

HOTSHEET

HOW TO START A PODCAST ON ANY BUDGET

By Sam Stedman



Like any new project, starting up a podcast is a formidable task, with lots of learning curve. But once the initial setup is in place, it can be a remarkably streamlined process.

Whether you're starting a single podcast, or a whole podcast network, my hope is that this document can help to identify the areas that will require the most thought and attention, and lead you through some of the considerations you'll likely face.

Here at **EcoParent**, we launched a six-channel podcast network on a \$30k grant generously provided by the Ontario Creates Magazine Fund. No one on staff had any previous experience with the creation of podcasts, so every lesson was learned authentically (read: the hard way!).

The result?

We did it...with some expert help.

And you can too!

Read on...



Planning & Budget

No matter what your budget, you can start a podcast. Bare bones, all you really need is a decent microphone and some basic skills with audio editing software (called a DAW – Digital Audio Workstation).

Of course, the more money you have, the more you can do. What's most important is to create the show that you can afford to do well. For instance, solo shows recorded in a controlled environment will be less labour intensive than interview-based podcasts that can add all kinds of uncontrolled variables, such as the guest's equipment and environment.

So, I recommend conceiving the show after you establish your budget. The sections below will give you a sense of the kinds of budgetary line items that are likely to make an appearance.

Legal Stuff

Before you begin, if your show involves bringing on guests, make sure you get your hands on a solid guest release contract that you can have your guests sign before you get into the studio to record.

Gordon Firemark makes one available for free if you sign up for his e-newsletter. For ease of distribution, we streamlined this process by putting the release form up on our website, with a mandatory "I agree with the terms" radio box that must be ticked before it can be submitted.

You'll also want to ensure that if you're not the host, you've got some legal contract in place with your chosen host(s). Intellectual property is not something to mess around with, after all. Online templates abound, but if you want to be really safe, have it looked over by an experienced lawyer before putting anything to use.

Recording

A decent microphone kit (including a stand) will run you about \$100 at the bottom end. Of course, you can spend more, but you don't have to in order to sound reasonably good. Unless you're getting all kinds of fancy equipment, you'll want a mic with a USB connector that you can plug directly into your computer, which is where the session will likely be recorded. And unless you'll be conducting in-person interviews with guests in your studio, you'll want a cardioid mic, which is best for picking up sound from only one direction, and eliminating unwanted background noise.

Just as important as the quality of the mic is your studio setup. You don't need a professional studio to sound good – a walk-in closet can produce exceptional results. The key is to avoid the echoing of sound waves, so you'll want to minimize the amount of exposed wall and other hard sur-



faces. Hanging some fabric in strategic places can go a long way! For an endless amount of inspo, Google ‘home podcast studio’. But don’t freak out – you don’t need to do all that much to create a decent sound environment.

Finally, you’ll need a way to record. If you’re creating a solo show, this is easy, and you don’t even need to spend any money – just download the free Audacity software and you’ve got everything you need. As soon as you introduce a guest, especially a remote guest, it gets a fair bit more complicated. Subscription software such as Zencastr and Riverside.fm are great choices, as they offer reasonably user-friendly ways to loop your guests in, and they record on discrete voice channels, meaning that the track with the host’s voice will be separate from that containing the guest, which allows a skilled audio technician to work their magic separately on both. This is essential, especially if the guest decided to use the built-in mic on their laptop, and was next door to a construction site. I’ve also heard of people recording on Zoom, and if you’ve already got a paid subscription it might make sense to look at this. Just keep in mind that the other solutions are purpose built for podcasting, and thus may have useful features that a more generic virtual communications app like Zoom may lack.

A word of advice: test, test, and retest EVERYTHING. Click every button, and adjust every setting. And confirm every setting before each recording session – just because the settings were good last time, doesn’t mean they didn’t somehow get reset or thrown out of whack between then and now. Logging in 10 minutes early to make sure all is well can be a lifesaver. Also, take the time to read (and re-read, and bookmark) the troubleshooting page of your chosen recording software. If the host isn’t intimately familiar with their technological infrastructure, they’re not likely to be able to troubleshoot on the fly. And that can lead to lost or unusable recordings, or just poor sound quality. This isn’t meant to scare you, but inevitably a technical glitch will arise, and it’s best to be as prepared as possible when that day comes.

Production

One of the biggest questions that needs to be answered is the role of an audio engineer, and whether or not you need one. As noted above, if you’re creating a solo show in a good setup with solid equipment, then the sound quality should be pretty good. In this case, then maybe you just want some start-up consultation and training – someone who can help you to develop the foundational assets (intro, outro, music selection, etc.) and show you how to graft them onto your recordings using free software like Audacity.

Or, if you want to step it up, Hindenburg Pro is a great piece of software designed specifically for podcast editing. (And they still offer a perpetual license! Grab it on World Radio Day if you can, as it typically goes on sale.) If you’re doing interviews with remote guests, that opens up a whole other can of worms. Not only must you contend with poor sound quality, but



unlike scripted solo shows, interviews typically require editing. While this is certainly something you could learn to do in house, the learning curve may be steep, and you'll need to allocate a substantial amount of time to each episode. This is where the services of a freelance audio engineer can make all the difference. It's worth pursuing even if you're on a tight budget, as you might be able to snag a recent grad, hungry for the work, at an affordable rate.

In the event that you want to split the editing and audio engineering between two different people, a piece of software called Descript has you covered. Simply upload your audio file into Descript, let it create a written transcript of the session, edit the transcript just like any word processor file, and re-export the edited audio file. While the export will need some expert cleanup, this can be an invaluable tool for some teams.

File & Feed Hosting

Every episode you produce will need to be hosted somewhere. I'm not talking about Apple Podcasts and Spotify here, as they do not 'host' your audio files. And while you can self-host these files, you'll need some serious technical ability to do so, and the vast majority of podcasters rely on a third-party hosting platform for this purpose; the relatively modest expense is worth every penny given the services these platforms offer. One of the most basic functions that just about every hosting platform offers is easy one-click distribution to Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and a variety of other places that people listen to podcasts. But their other features will differ, as will their price points, and you need to really consider the goals, and future development, of your podcasting efforts. Plan more now, cry less later – you really don't want to have to relocate your entire archive of episodes a year or two after launch if you can avoid it.

If you're starting up multiple podcasts, you should take a look at Spreaker, which offers a flat rate regardless of how many podcasts you host with them (which can save you a lot of money in the long run). You'll also want to take a hard look at the analytics offered by different hosting platforms – you know your advertisers, so consider what they'll want to see and make sure those audience metrics are offered. Equally important will be your plans for monetization. Some platforms offer dynamic ad insertions, which could be very useful if you don't want to rely on 'baked-in' sponsor recordings forever. Though premium features like this tend to come only in the higher-tier packages, it's easy to upgrade your level of service down the road, but much harder to migrate to a whole new platform when you discover that your host doesn't have the capacity to do what you want and need it to.



Promoting

The promotion of a podcast is not so different from any other digital content. You'll want to use all available channels to get the word out, and in the most engaging way(s). Make sure your branding and foundational assets look good.

vAudiograms – audiovisual assets composed of an image or video, an excerpt from an episode, and often a waveform – can be a very effective and engaging means of pushing out your content on social media. The current industry standard for audiogram creation is a piece of subscription-based software called Headliner, which makes it easy to assemble and export these social media assets, and allows you to streamline your workflow with custom templates. Most hosting platforms also offer a full-featured podcast player that can be integrated onto a web page with a simple code snippet, allowing site visitors to listen to an episode right on your website.

Be strategic with SEO and searchability as well, as you're competing in a crowded landscape. Keep your titles both catchy and informative. And if you really want to kickstart your podcast's traction, try to land other established podcasters as guests on your show, as this can really make an early difference. But no matter who your guest is, you'll want to make it easy for them to (shamelessly) promote the episode to their digital community, so be sure to build that into your promotional workflow as well (note: a well-made audiogram can be very sharable).