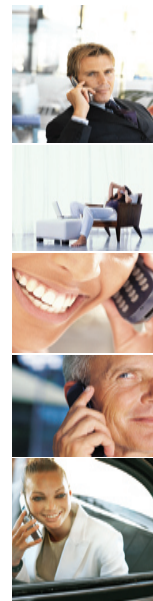


Podcasting: The Dawning and Spawning of a New Communications Tool



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As the iPod continues to change how music is purchased, delivered and listened to, "podcasting" has emerged as a next generation medium to syndicate and distribute all types of audio content. Everything from radio shows, songs and music videos to corporate training programs and how-to seminars can now be podcasted. Due to some intelligent marketers, 28% of Internet users are aware of podcasting, but only 2% are subscribed to a regular podcast.

The word "podcast" combines iPod with broadcast and was first coined in 2004 by Ben Hammersley of The Guardian magazine. The subscription aspect, as well as the medium of playback, sets the podcast apart from the traditional multimedia content found online today. While streaming will allow users to hear and view multimedia content directly from a Web site, podcasting allows listeners to download the audio content and listen to it on their iPod (or other MP3 device) anytime, anywhere.

"Under the Hood" of a Podcast

As far as computer program development, podcasting is simple process that begins with the creation of an audio or multimedia file, which may be edited and then converted into an MP3 file. All audio podcasts should be in MP3 format to make them easy to read by today's players. The podcaster will then want to have their file hosted on a Web site or placed on their own Web site. The next step takes podcasting from traditional content to next generation communications tool. The content creator sets up a RSS feed to publicize and distribute the podcast.

RSS can have multiple definitions. The most recent and favored answer is Really Simple Syndication – it has also been defined as RDF Site Summary and Rich Site Summary. The acronym still does not explain the RSS. In its most basic definition, RSS is a format for sending information to a group of subscribers such as metadata, or data about data, across the Internet.



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Typically, users will request an RSS feed, which sends them content ranging from news to blogs to multimedia podcasts. The content creator will then send periodic updates with new information. RSS allows users to receive tailored information in a central repository and gives content creators another avenue to reach a target audience. Since RSS technology is Web-based, feeds are automatically stored as links on other Web sites.

With RSS still in its early stages, most current operating systems and browsers are not equipped to read or translate the RSS feed and podcast. Tech-savvy browsers like Opera and Firefox currently have some RSS functionality. Microsoft has also announced that complete RSS reading features will be built into both Internet Explorer 7 and their upcoming Windows Vista. Unfortunately, until these products are available, RSS and podcast clients must use readers or aggregators to view their feeds. There are several types of readers available, both free and paid, and online or downloadable. While readers just show the current RSS feed being viewed, aggregators combine all of the feeds that the user subscribes to and puts them into one place. This allows the user to visit one place for all of their content needs.

Ironically, many people today are using a form of RSS without even realizing it. RSS technology is used in personalized home pages like My Yahoo! and My MSN. The most popular reader for podcasts at the moment is the Apple iTunes program. iTunes allows users to access a podcast library and subscribe to a number of "radio shows" via podcast. It also allows podcast creators to submit their programming for inclusion in the iTunes library. However, iTunes can be limited in its applications within the workplace since it offers compatibility with only the Apple iPod and ignores all other MP3 players on the market. With that in mind, users can still find alternative podcasts on individual Web sites around the world.



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Podcasting and Competitive Advantage

As a an emerging mode of communications, podcasting has the potential to create a unique opportunity for organizations to gain a competitive advantage, grow its business, as well as contribute to bottom line profitability.

Podcasting allows companies to improve both its internal communications with its employees as well as external communications with customers and other interested parties. Podcasting has the potential to become a valuable part of the marketing mix. It allows organizations to transition their Web sites from traditional support vehicles to marketing and sales channels. Contrary to ineffective and intrusive e-mail-push marketing methods, such as "spam," podcasting empowers customers to decide what programs they want to hear and subscribe to the desired feeds – typically the free ones. Plus, podcasting allows customization of information based on content-specific interest.

Through podcasting, audio files such as teleconference calls, audio newsletters, new product information and shareholder meetings can be placed directly onto PCs, iPods, MP3 players or other portable media devices. Therefore, podcasts give customers the flexibility to learn about products during a time that is convenient—during the workday commute, at lunch or at the gym. The portability factor makes podcasts an attractive communication medium since today's consumers are tech-savvy and utilize or own some form of PDA device.

Podcasting is a strategic approach to leveraging the power of customer reach while simultaneously serving as an effective and efficient communications tool. Podcasting allows you to share information with a global or traveling workforce, as well as with suppliers, vendors or partners. Meetings, conference calls and training tutorials, for example, can be recorded and shared with relevant employees, who then could access the information on a portable device while traveling or during downtime.



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Audio conferencing has recently emerged as an ideal application for podcasts. With built-in features offered through teleconferencing services to record the discussion and convert them to .WAV files or RSS news feeds, team meetings can easily become podcasts. Project team members never have to miss a meeting and can easily track action items and deliverables. Some of the more dynamic conferencing providers are enhancing their services with virtual voice mail boxes with support for RSS feeds via podcast, which provides users with the capability to download messages to their iPod or other mobile devices. For example, each time a voice mailbox message changes, a RSS feed is sent to the user's group of subscribers. This process is totally automated and it eliminates the need for subscribers to enter any code. Subscribers within an organization can listen to a CEO speech anytime or anywhere. With conference recording, if a sales executive is traveling and cannot listen to a conference call, he/she can download the recording to their PCs, retrieve it from iTunes to download to an iPod, or receive it via RSS news feed and click to stream it on a desktop PC.

Audio conferencing in tandem with the podcast can serve in a multitude of applications including investor relations and the dissemination of important public information, employee and customer training, and overall marketing efforts. This powerful combination offers a new medium to communicate and save any company significant money while improving overall efficiencies.

Today, simply having a Web presence no longer provides a competitive advantage to businesses. Organizations must consider new and innovative tools to allow them to grow their customer base, expand their business, improve internal efficiency and maximize profits. As an emerging technology in the business world, podcasting has limitless potential to do just that.



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