

Technology: Audio Podcasts

STARTING POINTS

The technical definition of podcasts is that they are digital media files distributed over the Internet. A more descriptive explanation is that podcasts are like radio shows with informational or entertaining audio content. What distinguishes the two is that listeners can choose when, where, and how to hear podcasts.

To listen, start by finding the file you want on the Internet—the iTunes store (<http://www.apple.com/itunes/>) is a great resource. Once you download the iTunes program file, you can listen directly from your computer or use it to add audio files to your cell phone, iPod, or other MP3 device. When you find podcasts that you especially like, see if there is a way to subscribe. This means that you automatically get the latest files. I am such a fan of podcasts that they are part of my daily routine. In fact, I cannot imagine going on my morning walk without listening to them.

Podcasts offer more opportunities than just listening. You can produce content as well. That's what I have been doing with my ongoing series, *Health Literacy Out Loud*. These podcasts are a way for health literacy advocates everywhere to hear and learn from those “in the know” about the topic. Below is information about producing podcasts. You can listen and learn more about *Health Literacy Out Loud* podcasts at www.healthliteracyoutloud.com.

STRATEGIES, IDEAS, AND SUGGESTIONS

Here are some ideas to consider (Osborne & Weiss 2009):

Weigh the benefits and risks of podcasting. Benefits of podcasting include positioning yourself as an expert, distinguishing yourself from competitors, raising your online visibility, and expanding your set of communication skills. But podcasting also brings risks and costs, including committing time and money, as well as the uncertainty of trying something new.

Stories from Practice: Producing Audio Podcasts

Adam Weiss edits all of Helen Osborne’s *Health Literacy Out Loud* podcasts. In a podcast about podcasting, Weiss spoke about how this technology can amplify the health literacy message. “Podcasts are a way to learn about health literacy at a convenient time and place,” he explains. “This suits health professionals as they can fit the learning into their everyday routine.”

Weiss compares podcasts to the radio. “On the radio, health literacy is a topic that people may hear about only once every few weeks, or months,” he says. “With a podcast you can present in-depth information that a listener wouldn’t otherwise get. No matter how good you are, radio stations are unlikely to create a ‘Health Literacy Channel’ unless you create one with a podcast.”

And that’s exactly what Helen Osborne did—with help from Adam Weiss, of course.

Source: Osborne (2010, August 1).

Choose a podcast format. The three most common formats are:

- **Highly produced radio shows.** This is when several segments are recorded “in the field” and later mixed together in a sound studio. An example is Chicago Public Radio’s *This American Life with Ira Glass* (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/podcast/>).
- **Lecture format.** This is just one person talking. Honestly, these are often less than compelling to listen to. An example of a lecture format done well is the BBC’s *From Our Own Correspondent* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/fooc/>).

- **Interview.** To do an interview show well you need to be an excellent questioner, listener, and committed to making guests shine more than you. *Health Literacy Out Loud* is an example of an interview show.

Decide about time. This includes the length of each edited podcast and frequency of new episodes. Twenty minutes is a good upper limit for most podcasts, and five minutes is usually the lower limit. The ideal is to podcast at least once or twice a month, as listeners will come to expect new and timely information.

Acquire needed technology. You can record podcasts in person or over the phone. To record podcasts in person, you need a good-quality digital recorder. It helps to also have a handheld microphone to better control the conversation. To record podcasts over the phone (as I usually do), you need:

- *Skype.* This computer-based program (available at www.skype.com) is a way to make phone calls over the Internet. The sound quality for podcasts is excellent so long as you use a good microphone and the other person talks on a corded landline, not Skype. An added benefit is that there is no or minimal cost for most calls.
- *Microphone.* The audio quality is far better when you use a good microphone, not just the one in your computer. Make sure to plug in the microphone before turning on Skype so the computer knows which to use.
- *Headset.* You need to listen while recording. The best way to do this is with a good-quality headset.
- *Software to save recorded calls.* You'll need additional software to save these recorded calls. Options include Call Burner for the PC (www.callburner.com) and Call Recorder for the Macintosh (<http://www.ecamm.com/mac/callrecorder/>).

Edit the podcast. To me, it is important to produce a professional-sounding podcast. That's why I work with an experienced audio editor. If you edit the podcasts yourself, you will need a software program to cut up and rearrange the audio segments. There are several free or inexpensive options for both the PC and Macintosh.

Make the podcast available to others. The simplest way is by making an MP3 file and posting it to a blog, such as WordPress (www.wordpress.org).

You can also make the podcast available to millions of potential listeners by posting it on iTunes. Consider also offering a written transcript so that your podcast is accessible to those who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or want a printed version of the audio conversation.

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CITATIONS

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SOURCES TO LEARN MORE

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