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Pod Power

Cutting-edge entrepreneurs see huge marketing potential in one of technology's hottest trends: the podcast

By RAYMUND FLANDEZ

IN LATE 2004, J. Craig Williams discovered a marketing tool that helped bring his small law firm international attention: podcasting.

With a few simple pieces of hardware and software, he could create a brief daily radio show—a “podcast”—and anyone with access to the Web could listen. So he bought a microphone, hooked it up to his computer and recorded himself chatting about important cases and other legal news. Then he posted those podcasts online at popular directory sites, as well as his own site, MayItPleaseTheCourt.com.

The results were striking. Listeners—including some lawyers—began to call and ask for legal advice. Attorneys around the country began referring clients to him. He even got calls about potential business from overseas.

Indeed, Mr. Williams says his podcasts have given his six-lawyer practice, **WLF Williams Law Firm PC** of Newport Beach, Calif., the same marketing reach as multinational firms. “The marketing takes care of itself,” says the 48-year-old Mr. Williams. “All [the podcast] does is give information. If you like the style of writing and speaking, then you’re getting to know me. Then you might call me. It’s not a hard sell.”

Getting the Word Out

Barely two years old, podcasting is becoming a popular marketing tool among businesses of all sizes. But the technology may have the most to offer entrepreneurs. For an investment of a few hundred dollars, small businesses can get their name before a world-wide audience and potentially boost their revenue.

Precise figures about podcasting audiences are hard to come by. But indirect measures show a large, and growing, market. For instance, almost a third of the 22 million U.S. adults who own iPods or other MP3 players have downloaded and listened to podcasts, according to a Pew Internet and American Life Project survey. (The name podcast comes from the ubiquitous iPod.) Meanwhile, the New Oxford American Dictionary declared “podcast” Word of the Year for 2005, and will add the term to its online version in an update this year.

Podcasts present businesses with unique marketing challenges. Unlike traditional ads, which accompany other pieces of entertainment, a podcast must offer listeners educational or entertainment value in itself—or else they will simply click it off and download a more interesting program. By some accounts, there are about 20,000 different podcasts online, with topics ranging from music and movie reviews to news and gossip.

On the other hand, podcasts are uniquely user-friendly. You can download the audio file to a computer and play it while you multitask. Or you can stick it on a portable music device and listen during your commute or your workout, just like a radio show or an audio book. Moreover, the audio medium lets charismatic business-

people show their personality more readily than a conventional advertisement does.

The medium can also give potential customers a chance to sample your wares. When Jeff Kowal started a record label, **Lotuspike LLC**, two years ago, he sought exposure for its growing list of artists in the progressive ambient music realm. But with bare resources for his Pittsburgh-based company, Mr. Kowal couldn’t afford fancy marketing.

So, last year, Mr. Kowal decided to start a podcast featuring chats with the label’s artists, announcements of forthcoming concerts and music clips from CDs, as well as original music specifically made for the podcast. It was essentially an “audio newsletter,” he says.

Mr. Kowal promoted his offering, dubbed **LotusCast**, with an email campaign. He also posted the podcast on Apple’s iTunes as well as other directories and packed the description with keywords such as “ambient music,” “relaxation” and “meditation,” to make it easier for interested listeners to find. The result: Traffic soared at Lotuspike.com, and online sales of its CDs and other products doubled, Mr. Kowal says.

Making Yourself Heard

So, if you’re an entrepreneur, how do you go about podcasting? All you need is a good microphone, a computer and podcasting software to capture the audio file. You can find a good tutorial on the process at PodcastTools.com, and you can download a free editing and recording tool from audacity.sourceforge.net. At lame.sourceforge.net, you’ll find a software tool that converts recordings to MP3 files that can be posted to a Web site.

Starting out, the cost essentially depends on what kind of microphone you choose. A solid, dependable microphone will cost \$100 or more. If you upgrade to a professional-quality microphone—or add other hardware such as an audio mixer and headphones—the cost could exceed \$300. If the choices seem overwhelming, **M-Audio**, a unit of **Avid Technology Inc.**, bundles starter kits for podcasters. The **Podcast Factory**, which includes a microphone, a host of software and other features, retails for \$179.95.

Beyond that, you may need to pony up for a Web site of your own if your business doesn’t already have one, to build your brand, post your podcasts and give your listeners a central location for information about your company. A site will cost about \$40 a month in hosting fees.

Before you start recording, think about the structure of your podcast. Ideally, podcasts should be kept short, from five minutes to a half-hour; writing a script beforehand is advisable to prevent awkward pauses and meandering. Also, consider the show’s style: Will it consist mostly of interviews, a monologue or a panel discussion?

“Get in early and experiment and find out what works,” says Doug Kaye, executive director of **Conversations Network** of Kentfield, Calif., which publishes presentations from conferences, lectures and meetings online. “And definitely provide a way for listeners to provide feedback.”

The big question, of course, is how to attract listeners. First of all, make sure your podcast has good sound quality. At