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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Everything You Need to Know Before You Start a Podcast

And some things the podcast evangelists won't tell you

A Links Global thought leadership article by M. Sanchez, founder of Links Global, a communications firm working at the intersection of trust science, narrative design, and civic engagement. Part of the Links Global article series: Contemporary Challenges. Drawn from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

In Brief

Podcasting is a genuinely powerful medium and a genuinely demanding one. This article explains what the format actually is, what it costs in time and attention, what the audience numbers honestly look like, what the medium is good for and not good for, and the questions to answer before you launch.

The podcast has become the communications format of the decade: the medium through which thought leaders build audiences, professionals establish authority, organizations deepen relationships with their constituencies, and ideas travel from specialized knowledge communities to general awareness.

The data is compelling. Global podcast listenership has grown substantially and consistently. The medium has reached 58 percent of Americans age 12 and over in the past month, and 54 percent of U.S. adults said they had listened in the past year, most of them to learn or to be entertained while doing something else. It has demonstrated unusual capacity for sustained engagement: podcast listeners spend more time with content than readers or social media consumers, have higher recall of content they encountered through audio, and develop stronger parasocial relationships with hosts than with most other content formats. For organizations trying to reach educated, engaged, professionally active audiences, the podcast is among the most effective distribution mechanisms currently available.

None of this means that starting a podcast is the right decision for every organization or every communicator. And the industry of podcast advice (the courses, the communities, the equipment guides, the monetization strategies, the growth hacks) has a significant interest in making the decision seem simpler, the path to success more accessible, and the likelihood of meaningful results more certain than the honest data supports.

This article is a field guide to what podcasting actually requires, what it actually produces, what the genuine opportunities are, and what the serious risks of starting a podcast are that the evangelists consistently underemphasize.

What Podcasting Actually Is

A podcast is a recurring audio program, distributed through podcast platforms and typically consumed on mobile devices during commute, exercise, household tasks, or other activities that leave the auditory channel available but don't fully occupy it. The medium's defining characteristics (serial form, intimate audio, accessible consumption) are not incidental. They are the features that generate the specific audience relationships that make podcasting valuable.

Serial form creates ongoing engagement rather than single encounters. A listener who finds a podcast valuable returns to it repeatedly, over weeks and months, developing a relationship with the content and the hosts that single-piece content cannot produce. This serial engagement is the foundation of the loyalty, trust, and influence that make podcasts valuable for authority building, but it requires sustained content production, sustained quality, and sustained audience maintenance that single-piece content does not.

Intimate audio creates a parasocial relationship quality that other media formats do not replicate. A podcast host who speaks naturally, candidly, and with evident personality is experienced by listeners as a presence in their daily lives: someone they spend time with regularly, whose voice they recognize, whose views and humor and intellectual patterns they know. This intimacy is not manufactured through the podcast format; it is a genuine quality of the medium that requires genuine personality, genuine voice, and genuine intellectual engagement to produce. Scripted, corporate, carefully managed audio does not produce it. It produces the auditory equivalent of an institutional press release: technically competent and relationally inert.

Accessible consumption means that podcasting reaches people in moments that other media cannot: the commute, the workout, the kitchen. This is a genuine competitive advantage for organizations whose audiences have attention deficits for screen-based content but listening time during activities. It is also a constraint: podcast content needs to work at the ear, without visual support, often in environments with partial attention. Content that requires visual reference, that depends on dense technical data, or that needs the listener's full attention to follow is not well-suited to the medium.

What Podcasting Actually Requires

The barrier to podcast production has dropped dramatically. A decent microphone, free recording software, a hosting platform, and the ability to distribute to major podcast directories is all the technical infrastructure required to launch a podcast that sounds professional. The entry cost, in

financial terms, is modest.

The entry cost in other terms is more substantial.

Time. A podcast episode that sounds like thirty minutes of natural conversation typically requires four to six hours of total production time: preparation, recording, editing, show notes, distribution, and promotion. A weekly podcast requires four to six hours of production time every week, indefinitely, for as long as the podcast continues. Organizations and individuals who calculate the cost of podcasting in equipment and hosting fees are underestimating the actual cost significantly, and those who discover the time cost after launch are responsible for most podcast abandonment.

Consistency. Podcast audiences are built through consistent publishing schedules. Irregular publication disrupts the listening habits that serial consumption depends on and signals to algorithms and directories that the podcast is not reliably active. The most common cause of podcast failure is not poor content. It is inconsistent publication: a strong launch followed by irregular episodes followed by an indefinite hiatus that the audience experiences as abandonment. The commitment required to maintain consistent publication over the months and years needed to build a meaningful audience is substantially larger than the commitment required to launch.

Genuine voice. The parasocial relationship quality that makes podcasting valuable cannot be manufactured. It requires hosts who are genuinely themselves in the recording (who have actual views, actual intellectual interests, actual humor and personality) rather than hosts who are performing a professional persona at the microphone. Organizations accustomed to carefully managed public communications often find this requirement genuinely difficult. The instinct to control the message, to stay on script, to avoid anything that could be characterized as unprofessional or politically sensitive, produces exactly the audio that fails to build the listener relationship that makes podcasting worth doing.

Content infrastructure. A podcast that publishes consistently over years is producing an enormous volume of content. That content needs sources, preparation, research, and ideas: more ideas, more consistently, than most organizations initially anticipate when they calculate the appeal of “we’ll just have conversations.” The organizations that sustain successful podcasts over time are those that have genuine content infrastructure: ongoing intellectual engagement with their field, continuous access to interesting guests and perspectives, and team capacity for the research and preparation that makes each episode genuinely valuable.

The Honest Numbers

The podcast industry’s promotional narrative (that any podcast can find a large audience with the right content and the right marketing) is not supported by honest engagement with the distribution of actual podcast performance.

The vast majority of podcasts have small audiences. On one major hosting platform, as of September 2026 the median episode gets 27 downloads in its first week; 412 puts you in the top 10 percent, and about 4,600 in the top 1 percent. A podcast in the top ten percent has a few hundred downloads per episode in its first week, and the top one percent a few thousand. A genuinely large podcast audience, in most categories, is tens of thousands. The podcasts with hundreds of thousands or millions of listeners are outliers operating in mainstream entertainment categories (true crime, political commentary, celebrity interviews) that are not the categories relevant to most organizations and professionals considering podcasting as a communications strategy.

For most professional and organizational podcasters, the realistic expectation is an audience in the hundreds to low thousands, and this is not a failure condition. A podcast with five hundred engaged, relevant listeners is a genuinely valuable communications asset for an organization whose work is relevant to that audience. A physician whose podcast is heard by five hundred healthcare administrators who make purchasing and partnership decisions has built something of real value, measured not in download counts but in the quality of the audience relationship and its relevance to the organization's goals.

The failure mode is not the small audience. The failure mode is spending the resources required to maintain a podcast for an audience that is not the right audience: producing content for general listenership when the organization's actual need is depth with a specific professional community, or building a podcast in a category too crowded to gain meaningful visibility without a marketing investment the organization cannot sustain.

What Podcasting Is Actually Good For

Podcasting is not the right communications format for every organizational goal. But it is genuinely excellent for several specific purposes that are worth distinguishing.

Authority building in specialized professional communities. A podcast that consistently delivers substantive, genuinely expert-level content to a specialized professional audience builds the host's and organization's authority within that community more effectively than almost any other format. The sustained engagement, the demonstrated depth of knowledge, and the relationship quality that good podcasting produces create authority that is difficult to replicate through other channels. For organizations whose strategic goal is recognition as a leading voice within a specific professional or sectoral community, podcasting is among the most effective investments available.

Relationship deepening with existing audiences. Organizations with existing audiences (newsletter subscribers, social media followers, event attendees) can use podcasting to deepen the relationship quality with those audiences rather than to acquire new ones. A podcast that existing supporters find genuinely valuable increases their engagement with the organization's work, strengthens their

relationship with the organization's leadership and voice, and converts casual supporters into advocates. This goal requires less concern about audience acquisition and more concern about content quality, which changes the production logic significantly.

Thought leadership documentation. For individuals and organizations with genuinely original ideas and perspectives on their field, podcasting provides a format for developing and communicating those ideas at a depth that social media cannot accommodate and that most audiences will not read in long-form text. The intellectual work of preparing podcast episodes, of developing an argument thoroughly enough to sustain a thirty-minute conversation, often produces more rigorous thinking than the same ideas would receive in other formats. And the resulting audio documentation is indexable, searchable, and accessible to new audiences over the podcast's entire archive lifetime.

Community building around shared professional interests. Podcasts with genuine community dimensions (guest conversations that connect hosts to guests' networks, listener question segments that make the audience visible to each other, live recording events that create in-person touchpoints) can build genuine professional communities around shared intellectual interests. These communities have value that extends beyond the podcast itself: they create referral networks, collaboration opportunities, and professional relationships that generate organizational value independent of the podcast's direct impact.

What Podcasting Is Not Good For

Being honest about what podcasting does not do well is as important as identifying what it does well.

Rapid audience acquisition. Podcast discovery is slow, organic, and heavily dependent on word-of-mouth and platform algorithm placement. Organizations expecting to launch a podcast and rapidly acquire large new audiences are consistently disappointed. The medium builds audiences slowly and loses them slowly: its stickiness is an asset for retention and a challenge for acquisition.

Mass reach on a limited production budget. Reaching mass audiences through podcasting requires either an existing large audience in another channel, a significant paid promotion investment, or the kind of mainstream category appeal that positions a podcast in competition with professional media operations. Organizations that cannot sustain one of these should design their podcast strategy for depth with a specific audience rather than breadth across general listenership.

Replacing other communications channels. Podcasting reaches podcast listeners. This is a larger and more engaged group than it was a decade ago, but it is still a minority of any organization's potential audience, and it skews toward specific demographics: educated, professionally active, comfortable with long-form audio content. Organizations that treat podcasting as a primary communications channel rather than as one element of a broader communications architecture are underserving the audiences that other channels reach more effectively.

Quick wins. Podcasting is among the most long-term of communications investments. The relationship quality that makes it valuable typically takes six months to a year of consistent publication to establish. The authority and community that make it strategically significant take longer still. Organizations looking for communications investments with near-term return should direct resources elsewhere.

Before You Launch

For organizations and individuals who have thought through the above and believe podcasting is the right investment, five questions deserve honest answers before the microphone is purchased.

First: who specifically is the audience, and is the podcast format how they consume information? The specificity of this answer matters. “Professionals interested in public health” is not specific enough. “Public health program directors at mid-sized local health departments who have listening time during exercise and commute and are actively looking for perspectives on AI adoption in their sector” is specific enough to design a podcast for.

Second: who is the host, and does their voice work for podcasting? Not every excellent professional communicator has a podcast voice: the combination of vocal quality, conversational naturalness, and genuine personality that the medium requires. Honest assessment of this before launch is much less costly than discovering it after.

Third: what is the content infrastructure? Where do ideas come from, how are episodes prepared, and what happens when the obvious topics are exhausted in the first twelve episodes? Organizations that cannot answer this concretely should not launch.

Fourth: what does success look like in twelve months, and is that goal realistic given the honest numbers? Defining success in terms of audience depth and relationship quality rather than download counts produces more realistic targets and more sustainable motivation.

Fifth: who is accountable for the production timeline, and what is the plan when that person leaves, gets sick, or gets overwhelmed by competing priorities? The organizations whose podcasts survive transitions are the ones that built podcast production into team workflow rather than relying on individual heroics.

Podcasting done well is among the most powerful communications investments available to organizations and professionals who have something genuinely worth saying. The barriers to doing it well are not technical. They are the barriers of sustained commitment, genuine voice, honest audience assessment, and realistic expectation management that separate the podcasts that build something lasting from the ones that become examples of the abandonment problem the medium has always had.

Where This Fits

A podcast is a trust relationship built one episode at a time, which is why the arguments in Trust Literacy apply to it directly. For the other side of this story, read The Celebrity Podcast Problem.

Schedule a conversation with Links Global: www.linksglobal.org

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