and your remote staff must get accustomed to receiving audio training."

Commins is with A VOICE Above The Crowd in Atlanta, Ga.

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