



# Breaking the Sound Barrier

Incorporating podcasts to build communication skills.

By Tim Mulvaney

If you are not using podcasting to reinforce and promote your training to its target audience, you should be. As trainers, you do not need to be techies or audio experts to produce a podcast, but you should learn to use the technology to keep up with the expectations of clients and colleagues, and to stay ahead of the curve.

Managers and employees communicate with each other in sales meetings, job performance discussions, and meetings to discuss goals and career development. This creates plenty of applications for podcasting to help make those conversations easier.

Audio and video podcasts can also be useful tools for training in courageous conversations, where individuals engage in dialogue with people they don't normally speak to about sensitive topics such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, or with colleagues they speak to all the time, about uncomfortable topics such as inappropriate behavior, money, and job performance.

Using audio and video recordings of various conversations as a learning tool represents a natural fit.

## On the air

Podcasting is similar in scope to producing a radio show. It includes recording a portion of audio or video content that is punchy and useful, posting it online or on your intranet site, and providing a link to your audience to download the recording.

Podcasting has improved training in terms of reducing training costs,

increasing participation, and initiating greater learner engagement. In a story on podcasting in *The Wall Street Journal*, one organization determined that producing podcasts allowed them to deliver their training for \$30,000 rather than \$125,000 because it reduced the number of training sessions by 50 percent.

One client, a package products company, had never recorded more than 40 percent participation for any kind of training. But by including some relevant podcasts before, during, and after one particular training session, they reached 70 percent participation.

As with many of their peers, managers at the package products firm struggled to talk to employees about their behavior before it was too late, or they put the discussions off until the very last minute. The focus of their training was on two topics: performance management and career development.

In preparing for the training, I created two six- to seven-minute podcast episodes, one for each of the two topics. The podcast told the story of Sheldon, a fictional employee whose supervisor suspected he was looking for a new job.

The supervisor wanted to keep him, but she was worried that if she raised the issue with him, she would put ideas in his head. In addition, she had never discussed career development with him before, and doing so was a bold step. The podcasts were structured to address both concerns.

I posted the episodes and sent a link to the target audience. Participants walked into the training room having already begun their learning by debating what they would do about Sheldon.

### **Learning boost**

The package company credits the jump in participation to the two customized, targeted pre-session recordings. Participants heard their own issues and concerns in the podcasts, and they understood that the training would be relevant to them.

This spurred their interest in the training before the face-to-face segment

## **Podcast Crash Course**

Here is a very brief primer, online resources, and some other tips to use when producing a podcast. Audio is the easiest. Two recommended resources to record the conversations are FreeConference.com and Audioacrobat.com.

For the bridge line you can use FreeConference.com ([www.freeconference.com](http://www.freeconference.com)) to obtain participants' permission to be recorded. During the reservation process, users can turn on the "record" feature. Participants must agree to be recorded before entering the conversation.

One helpful recording tool is offered by Audio Acrobat ([www.audioacrobat.com](http://www.audioacrobat.com)). The quality of Audio Acrobat's recording is very good. The completed MP3 podcast is uploaded back to Audio Acrobat. When you are ready to "publish" your podcast, Audio Acrobat will generate the appropriate HTML codes for your website, your emails, or your downloads.

Apple's music editing program, GarageBand, is another useful resource. There are editing programs for PC users, but Apple's drag-and-drop features are seamless.

began. That interest was manifest in a near doubling of participation rates. Participants were engaged in the learning without ever having set foot in the classroom, and the trainer's job was then half complete.

Within 24 hours of each session, in which they had practiced conversations drawn from their own experiences, I produced a five- to seven-minute audio podcast that reiterated the lessons learned from that particular session and reminded them of their on-the-job assignments. At this point in the process, participants had at least three touch points with the content, but only one was in the training room.

This effort also created a just-in-time database of nearly a dozen five- to seven-minute audio podcasts that the managers could use, in the moment, before taking part in an actual conversation with an employee. They receive a reminder, a tip, and a helpful note about what to do in their conversation, moments before it happens.

For another organization—a major educational institution—the training topic was managing your boss, which included learning how to make the right

approach, setting expectations, and engaging in difficult conversations.

In this venue, audio podcasts were the first practice conversation before volunteers practiced a live conversation, again, drawn from their own experiences. This exercise was about building managers' confidence before taking the next big step—practicing in the training room.

Besides the audio podcasts, video podcasts have become a great way to sell the training. For instance, you can send a welcome video to an executive group prior to the first meeting on diversity.

Pre-session interviews were conducted with executives by telephone. I produced a four-minute video, along with a one-page, downloadable PDF worksheet for them to gather their thoughts. It was all posted on the web, and a link was provided. The conversation began before we ever met.

Another benefit to having audio and video podcasts available at any time is that the training participants become active learners throughout the process.

Podcasts will not replace any live, in-person training, but they are making it easier for participants to

### A standard format for a 10- to 15-minute podcast training lesson should look like this:

- opening bumper/welcome: 20-second theme music and voiceover, the same every time
- audio of narrator describing the program: 1-3 minutes
- transition music
- relevant portions of the raw recording: 2-4 minutes
- transition music
- audio of narrator describing what you just heard and what you will hear next: 1-3 minutes
- relevant portions of the raw recording: 2-4 minutes
- transition music
- repeat until you have said what you wanted to say
- narrator describing lessons learned from that conversation: 2-4 minutes
- closing bumper, staying consistent

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engage in the training on their own schedule, with some of the latest technology, and at a reasonable price.

The format of any organization's podcasts, whether audio or video based, should always be the same. As with any radio or TV program, when you hear the opening music, you know what's on. You want to brand your podcasts to conform with a certain sound, picture, and format.

Learning professionals should strongly consider taking the time to learn and use this technology. The first one-minute recording may

require several days, multiple takes, and considerable frustration. But the learning curve is relatively short. With some practice, any trainer can record, edit, and post a four- to five-minute video in about an hour.

Through podcasts, trainers have the ability to sell the training to a target audience, as well as reinforce the learning and create reusable tools for your training.

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