Academic BRASS

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Podcast Review: *The Distance*

Podcasts are an exciting, underutilised medium. Nearly 50% of millennials (18 to 34 years old) listen to podcasts on their smartphones at least once a month (Lella, Lipsman, and Martin 50). National Public Radio saw its monthly podcast downloads increase by 40% in the past two years, even as its weekly radio audience declined (Vogt). Compared to terrestrial and satellite radio, podcasts are more convenient and niche-focused (Sorgatz).

In February 2015, Edison Research released the following report on Americans 12 years and older who listen to podcasts (Matejko):

- 46 million listen to at least one podcast per month
- 27 million listen to at least one podcast per week
- Weekly podcast listeners listen to an average of six podcasts each week

Podcasts have low production costs and are technically easy to implement. Students like that they are portable, allow them to learn at their own pace, and support both auditory and visual (with transcripts) learning styles.

Yet one recent study found that only 27% of libraries produce podcasts (De Sarkar 200), and in North America, many more public libraries than academic libraries are behind these ventures (De Sarkar 207). Another study found that only about 33% of American research libraries have podcasting initiatives (Bierman and Valentino 349).

If you haven't added podcasts to your business resource arsenal, it may be time to.

Background

Podcasts are audio files made available to download or listen to online. Podcast content runs the gamut from business, to comedy, to traditional talk radio, to recorded university lectures and more. Anyone can create a podcast, and revenue comes from advertisements, listener donations, and other sources.

This article will overview a business podcast called *The Distance*, including its strengths and weaknesses. *The Distance* can be accessed at thedistance.com. It is produced by a dedicated team funded by Basecamp, an online project management tool.

Why Listen to *The Distance*?

The Distance interviews the owners of businesses that have lasted for at least 25 years. The content and production quality is high, and for students of entrepreneurship, *The Distance* is a useful introduction to business podcasts for several reasons.

Firstly, the podcast focuses on "local businesses" (that is, small, family-run businesses). This makes the stories relatable to students hoping to start their own business. Large, flashy startup "unicorns" or Fortune 500 companies make for exciting stories, but their success may seem unattainable to the beginner—by comparison, the quiet inspiration of businesses that have stood the test of time makes it clear you don't need to be a "rockstar" to be successful in business.

Secondly, the podcast provides context for business fundamentals that students will recognize from their textbooks. To study unique selling propositions or the importance of adapting to changing market trends is one thing. Hearing these ideas in the context of a local laundromat or Christmas tree farm is another.

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Thirdly, the audio format of The Distance is ideal for students who do not learn optimally via reading. Our business libraries may carry many excellent books on entrepreneurship, but a podcast like *The Distance* reaches out to "new" audiences because of its presentation, which is accessible to students who struggle with text or simply have very little time for extra reading.

Overview of *The Distance*

Each episode starts with the host giving a brief, high-level overview of the business, followed by a quote from the owner about either the business' product or its history. After taking a moment to introduce the podcast and its sponsor, the host typically leads into the interview with the history and physical location of the business.

As much information as possible is given directly by the business owner, with the host stepping in to provide background, build-up, or a bridge between quotes. While the business owners do most of the talking, the host builds suspense and creates an overarching narrative for each episode with bridging statements between segments, context, and commentary.

Strengths and Weaknesses of *The Distance*

The strengths of *The Distance* are many. Most business podcasts focus on start-up founders, but *The Distance* only tells stories about long-running, proven businesses. Its listeners benefit from the interviewees' decades of expertise.

Another key way *The Distance* sets itself apart is the diversity of the businesses, most of whom a listener would never have heard of otherwise (like an Iowa farmer or a Chicago florist). By working with smaller-scale business owners, *The Distance* guarantees fresh content that listeners will not have already seen in business journals.

The Distance's weaknesses are a slightly formulaic format, the brevity of the episodes, and a lack of actionable lessons for entrepreneurs (perhaps due to an overemphasis on the narrative format). The interviews also barely touch on the business' struggles and/or failures, which are fruitful learning opportunities.

Next Steps

At the Business Library of Nanyang Technological University, we showcase 20 management gurus that were picked by students and faculty members. Each guru has a two-minute long audio introduction narrated by a student.

The Distance has inspired me to start a similar project at my library, which will focus on local business owners in Singapore. I hope it does the same for other business librarians. Showcase your town, city, region, or country's businesses that have endured long-term, and I believe your students will benefit.

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