

Author interview: Podcasting biz (Update)

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The growing popularity of the Internet-based broadcast medium known as podcasting is finding its way into businesses that are looking for new methods to reach consumers.

In her new e-book, "The Podcasting Ebook: Your Complete Guide to Podcasting," author Stephanie Ciccarelli writes of how the recent digital phenomenon can help businesses find new customers.

Ciccarelli, vice president of marketing at InteractiveVoices, is the host and producer of the company's IV Podcast, a weekly show that is available to voice-over customers.

She first researched podcasting in hopes of bringing podcasting jobs to the Web site for the company's voice-over talents, which prompted her to write the e-book, which can be found at ThePodcastingEbook.com.

The e-book, for \$14.95, aims to inform readers of how to create, record, publish, and promote a podcast.

"More businesses should get involved with podcasting for a number of reasons," Ciccarelli told UPI. "Podcasting is direct, is time-shifting, and is highly targeted, not to mention a cost-effective means to market a product or service to people who are listening on their own accord. Podcasting can also bring attention to electronic materials available at a given site, such as summaries of white papers that can be downloaded, tutorials, support aids, and announcing upcoming events."

Already many companies and organizations have begun podcasting ranging from IBM to the White House, CNN and FOX News.

Businesses are podcasting to reach their audiences on a more intimate and personally convenient way, Ciccarelli said. As subscribers are more loyal to the podcast of a particular business -- becoming a captive audience -- the company then has the ability to "influence and convert them from a cold lead to a customer."

According to Ciccarelli, the most lucrative way to make money from podcasting is to open up airtime to advertisers and sponsors.

"A loyal audience combined with good content is a prime opportunity for advertisers to seize," she said. "Podcasting is ripe with potential, and advertisers know it."

Currently, the trend for non-profit podcasts is to accept micro-payments to cover expenses, a trend adopted now by commercial podcasters, Ciccarelli said.

"In time, charging a modest fee for a podcast subscription will become standard, just as a customer pays for a magazine subscription or cable television," she said. "'The Podcasting Ebook' has an entire chapter devoted to making money from podcasting, exploring advertising opportunities and other financial avenues to pursue."

But business podcasting continues to be on a steady climb, says Ciccarelli.

As she sees it, business podcasting will include series, symposiums, conferences, training sessions and workshops, which will be available for both commercial and internal use.

In addition, companies will also produce commercial podcasts directed at their customers from question-and-answer podcast or "a sales pitch meant to close the deal with an individual or group of customers."

In fact, the podcast listening base is getting bigger. An estimated 12.3 million U.S. households will use their MP3 players to listen to audio podcasts by the end of the decade (vs. listening on the Internet), according to the April 2005 report "The Future Of Digital Audio" from Forrester Research Inc.

"Podcasting is gaining momentum rapidly," Ciccarelli said, in due part to the heavy promotion and easy access for iTunes users. "Within the first two days that iTunes offered podcast subscriptions, over 1 million people subscribed through their service to podcasts online. The number of podcasts and listeners continues to grow at an incredible rate as more individuals embrace this new information and entertainment medium."

But podcasting is also getting a lot easier. Ciccarelli says that the basic tools of podcasting are readily available on the Internet for podcasters to easily publish their podcasts. Moreover, programmers are continuously improving current technology, making it easier for podcasters to publish their RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds.

RSS feeds are created from links to and from other distribution sites, sending material instantaneously, Ciccarelli said. In fact, many sites are already RSS formatted, allowing the average person to podcast without technical expertise.

For Ciccarelli, the future of podcasting will be an extraordinary one, but she doesn't see it as a threat to mainstream media.

"There is so much potential to consider. Will it overtake traditional media such as television? No, most likely not," she said. "Podcasting will

establish its own role in the media and serve an audience with very specific needs and desires. By virtue that podcasts can be updated instantaneously, listeners will become dependent on their favorite podcasts to bring them the updates that they need, particularly if mainstream media outlets do not cover the information they are seeking."

Broadcast radio has been adapting to the new podcasting world, and rather than seeing podcasts as a threat to radio, she says it's more complimentary as some radio stations have already begun to use podcasting.

"I can foresee radio stations licensing podcasts from independent producers in order to diversify their broadcast programming, perhaps even collaborations between radio personalities and podcast hosts," Ciccarelli said. "Broadcast will not go away, but it will need to adapt and change with the marketplace to remain competitive."

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