

PODCASTING?

New recording studio banks on hottest media wave



By David Garbe
STAFF WRITER

It's called "podcasting," and it's barely six months old. That's pretty young, even amid the accelerated lifecycles of the high-tech industry. But Web gurus around the globe are convinced the infant technology is already on the verge of growing into the next big thing.

What is it? Kris Smith, a self-proclaimed nerd from Naperville who's on the leading edge of the podcasting phenomenon, would be happy to explain.

Think TiVo for radio, he says. Or, for the phonically inclined, broadcasting for iPods. Fundamentally, "podcasting" is a system that lets consumers choose what they like from a limitless number

FYI

■ To subscribe to any of Smith's shows, visit www.croncast.com or www.ipodder.com.

■ For information on his new commercial studio, visit paleogroove.com or call (630) 615-0238.

■ To browse the variety of all available podcasts on the web, visit www.podcastalley.com.

of pre-recorded radio-type shows and set their computer to automatically download the latest edition of the show.

Listeners can then play back the digital-quality shows from their preferred MP3 player when it's convenient for them.

Although it sounds a lot like radio, he says, podcasting represents a whole new way of thinking about audio entertainment.

Right about at that point in the explanation, Smith

starts to get goose bumps.

"You're getting this unique experience you don't get in traditional radio," he said, because podcasting puts listeners in the program director's chair like never before.

You want half an hour of NPR news followed by Bolivian panpipe music and then a tutorial on snowmobile repair?

Click your mouse and it's yours, to take with you on your iPod for the afternoon commute. And, for now, it's free of charge and free of advertising.

The depth of the Internet guarantees limitless selection, and of course FCC rules need not apply.

Perhaps best of all, just as the Web made it possible for anyone to become a publisher, podcasting is making it possible for anyone to become a broadcaster.

Such endless possibilities might be a bit into the future. At the moment, the podcasting world is limited to a few hundred daily or regular shows run mostly by technophiles like Smith.

A new hobby

That's fine with him. He's excited to be in on the ground floor of what he expects will be a transformative trend.

Right now he hosts two regular shows, including one

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Kris and Betsy Smith, who host a popular "podcast," are betting their hobby will blossom into a profitable business as iPods and similar devices proliferate.

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five-day-per-week podcast that features him and his wife, Betsy, talking about their experiences as a young couple with young children.

That show, called CronCast, is consistently in the top 25 most-listened-to podcasts on the Web.

That might be due to the fact that both he and Betsy sound like seasoned radio pros who have been chatting on air for years — although they only developed this new hobby within the last few months.

Kris has a deep, resonating voice; Betsy's is light and crisp. And both are able to speak fluidly and candidly, free of worrying about adhering to rules or attracting mass appeal.

"Listeners experience it on a very personal level," Kris said. "They can relate to our stories."

In a recent episode, Betsy recounted a road trip to Alaska in an Airstream motor home with her eccentric father. The couple might have known each other for a decade, but they're not out of things to learn about each other.

"You went in 1990?" Kris interjects, launching a fast-paced conversation. "You went that soon before I met you?"

"Well, yeah," Betsy replied. "Kris, I met you when I was 17. What the hell! I didn't have that much life before I met you. I only learned to walk, like, a few years before I met you."

"We had an arranged marriage," Kris notes for the audience.

"Yes, I was fresh from the Yukon, that's why you looked good."

"Your dad would have arranged a marriage with me if he had met my mom. He loves my mom."

"And that would have been another reason not to have married you."

A new business

Producing that show, Kris said, provides endless fun for him and Betsy, not to mention a listener-suggested name for their soon-to-be-born daughter: Margaret Rose Smith.

But his CronCast show has also helped Kris understand a few tricks of producing successful podcasts, a skill he hopes will someday provide him with a full-time job.

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'Podcaster' Betsy Smith,
Ribbing her husband during one of their shows

A multimedia designer by day, Kris is launching a side business: PaleGroove Studios, the first recording studio in the nation that will produce nothing but podcasts.

"We are already working with lawyers, rock bands, industry associations and others to develop custom podcast shows for their own target audiences," Smith said.

Smith's Naperville-based company has also partnered with United Technique Recording Studio in Chicago, allowing him to work with clients in the city as well as those locally.

He charges \$75 per podcast show, most of which run half an hour. Smith provides the recording equipment, advice on style, remixing and distribution management.

He hopes as the technology seeps into the public consciousness, more and more people with looking to get a message out — everyone from politicians and companies to artists and hobbyists — will be looking for a consultant like him to show them the ropes.

And he expects that will happen sooner rather than later.

For starters, more than 11 million iPods and similar devices have already been sold and sales continue to grow sharply. Meanwhile, the podcasting technology is available for free to anyone with a computer.

Given that kind of market, major corporations, like the BBC and General Motors, are already trying to stake out their place on the uncharted airways of the web.

"It's a dream for advertisers," Smith said. "They get highly targeted ads, and cheaper than mainstream media."