Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Podcasting Best Practices
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Improving and Protecting Health through New Media

Introduction

A podcast is a digital audio or video file that can be saved for playback on a portable media player or computer. The term podcast refers to both the actual content of the media file or the method by which the content is syndicated. Programs and divisions at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) produce podcasts as individual episodes for inclusion in a larger series, or as a separate, stand-alone series. While all of the following best practices are relevant for both episodic and serial podcasting, some best practices are more relevant to producers of one particular form of presentation than the other.

The following best practices are not a comprehensive list, but rather a starting point for consideration when initiating podcast production. They are grounded in basic concepts of social marketing, which emphasize formative research prior to presenting information.[1] The preliminary research stage informs target audience selection and identification of messages, two elements upon which all effective subsequent communication are built.

In this document we address the following best practices:
- What is the purpose of the podcast?
- Know thy audience.
- Audience-centered content organization.
- To repurpose or not to repurpose?
- Less is more
- Production quality.
- Regular and frequent release.
- Cross-Marketing – CDC internet and third party sites.
- Be complete…
- …But limited.
- Transcripts – more than a Section 508 requirement.
- Connecting with your audience.
- Closing the loop – Getting audience participation.

Best Practices

What is the purpose of the podcast?

The first and most important step when initiating production is to identify target audiences and main health messages. Basic communication theory guides this initial step in the production process, emphasizing the need to clearly define the communication goal prior to developing content. Once a communication goal is determined, it is appropriate to design a marketing plan and a messaging strategy to most effectively achieve that goal.[2] Only after these steps have been completed should a determination be made about whether a podcast is an effective way of achieving the communication goal and whether it fits within the marketing plan and messaging strategy. If a podcast can play a role in the campaign, then a podcast should be planned to address the communication goal.

Know thy audience.

Podcast design should be deliberate in that it is an appropriate method to meet communication goals and is a good fit with the specified marketing plan. Similarly, podcasts should be designed with a particular audience in mind. [4,5] Selection of a target audience is necessary prior to script creation to ensure effective communication. [3] For instance, podcasts designed for the general public should avoid use of medical terminology when more accessible synonyms exist. While it is acceptable to use words like 'dyspepsia' and 'Varicella' in podcasts designed for health professionals, such words should be replaced with 'heart burn' or 'chicken pox' when designing podcasts for the general population. Podcasts targeting adolescents and young adults should be casual and idiomatic, while those for seniors should be more formal.

Audience-centered content organization.

The CDC Health Protection Goals offer a great way to organize podcast content that breaks from normal organizational or disease-specific research thinking. For many audiences it is the primary and optimal way to organize and deliver content. A parent of a 5-year old wants to know about issues concerning pediatrics and the health and well-being of her child and would prefer them to be packaged and delivered that way. She doesn't want to subscribe to a series on diabetes, one on measles, one on meningitis, etc. to find the three pertinent episodes. One podcast series on pediatric issues (or Grow Safe and Strong in this case) would be more applicable.

Dividing the production responsibilities by collaborating with colleagues in other programs and segmenting up the workload makes regular and frequent podcast release more feasible. Four or five programs each responsible for one episode per month can produce a weekly podcast series, with the production demands equal to those of a monthly podcast for any one program.

To repurpose or not to repurpose?

In many cases, audio or video content may already exist on a particular topic prior to podcast development. In this case, it can be tempting to repurpose existing content for use in a new podcast. However, repurposing is not always the most effective use of podcast technology. Michael Geoghegan, founder of Willnick Productions and producer of Disney's initial podcasts, explains, "Rather than taking an audio file and calling it a 'podcast,' companies need to create unique content as a podcast to generate real interest and long-standing popularity." [6]

Prior to deciding whether or not to repurpose, it is important to revisit the initial marketing plan and messaging strategy that have been created to meet the communication goal. If existing content fits well within this framework, then it is acceptable to repurpose. Otherwise, new content should be created that is suitable for the messaging strategy. Repurposing existing content simply for the sake of producing a podcast violates the tenets of communication theory and is not based in research.

Less is more.

Just as repurposing existing content for the sake of creating a podcast is not recommended, creating video podcasts is not always an effective means of communication. Unless the video or visuals used in the podcast are critical to effectively communicating the message, use of such technology should be avoided. Many users prefer to do other things while listening to podcasts, such as housework or driving, which is not conducive to watching a video podcast.

Similarly, a thirty minute podcast is not necessarily better than a five minute podcast because it is longer. In fact, subscribers may listen to a thirty minute podcast, but not even consider downloading one that lasts an hour.[7] Communication goals, messaging strategy, and target audience should inform script creation, and thus the length of the podcast. If the same message can be effectively communicated in five minutes instead of ten, there is no reason to create a longer podcast.[4] However, extended, long podcasts may be more appropriate for certain communication goals.

Production quality.

While many individuals access podcasts from a computer, others choose to download them to a portable media device and listen with head phones or ear buds. For maximum comfort of the listener, podcast production should be as high quality as possible.[5] Listeners simply will not continue listening to a poorly recorded podcast.[7] At CDC, this usually means using the Division of Creative Services (DCS) to create a quality product.

Anyone can produce a podcast with inexpensive recording equipment, but that doesn't mean everyone should. When sound quality is poor, it is very apparent to audience members using ear buds to access content. Static or background noise on a recording can be unbearable for such individuals. This also has implications for repurposed content. While pre-existing content might be desirable to use for various reasons, if the quality of the recording is poor, the audience may not stay tuned in long enough to receive the message.[8] Disney podcast designer Michael Goeghegan reiterates, "Your listeners control the subscription…if you come out of the gate with an unprofessional or poorly-developed podcast, [your listeners] will unsubscribe as quickly as they signed up."[6]

If incidental music or sound effects are used, final product must be reviewed closely and thoroughly. If the sound levels for background music or sound effects are too high, they will obscure or block the spoken text, especially when listened to through ear buds.

Regular and frequent release.

When creating a marketing plan and messaging strategy that includes the use of a podcast series, it is important to note that series with more regular and frequent releases are the ones with the broadest listener base. For example, at CDC no single episode of the two weekly series by Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) ranks higher than the 15th most popular download. However, the series account for approximately 35% of all

podcast traffic each week. The series have built a dedicated audience that continues to grow. When developing a podcast series, podcasts should be released at least monthly – preferably on a weekly or biweekly basis. This regular and frequent release schedule cultivates a steady audience over time.

Cross-Marketing – CDC internet and third party sites.

Leveraging a variety of existing and no-cost channels for podcast marketing is an effective method of increased exposure to a podcast episode or series. Multiple channels exist both internally and externally, all of which should be explored for marketing purposes.

CDC.gov hosts a page devoted to CDC podcasts (www.cdc.gov/podcasts) where users can browse podcasts, search for podcasts by a particular topic, or subscribe to a podcast series. In addition, podcasts should be featured on program pages, created in coordination with a CDC.gov Feature or Health-e-Card, and promoted through CDC's public health partners.

Several external podcast directories also exist where podcasts can be registered. Registering podcasts on an external directory makes them accessible to individuals who might be interested in the topics but are not visitors to CDC.gov or are not familiar with the CDC.gov Podcast page. External registration is especially useful to increase the listener base for new podcast series.[5,8] The CDC Podcast Coordinator will register all new series of CDC podcasts. The most popular of these external podcast directories include:

- iTunes.com[8]
- Zune.net
- PodcastAlley.com
- PodcastPickle.com
- DigitalPodcast.com
- Podcast.net

Be complete...

Many times a podcast will direct the listener to a URL containing more information or resources related to the podcast's topic. All URLs should be completely spoken in order to make them as accessible to the user as possible. A fully articulated URL in a podcast will be transcribed as such, thus providing an opportunity to include a functional hyperlink within the podcast transcript and allowing for search engine indexing and improved ranking.

...But limited.

Since podcasts are routinely downloaded and often shared from person to person outside the confines of CDC.gov, special attention must be given to non 'evergreen' material. Given the nature of some podcasts, especially those dealing with outbreaks and

emergency situations, certain podcasts should explicitly state a time reference in the audio as well as a sunset time. For example, "This podcast is an update of the situation as of October 13, 2007 at 2:30 PM Eastern Standard Time on the current e-Coli outbreak in the western US. This content will be considered current until a new podcast is released, the emergency.cdc.gov web site is updated, or 2:29 PM Eastern Standard Time, October 15, 2007, whichever comes first."

Transcripts – more than a Section 508 requirement.

In order to meet Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility guidelines, all video podcasts must be open captioned since not all portable media players currently support closed captioning. [9] In addition, any podcast produced by CDC or hosted on the CDC.gov web site must include a written transcript. Please note that it is possible to subscribe not only to CDC podcasts, but to the PDF transcripts of CDC podcasts.

Based on the CDC.gov statistics, the number of downloads for transcripts is higher than the expected representative proportion of the population that would require alternative delivery mechanisms for accessibility. Transcripts are being downloaded for printing, speed reading, and for hand-outs to patients and classrooms. Transcripts in and of themselves are a viable and important distribution channel. Even organizations not required to uphold Section 508 standards recommend podcast transcription. [4,5,8]

Connecting with your audience.

Like traditional broadcasting, getting the audience to identify and emotionally connect with your host or hosts is important. Not only does it build a sense of anticipation from episode to episode, it also helps to increase the level of trust in the delivery of the message. Just as a newscaster becomes the personification of a corporate entity, the host of a podcast can make a similar connection with the audience. Hosts for podcasts that are intended for the health care professional should project confidence, knowledge and authority. Those for the general public should be personable, likeable and trustworthy.

Closing the loop – Getting audience participation.

Revisiting communication theory, attainment of a communication goal relies on determination of that goal, development of a marketing plan and a messaging strategy, and selection of a target audience. Podcast creation should occur with each of these steps in mind. Communication theory also highlights evaluation as a necessary step in the process. [1] Inherent in podcast creation should be an evaluation strategy. This strategy can include raw metrics such as number of downloads as well as qualitative feedback from listeners about any aspect of the podcast including length, topic, or presenter.

Podcasting is an emerging channel for audience engagement, and as such, it is essential to solicit audience feedback as a form of evaluation. [8] It is important to think about ways to obtain feedback from the audience such as creating and maintaining a separate e-mail box

for comments. Podcast development should not end with a podcast being uploaded to a website, but should continue past that point with evaluation.

Beyond evaluation is audience participation. Despite its classification as a Web 2.0 technology, podcasting still retains some 1.0 characteristics. For instance, podcast messages are crafted, produced and broadcast with little to no audience participation or personalization inherent in many other Web 2.0 technologies. One way to increase audience engagement is to actively solicit audience participation and use audience feedback. Methods include answering audience emails, receiving and recording audience phone calls, receiving questions and comments from listeners in audio files, etc.

Summary

To conclude, podcasting is a potentially effective means of health communication if it is implemented appropriately. As with any other communication channel, initial decisions about whether or not to utilize podcasting technology must be based on formative research including target audience selection, goal setting, and marketing plan and messaging strategy development. If podcasting is an appropriate communication channel for these elements, then specific decisions regarding the podcast can be made including content, length, and evaluation strategy. Referring to the best practices listed above and consistently revisiting the marketing plan during podcast development will help ensure that a relevant and valuable podcast is ultimately created.

Glossary

Episode – One podcast that belongs to a group or series of related podcasts

Series – A group of related podcasts comprised of single episodes

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9. CDC 508 Implementation Guidelines.