



Listen Up!

How Brands Use Podcasts
to Forge Authentic
Customer Connections

imagination.
PART OF  The Mx Group

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The podcast universe continues to evolve. Never fear. We've rounded up some future-forward predictions—and pro tips to keep you on the right path.

The Great Podcasting Boom

The drama of TV. The smarts of a well-reported magazine article. The immersive audio wizardry of radio. Done right, podcasts are like all the best features of media rolled into one beautifully portable package. It's no wonder listeners are tuning in.

While the term “podcast” didn’t enter the vernacular until 2004, the medium has been around since the earliest days of the internet. However, unlike dial-up modems and AOL Instant Messenger, podcasts have proven staying power. Much of that has to do with a little phenom known as *Serial*. NPR’s ridiculously addictive whodunit came in with a white-hot premiere season that pulled in some 300 million downloads—and snagged the first-ever Peabody Award given to a podcast.

That was just the start. With listenership skyrocketing year over year, an ever-increasing number of brands have added podcast sponsorships and on-platform ads to their paid media strategies. In the U.S. market alone, podcast ad revenue is expected to hit \$4.2 billion by 2024, per a 2021 report by the Interactive Advertising Bureau and PwC.

But some of the most forward-thinking brands—from GE to Gucci—are thinking big. Rather than simply incorporating podcasts into their paid media efforts, they’re using them as a form of owned media and building their very own branded podcasts.

So what do you need to know? Let’s dive in.

Podcast Power

Podcast audiences are spiking:

73%

of Americans over the age of 12 have **listened to online audio** in the last month.

Source: Edison Research, 2022

By the end of 2025, there are expected to be

144 million monthly podcast listeners

in the U.S. alone.

Source: eMarketer, 2022

And those listeners are frequently part of the prime audiences that marketers want to reach:

43%

of B2B and B2C decision-makers in the U.S. reported getting their **thought leadership content from podcasts**—sharing the top slot with e-newsletters and webinars.

Source: Sapio Research, 2022

66%

of U.S. podcast listeners have a **college degree** and an average annual **household income of \$75,000** or more.

Source: Buzzsprout, 2022





1 Building Connections and Cred

The Short Version

The reality:

Audiences are hungry for information rooted in genuine expertise.

The problem:

A lot of thought leadership isn't that great—and even the people cranking it out know it. Only 33% of thought leadership producers believe that the overall quality of their content is very good or excellent. And that number drops to 29% among execs, according to a 2022 [report](#) by Edelman and LinkedIn.

The fix:

Brands should focus on quality over quantity, devoting their resources to producing content that delivers a high impact. And podcasts can be a super-effective way to accomplish this. But you better know your raison d'être.

So, You Wanna Be a Thought Leader?

It's an ugly little truth: There's a whole lot of wannabe thought leadership content floating around online. We've all fallen prey to gated whitepapers that turn out to be glorified sales pitches or articles that promise a fresh take but are really just a rehash of the same old, same old.

Good thought leadership content provides value by taking a deep dive into the challenges audiences face. But truly great thought leadership uses interviews, data and new thinking to provide and provoke solutions—setting your brand apart from the pack.

And while there's no doubt that tried-and-true vehicles like whitepapers, videos, content hubs and magazines will continue to be part of a robust thought leadership plan, many brands are adding podcasts to the mix.

Why? Well, for starters, they're a creative and engaging way for companies to:

» Provide content that addresses actual audience needs

Everyone's got their own pain points. With a little research, brands can create podcasts that answer the most pressing (and searched) questions—building their rep as a thought leader in the process. On Project Management Institute's *Projectified* podcast, for example, project leaders talk about how they're navigating key issues.



The result? Listeners walk away with useful tips, and the Project Management Institute is seen as a go-to resource.

» Meet the audience where they are

Watching Netflix or YouTube requires plunking down in front of your TV, computer or smartphone, eyes glued to the screen. Not so with audio. It's a completely portable experience that users can engage with in their car, on a run or at home while doing the dishes. And the best part? The episodic nature of podcasts leaves listeners expecting—and wanting—more, creating a loyal subscriber base.

Podcasts are a powerful way to ...

- Drive brand awareness
- Build a stronger tie to your customers
- Highlight your values
- Inform your audience
- Share your expertise

The payoff?

Enhanced credibility and connection

» Lead with in-house expertise

Every organization holds a trove of insider knowledge and homegrown brainpower. Podcasts are a creative way to unlock that expertise and transform it into engaging content with a distinct point of view. The Society for Human Resource Management's Tony Lee, for example, hosts *All Things Work*, an “audio adventure” that includes interviews with thought leaders and tastemakers discussing everything from virtual reality to compensation strategy.

» Demonstrate your beliefs

Shoppers are looking at more than just price these days: 82% say they prefer a brand's values to align with their own—and three-quarters report having parted ways with a brand in the past over a values mismatch, per a 2022 Google Cloud survey. Podcasts let marketers communicate their ethos in an organic, authentic way. One example: the Ben & Jerry's series *Into the Mix*. In line with the company's decades-long history of social activism, the podcast “celebrates the intersection of activism, art and culture,” says Chris Miller, Ben & Jerry's global head of activism strategy.

» Humanize their brand

The power of audio lies in its personal nature. It's inherently human, which in turn helps brands build a connection with listeners. Case in point: *Around the Barrel with Jack Daniel's*. Whether it's covering



the whiskey maker's origins or its place in pop culture, the series highlights the company's history in a deeply personal format that feels true to the brand.

Connecting Across Verticals

What makes podcasts particularly powerful is their versatility. They can be used to reach virtually any demographic across a range of verticals and industries—whether it's a Gen Zer in Santiago picking up career tips from an association's podcast or a baby boomer in San Francisco tuning in for retirement advice from a financial services firm.

B2B

Customers look to B2B brands for more than just products or services. They also want to learn from their expertise. Smart companies saw their opening and have used thought leadership content to deliver on this desire. And while most rely on articles, whitepapers and the occasional webinar, forward-thinking brands are looking to podcasts as a powerful platform to provide genuine value and share deep knowledge in the subject areas that matter most to their audiences.

Associations and Nonprofits

Associations and nonprofit organizations have a long-established rep for creating story-driven content. And podcasts let them continue that tradition, allowing for rich, immersive listening experiences. Philanthropic groups can use them to share evocative human-focused stories, while professional associations can create content centered around learning and development.

Consumer

Podcasts offer an incredibly effective way to build brand awareness and provide value to current and potential customers. The key word here is value: Compared with B2B audiences, consumers are far more sensitive to overt marketing, so brand leaders must identify the right theme, message and positioning.

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a light-colored trench coat, is shown in profile. He is wearing large, white over-ear headphones and holding a smartphone in his left hand. He is looking down at the phone. The background is a blurred city street with buildings and lights. A large, semi-transparent white circle is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Breaking Through the Noise

The Short Version

The reality:

Podcasts are insanely popular right now, officially part of the cultural zeitgeist: Nearly three-quarters of Americans over 12 reported listening to online audio in the last month, according to a 2022 [report](#) by Edison Research.

The problem:

Would-be podcasters face immense competition—and not just from other brands. Yet far too many aspiring podcasters simply record a meandering monologue, an hour-long conversation or a glorified ad for their brand, then upload the audio file and wonder why they're not seeing results.

The fix:

To recruit—and retain—listeners, brands must create something actually worth listening to. That requires an audience-first approach, remaining laser-focused on deepening relationships rather than pushing products. This cannot be a 20-minute plug for your company.

It's Getting Crowded in Here

There are roughly 4 million podcasts, per Buzzsprout—and that number is continually growing. The one upside: In a sea of self-anointed gurus doling out sometimes-questionable advice, brands that can offer trustworthy insights will find a hungry audience.

Deep down, everyone wants to feel understood, and the most effective way for companies to address that fundamental need is by creating content that's tailored to their customers' goals, habits and desires. Yet while marketers have long waxed poetic about the power of an audience-first approach (and with good reason), far too many remain hyperfixated on their own business goals. To truly serve their audience, brands must flip their focus and build a podcast that's educational and interesting—and possibly even a little provocative.

And though podcasts are growing at an exponential rate, there's still room for more. Even niche topics like wealth management or open-source software can be turned into an exciting journey with the right ingredients.

When many people hear the word podcast, they think of the standard interview format, with a single host interviewing one or two guests. But there's plenty of new turf to explore.

If your goal is to produce multiple seasons of a podcast, you'll want to

make sure that the theme of your series is focused, yet flexible. Pigeonholing it into something that's too specific can make it hard to continue identifying stories that are both interesting and topically relevant.

Like any piece of content, a well-produced podcast starts with a solid strategy. What does it take? Here are our must-haves:

» **Specificity.** Clearly define what your series is about and who you're targeting. Rather than casting a wide net, find your niche and focus on providing insights to a well-defined audience.

» **Innovation.** In a crowded landscape, those podcasts that subvert the standard formula are more likely to stand out. For brands, this means experimenting with new formats.

» **Consistency.** Find a cadence that works for you—and stick to it. Don't commit to a schedule you can't keep, but don't space out episodes so much that subscribers lose interest. If you can't commit to a full season, consider doing a miniseries.

» **Value.** Think about what your audience wants and needs and how you can deliver on that. This could be through powerful storytelling or by inviting thought leaders to be part of the conversation.

Interview

A host poses questions and prompts discussion with subject matter experts. Perfect for exploring niche topics.

Roundtable

Similar to an interview, a host interviews multiple guests simultaneously. Good for sparking lively discussion—and sometimes debate—among experts.



Narrative

A host weaves a story over multiple episodes, combining monologues and interviews.

Documentary

Incorporates monologues, narratives and interviews to create a multilayered exploration of a topic.

A high-angle, top-down photograph of a person sitting at a wooden desk, recording a podcast. A professional blue and silver condenser microphone is mounted on a black shock mount and positioned directly in front of the person. The person's hands are visible on the desk, one near a white computer keyboard. The person is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and a black wristband. The background is slightly blurred, showing the desk surface and some cables. A large, semi-transparent grey circle is overlaid on the left side of the image, partially obscuring the person's arm and the desk. The text "Ready? Set. Podcast!" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the bottom of the image, overlapping the grey circle and the person's shirt.

Ready? Set. Podcast!

The Short Version

The reality:

Of the millions of podcasts that have been pushed out into the world, just 18% are still active as of January 2023. Think *Hunger Games*: No podcast can survive without killer content—backed by quality production.

The problem:

From crafting storylines and booking guests to conducting interviews and editing them into a cohesive, impactful story, podcasts require a whole lot of work. And that work doesn't stop once a series has launched.

The fix:

Establish processes for planning, production and promotion. Not only will this help streamline the work required for each episode, but it will help you better identify the resources and expertise needed.

Bringing the Vision to Life

It's not just what you're saying on your podcast, but how it sounds. Listeners have high expectations—and they're going to hold brand podcasts to the same standards as the ones produced by professional media folks. Nobody has patience for low-quality audio or wandering conversations with no payoff.

You're going to need to think carefully about production, from choosing the right equipment and creating schedules to identifying and booking guests and then editing your recordings into something that people want to listen to.

Even the most free-flowing, conversational podcasts call for a significant level of research, scriptwriting and thoughtful

editing. Given the work and dedication required, it's easy to see why podfade is a thing. So to avoid fading into podcast oblivion, you need a plan, starting with how you're going to format your podcast. Your choices include:

» **Series:** Episodes are released in a regular cadence, each featuring one story or subject.

» **Miniseries:** A limited number of episodes are released in a regular cadence to tell a complete story.

» **Microcasts:** This is short-form audio content, usually between two to 10 minutes, used to convey brief bursts of info.

Then comes the fun part: actually creating your podcast. And you've got a few options:

» **Tackle it in-house:** This will require team members with the chops to handle things like sourcing, scriptwriting, interviewing, audio editing and marketing. You'll also need to make sure those people have enough time to consistently see the podcast through from start to finish.

» **Call in backup:** Teams with the bandwidth to handle upfront production but lacking the in-house expertise to execute highly specialized tasks such as scripting or audio editing should consider adding some outside help.

» **Let the experts handle it:** If it all seems a little overwhelming, you could opt to partner with an agency. (And, yes, this is where we'll just mention that Imagination has plenty of podcasting experience.)

Step by Step

While every podcast production process will vary, these are your essential steps:

1. Nail down your process.

A thorough production plan and schedule will help keep the team on track and ensure episodes regularly hit the airwaves.

2. Start with storylines.

This is where you'll need to channel your inner journalist and define your angle for each episode: What do you hope to cover? Why does this matter to your audience? Who will be featured?

3. Get scripting.

All podcasts, regardless of format, will require some degree of scripting. This might include creating an outline, drafting interview questions, researching or simply identifying the big talking points. It's the best way to make sure you get the content you need.

4. Hit record.

As a general rule, plan on recording more audio than you think you're going to use. We've learned the hard way: It's way





better to have more content to work with than not enough. And make sure you've got the right equipment to capture audio that's clear and free of distracting sounds or frequencies.

5. Edit (aka, "kill your darlings").

Each episode should be cut, refined and polished until it becomes the kind of engaging story no one will tune out. That may mean snipping away parts you've fallen in love with. And you'll likely find that you need to slice and dice portions of your recording to make your episode zip along.

6. Get it out there.

Once you've got your episode in the can, you'll need to publish your files to a hosting platform and then distribute your episode to all the major listening outlets. For brands in particular, it may take some work to build an audience. So just like

any new product, your podcast will need a promotional push, whether it's a full-on ad blitz or a series of audiograms for your social media channels. Likewise, you'll want to think carefully about episode titles, descriptions and keywords to encourage discovery.

7. Measure and refine.

You know the drill: Review the numbers and iterate accordingly. While the analytics available through most podcast hosting and streaming platforms will offer only a limited view into the overall performance of your brand podcast, they can still hold valuable insights. If you have a podcast landing page set up on your website, use your preferred analytics platform to ferret out deeper insights. Figuring out the most and least popular episodes can help determine what your audience really wants—which can help shape the future of your series.

YouTube Turns Up the Volume

Not content to rule over the video sphere, YouTube has officially entered the podcast space with the launch of a dedicated [landing page](#). While podcasters have long used the platform as a means of distribution, the introduction of tools tailored specifically to podcasts could be a gamechanger:

Video may become table stakes for podcasters. What started out as an audio-only model may shift to hybrid. Nearly half of active podcast listeners said they prefer consuming podcasts with video, according to a 2022 Morning Consult [survey](#). Among the top reasons cited were the ability to see facial expressions and reactions from the hosts and guests (51%) and because video helps them to better focus on the podcast (50%).

Yet while audio can be consumed just about anywhere, video content requires a deeper commitment—making some listeners reluctant to watch a full-length interview on YouTube. Instead, consider using the platform to share highlights of your podcasts, enticing them to check out the full episodes.

Analytics may (finally) improve. The dearth of in-depth podcast analytics can make it difficult for marketers to measure the performance of brand podcasts. With YouTube's investment in podcasts will hopefully come more robust analytics, not just via the video platform but also through its parent company, Alphabet.

Making money through podcasts could become easier. Podcasters looking to monetize their content have traditionally relied on sponsorships and listener support. Distribution through YouTube lets them take advantage of the platform's monetization tools, including display, overlay and video ads; channel memberships; and YouTube Shopping.

Now Hear This!

No matter which route you choose to take, the key takeaway for brands is this: Launching a podcast will require creative vision and serious planning, but the potential payoff is massive. Yet much like social media, the podcast space is moving fast. Don't panic. We've got a few futureproofing tips:

1

Go (even) deeper.

The big issue with podcasts right now is that there are so many of them. To avoid getting lost in the sea of options, podcasts are going to have to become even more niche.

2

Don't neglect your own employees.

This one's largely untapped: Try using podcasts as an employee engagement tool. Whether to foster a sense of culture or keep teams abreast of industry trends, employee-focused podcasts can make sense for companies, especially those with a large global footprint or distributed workforce. As with any other podcast, though, it needs to provide value to listeners.

3

Incorporate video thoughtfully.

Don't let video kill the podcast star. But it's worth experimenting with and letting listeners get to know the people behind the mic. (See "YouTube Turns Up the Volume" on page 15 if you still need to be convinced.)

4

Lean into inclusion.

Gen Z in particular demands diversity—and that includes from the podcasts this generation chooses to listen to. As they become more avid audio consumers, expect brand podcasts to adjust accordingly. But let's be clear, this shouldn't be some attempt to placate younger audiences. Adding voices from different genders, ages, ethnicities, abilities, mindsets and backgrounds will make your audio content richer.

Podcast Picks

We hit up our colleagues at The Mx Group for some recommended listening.



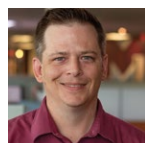
"I'm a big fan of **Command Line Heroes** by Red Hat, an open source software company with a podcast that 'tells the epic true tales of how developers, programmers, hackers, geeks, and open source rebels are revolutionizing the technology landscape.' This sounds kind of inherently boring, and Red Hat could have gone for the standard interview-style podcast, but instead they took the narrative documentary route, blending together narration, music, sound effects and interviews to create something much more engaging."

—Peter Kosmal,
Senior Audio Manager



"**This American Life**. The topics are often super niche but compelling, and the storytelling is second to none. I made my way through the **Staff Recommendations** this summer. There are some real hidden gems. I also like **The Next Big Idea**. Different experts join each week to break down big concepts and ideas, from sleep to big data to the power of fun."

—Laura Marzec,
Content Director



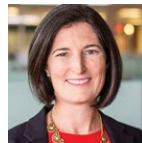
"**Lex Fridman Podcast**. His content is in my interest zone: 'conversations about the nature of intelligence, consciousness, love and power.' His interviewing skills are great, and the people he has on are leaders in their respective fields. And to boot, he doesn't dumb down the content like others."

—Mark Alicz, Associate Director, Data & Insights



"**Smartless**: light, fun, for walking the dog/car rides. **Freakonomics Radio**: new ways of looking at the world and insights into people and behavior. **Planet Money**: financial and economic topics. Most related to my job: **The Drum Network Podcast**, various topics on industry trends."

—Brennen Roberts,
VP of Marketing & Growth



"My fave is The **NPR Politics Podcast**. It helps me keep up with what's happening on the political front, while also being entertaining and relatable and enjoyable to listen to—not a chore, but something I look forward to."

—Kate Fishburne,
VP of Organizational
Development



"**The Tattered Mat**: Yoga and meditation, but interesting interviews and stories about how and why yoga and meditation has helped people find balance, relieve stress, and improve their personal and business lives."

—James Meyers,
SVP & Managing Director,
Content Marketing &
Imagination



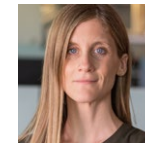
"**Shift+F1**. Formula One is my favorite sport. Shift+F1 is hosted by three guys who used to be video game journalists, so it has a unique bent to it."

—Peter Baughman,
Senior Director of Media



"My go-to is always **Freakonomics Radio**. Interesting—and surprising—subjects and conclusions. A charming host. A multilayered cold open that catches your attention and works to keep your attention by hinting at what's to come. All that, and a catchy theme to boot."

—Matthew Wright,
Senior Content Director



"**Conan O'Brien Needs a Friend** and **Smartless** ... these two make me laugh, and if I'm listening to a podcast, it's usually a good time for me to feel positive. I also like **The Daily** by The New York Times and NPR's **Life Kit** because it reminds me that not everything has to be complicated. Adam Grant's **Re:Thinking** is good when I have enough brain energy to appreciate him. He's very smart and thoughtful."

—Emily Kleist,
VP, Executive Creative
Director

Contact

James Meyers

SVP & Managing Director,
Content Marketing & Imagination

jmeyers@themxgroup.com

630.781.3400

Brennen Roberts

VP of Marketing & Growth

broberts@themxgroup.com

331.265.3151

About The Mx Group

The Mx Group is the second-largest independent, integrated B2B marketing agency in the U.S., with a mission to impact the marketplace for companies that impact the world. For over 30 years, we've created meaningful end-to-end buying experiences for B2B brands. Our clients are leaders and innovators in automotive, financial services, food, healthcare, oil and gas, industrial, packaging, trade associations, technology and SaaS who rely on our expertise to influence and grow their businesses. Our relationships with our clients and people are why B2B Marketing recognized us as Agency of the Year. Our headquarters are in Chicago, but our reach is global. Whether a client is an established or startup B2B brand, we have the people and perspective to be a strong partner that makes a difference.

About Imagination

Since 1994, Imagination has been a leading content marketing agency for brands and organizations that want to build awareness, engagement and thought leadership with their target audiences. Over the last 28 years, Imagination has used its deep journalism experience and capabilities to help financial services, B2B and association clients achieve their business and marketing goals. In addition to winning countless awards for excellence for content strategy, editorial journalism, design and innovative content distribution, the agency has been named Content Agency of the Year by The Content Marketing Institute as well as being recognized as One of the Top Ten Most Creative Content Agencies in the World. In October 2022, Imagination joined with The Mx Group to become a powerhouse agency employing over 150 talented marketing experts.



Want more?

How's this for meta? We created a podcast miniseries about podcasts.

Episode 1

The History of Podcasts

Episode 2

How to Produce a Podcast

Episode 3

The Future of Podcasting

imagination.
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