

# Employee *Thinking*

Edelman's perspective on current issues and trends in employee engagement

## Reaching Employees Through Podcasting

New technologies - from intranet portals to webcasts to blogs - have become powerful additions to the toolboxes used by internal communicators. Now, as communications professionals search for the latest innovations that can reach an increasingly time-crunched, mobile and dispersed workforce, attention is turning to the relatively new technology known as podcasting.

### Podcasting 101

Podcasting refers to a digital audio recording - typically in MP3 format - posted online. Individuals download the recording to an MP3 player, such as an iPod, and listen at their own convenience. Listeners use an online feed to "subscribe" to the podcasts they wish to receive. Through this subscription feature, as new podcasts are posted online, they are automatically downloaded and synced up with a listener's MP3 player. Podcasts are not only easy to download and listen to, they are also simple and inexpensive to produce, generally requiring just a microphone and recording software.

### Advantages of Internal Podcasting

Since almost any type of audio recording - from music to a speech to a book reading - can be podcast, organizations could podcast a variety of content for employees, including messages from leadership, training, overview of recent industry news, business reviews and project updates. Podcasting offers several advantages over traditional employee communication channels, including:

- **Reduces Cost:** Podcasting eliminates the expense of producing and distributing certain training manuals, newsletters and CDs. In some cases, it could even eliminate the cost of traveling to a speech, meeting or training session. According to recent research from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than 22 million American adults own MP3 players, which indicates it's increasingly possible for employees to download company podcasts to their personal players.
- **Increases Productivity:** Since podcasts are accessible anytime and anywhere, employees can listen to them during what would otherwise be downtime, either on the job (e.g., while waiting in airports or performing routine tasks) or on their own time (e.g., while exercising, commuting or running errands).
- **Saves Time:** An online feed alerts employees when new podcasts are available, which eliminates the time they spend checking for new and relevant content in newsletters or on the intranet.
- **Ensures Relevance:** The subscription capability of an online feed allows employees to automatically receive content relevant to the entire company, as well as information specific to their team, function or location.
- **Meets Learning Needs:** Podcasting effectively reaches auditory learners - something few other internal communications channels offer. It also gives listeners the ability to replay information they missed or didn't comprehend the first time they heard it, which isn't possible during a live meeting or speech.

### A Look at Organizations That Podcast for Employees

Given that podcasting is still very new, it's not surprising that few organizations have ventured into internal podcasting. There are, however, a few companies, including IBM and Capital One, testing the waters. Capital One, for example, recently bought 3,000 iPods for employees, each of whom can download content ranging from information about diversity initiatives to highlights of the company's earnings calls. According to the August 2005 issue of *Workforce Management*, Capital One employees said podcasting saved them time over traditional learning methods.

Companies evaluating podcasting for employees should take note of the technology's success in educational settings. For example, in 2004, Duke University gave all first-year students iPods and voice recorders so they could listen to and record course materials. A Duke study found the experiment increased student engagement, reduced dependence on physical materials and supported individual learning styles.

### Considerations for Organizations Pondering Podcasting

Organizations thinking about internal podcasts should keep in mind the following.

- **Podcasts should serve as one part of the overall communications mix.** Podcasts are one-way communication channels, perfect for situations where the goal is simply delivering information. Podcasts can not, however, be used in situations where interaction, information exchange, demonstrations or practice is required.
- **Delivery must be dynamic. Simply reading a speech or document won't hold employees' attention.** To ensure employees are engaged, companies should consider integrating music, humor, cliffhangers and other creative elements into podcast content.
- **Podcasting may be more effective at reaching younger employees than older ones.** According to the Pew research, 19 percent of 18- to 28-year-olds own MP3 players, compared to 14 percent of 29- to 40-year-olds, 11 percent of 41- to 50-year-olds, and 6 percent of 51- to 59-year-olds. The research also indicates almost half of MP3-player owners ages 18 to 28 have downloaded podcasts, compared to about 20 percent of MP3-player owners over age 29.
- **Employers should be prepared to respond to criticism that podcasting is another example of organizations expecting employees to be on the job during non-business hours.** If faced with this criticism, organizations should emphasize the podcasts are intended for employees to listen to during downtime at work. Employers can also frame podcasts within the context of flex schedules, noting employees can listen to podcasts anytime convenient for them.

Edelman's Employee Engagement Practice helps organizations communicate more effectively with all employee groups and increase overall levels of employee engagement. For more information, contact Christopher Hannegan at +1 312 240 2686, [cph@edelman.com](mailto:cph@edelman.com) or his blog at [www.employeeethinking.com](http://www.employeeethinking.com)

