Podcasting for Lawyers – The Nuts and Bolts

By: Joshua Fruchter, Esq. *Joshua Fruchter is president and co-founder of eLawMarketing, a leading provider of online marketing services to law firms and other professional service providers. He can be contacted at 866.833.6245 or at* josh@elawmarketing.com. *The firm's Web site is at* www.elawmarketing.com.

At a technical level, "podcasting" is a method of publishing audio and video files to the Internet that uses a "feed" such as RSS to deliver the files to subscribers. The term "podcasting" derives its name from Apple's iPod, but you don't need to own an iPod to create, publish and distribute podcasts.

This article will explain the nuts and bolts of creating a "podcast" – your own syndicated, online radio program. For those lawyers willing to take the time to understand the process, the benefits are extraordinary – the opportunity to showcase expertise, build a loyal audience, generate new leads, and drive website traffic at extremely low cost and minimal time commitment.

Scripting

To attract listeners, your podcasts will need to feature meaningful, compelling content. Past speeches and presentations are often good sources of content for podcasts since they have already been optimized for a listening audience. However, for individuals who speak contemporaneously from outlines or scribbled notes, it may be worthwhile to write out a more detailed script for an audio broadcast. While "live" audiences will often put up with a lot of "umms," "ahhs" and "ahemms," listeners who don't have a visual "anchor" will not be so forgiving.

Another good source of content for podcasts are past articles, and client memoranda and alerts. However, what reads well on paper, may not sound so good in audio. Written content will therefore often need to be modified for a listening audience.

As far as presentation format, podcasters shouldn't limit themselves to straight speeches. Assuming the logistics can be arranged, an "interview" format is often more compelling due to the interplay between the two "voices." Interviews also better position the "interviewee" as an expert in listener's minds.

Recording

Some professionals record their own podcasts using a laptop, and a microphone or headset. However, recording your own broadcast to a laptop requires an audio mixing application such as Audacity, and many novices will quickly find that using such an application exceeds their technical skills (if they even bother to try in the first place). Technical hurdles include sound editing (e.g., editing out background noise, and/or adding music or other effects), and conversion of the recording to the MP3 format (the format most commonly used for distribution of audio files over the Internet).

Other presenters record their speeches using a portable device for later upload as a podcast. However, this approach also requires some technical skill.

A third option offered by podcasting services such as Audioblog is recording your podcast directly into the phone by calling a number provided by the podcasting service. The technical process of converting your recording into an MP3 audio file is handled by the service. However, you won't have the opportunity to edit your file or add music and other effects.

Given the technical hurdles posed by the recording methods noted above, and the poor sound quality that usually results, careful thought should be given to using a professional sound studio to record your podcasts. Among other things, a studio can add in sound effects such as music that will enhance the appeal of your broadcast.

In many cases, a professional speaks so frequently and their voice is so well recognized (let's call them "gurus"), that he or she will need to provide the "voice" for the podcast. However, professionals who don't necessarily need to use their own voice should consider hiring a voice talent to read their scripts. It costs more, but the presentation will sound more polished and professional, and therefore stand out more prominently from the crowd of poor quality broadcasts.

Hosting

Once an audio file is recorded and converted to an MP3 format, it needs to be uploaded to a server where it will be stored and made available for download by listeners via a link on a website. Some blog services such as Typepad allow users to upload audio files. Other services such as Audioblog give you the ability to host audio files and publish them to blogs along with a graphic that readers can use to play the file directly from your blog post. Just remember that if your audio file is 10 MB and 100 people listen to it, that's 1 GB of download bandwidth (at some point the hosting service is going to make you pay extra for excess downloads over a certain threshold).

However, just posting a link to an audio file on a website is not a "podcast" (though many people wrongly assume it is). The critical step required to convert an audio file into a true podcast is to publish the file to an RSS feed so that subscribers using iPods or other "podcatching" software such as iPodder are notified that a new audio file is available for download.

To publish your audio file to an RSS feed, you can use a service such as Audioblog. The service will allow you to create an RSS feed to which you can quickly and easily add new broadcasts.

Promotion

Once you publish your audio file as an RSS feed, you'll want to let people know that exists. You can do so by adding your RSS feed to iTunes, Yahoo and other podcast directories. Individuals searching those directories for audio content can find your RSS feed, download it to their "podcatchers" (such as iPods), and be notified each time you publish a new broadcast.

Flash

To add a visual component to your podcast, you might consider creating Powerpoint slides, converting them into Flash files, and then synchronizing the Flash file with the audio. Adding a visual element to your podcast will help hold the attention of your listeners for a longer period of time, and lessen the likelihood of your listeners getting distracted by what's going on around them as they listen to your broadcast.

Tracking

Curious how many people are downloading your audio file? A service such as Feed Burner replaces your RSS feed with a specialized feed that can provide feedback on the number of downloads and other useful data. Feed Burner also lets you more easily publicize the addition of new podcasts to your RSS feed to various podcast directories. Feedburner even now supports notification of new podcasts via email.

Conclusion

Podcasting may be popular, but it is certainly not simplistic. Professionals should put careful thought into the various steps involved in the production process so that the end result sounds professional, and enhances the reputation of the firm or individual hosting the podcast. Done right, the payoff from podcasting can be huge.