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Joseph Associates International is a Chicago based business brokerage firm specializing in bringing owners of small to mid-sized companies together with foreign and domestic buyers.



Podcasts Spread Message

Audio & video broadcasts are becoming easier for small firms to use in marketing.

By Ann Meyer

Seminar speaking and networking have been marketing mainstays for Chicago business attorney Brian Fons.

But thanks to advances in technology Fons now can reach customers and prospects remotely, delivering the information in Podcasts that listeners can access from iTunes.com. Podcasts--audio and video broadcasts distributed over the Internet using Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds--have been around for more than five years, but interest in them has accelerated since Apple Computer Inc. added a Podcast directory to iTunes in June 2005

and released improved Podcasting software last winter, experts say.

Fons, who subscribes to about six Podcasts himself, has been doing his own Podcasting using a radio show format for about four months. He sees the new media format as an ideal way of disseminating legal information that many small-business owners find heavy to wade through in print.

"I can give them this as a resource," he said. "We've also got articles, but it's easier to learn from a voice as opposed to reading it."

Fons, who is president of Corporate Creations Chicago, explains the difference between a C corporation and a limited liability company in one Podcast episode. Another tackles how to use trademarks to protect a business name or logo.

It's information Fons frequently presents in seminars and often is asked about by new clients. "I answer the same five questions throughout the course of the day almost every day," he said. Now he can refer inquirers to his Podcasts. "It's one more way to reach customers," he said.

Increasingly, many businesses are coming to the same conclusion. Oak Brook-based giant McDonald's Corp. recently launched a Podcast called, "The McDonald's You Don't Know," showcasing individual owner-operators as well as providing information on corporate programs.

"People want to be communicated with through lots of different vehicles," said McDonald's spokeswoman Anna Rozenich. "We are always leveraging technology to communicate."

More than 60,000 Podcasts are now available on iTunes and other Web sites, experts say. While some offer general-interest programming, most are targeted at a niche audience and a growing number tackle business issues.

To be effective, Podcasts must be informative and not too promotional, suggested William Swartwood, president of Swartwerk Media in Chicago. "I don't think a Podcast that would tell people what's on sale at your store would work," he said. "Teach people something. People like to learn."

Podcasts should show a bit of the business owner's personality, Swartwood said. "Like a radio show, you start to get to know the personality" behind them, he said.

To keep the Podcast conversational, it helps to have a second person involved in the recording, said Griff Wigley, principal of the Web log coaching firm Wigley & Associates in Northfield, Minn. "Voice is very important," he said. Without someone else in the room to have a conversation with, "People slip into sing-songy memo speak," he said.

Naperville business broker Joe McCaul of Joseph Associates International uses an interview format, bringing in private equity principals, business lenders and

other experts to talk about topics related to buying and selling a business.

The company, which started Podcasting in March, now has about 2,000 subscribers, said Ken McCaul, broker. While the company avoids direct sales pitches, the potential exposure is considerable, he said. "It's an easy way to get in front of potentially millions of subscribers," he said.

What's more, the process of calling in business experts to participate in a Podcast has been beneficial. "These people feel good about it," Ken McCaul said. "It gives us a chance to demonstrate our advanced capabilities. We're doing something that other people aren't." And it makes the firm "top of mind" with key people in the industry, he said.

Podcasts are easy to produce. Fons got started with a \$20 microphone hooked up to his Apple computer and uses Apple's Garage Band software for recordings. He divides his hourlong seminar lectures into 15-minute segments and releases them as a subscription series.

It's similar to what entrepreneur Doug Kaye, co-founder of GigaVox Media Inc. in Newport Beach, Calif., is doing on a wider basis. Since May 2003 Kaye's companies have produced some 1,400 Podcast shows, most stemming from conference seminars on technology issues, he said. Many of the Podcasts are supported by ads, Kaye said. Fees are charged on a cost-per-thousand basis, with the number of downloads used to determine listeners.

To draw new listeners GigaVox Media's Web site provides written descriptions of each topic, as well as biographies and research links on each featured speaker. That text is generally picked up by the search engines' browsers, while

the content in Podcasts is not, he said. "If you want to be found, you have to invest as much in the Web site as the audio," Kaye said.

Ken McCaul accomplishes the same thing by registering Joseph Associates' Podcasts with more than 20 Podcasting directories, he said. For example, the company's Podcasts are listed first under "business broker" on PodcastReady.com and Podcast.net.

Andrew McCaskey, president of Review Communications in Elkhart, Ind., hopes to turn his regular Podcasts into a viable business.

He Podcasts six days a week as the host and producer of SlashdotReview.com, a Podcast offering a summary of the latest technology news from Slashdot.com, a popular Web site, plus one new artist song. "I focus on the highlights in a 10-minute format," he said.

McCaskey's Podcasting started out as a hobby two years ago, but as the show has attracted a regular following McCaskey has attracted a corporate sponsor and is looking for other advertisers, he said.

Podcast advertising is just emerging, with companies like Podtrac Inc. in Washington, D.C., helping to bring Podcasters together with advertisers, McCaskey said. But making a living through Podcasting might be a challenge, he said, noting that he has not given up his day job as a technology consultant.