

Podcasting is a fun and creative way to grow your business. But if you're not careful, it can be time-consuming, stressful and expensive. Here are ten practical ideas to make your business podcasts work better.



TEN THINGS THEY DON'T TELL YOU ABOUT MAKING A PODCAST



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talknormal.co.uk



✂ Ten things they don't tell you

01

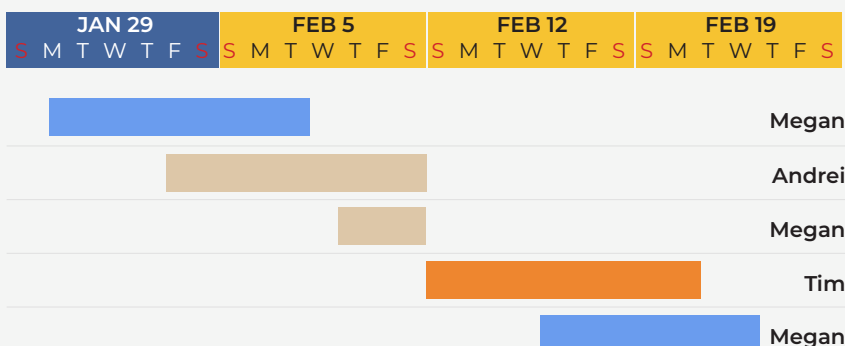
BEWARE OF THE DIFFICULT THIRD EPISODE

Musicians know that the third album is difficult: the first album is the one that they always wanted to make. The second album uses up the rest of their ideas and pleases their fans. What do they do next?¹

The same is often true of a podcast: when you take the plunge, the first recording is the idea (or the guest) that inspired you. The second one uses up your other good idea. And now your third episode is due next week, and you realise that creating regular episodes to a deadline is harder than you thought.

Creating a series of podcasts means that you will constantly be booking, scheduling, writing, and editing several episodes at the same time. Meanwhile, guests cancel, recordings fail, or you need to reorganise the schedule for a big story. If your podcast is your side hustle, or an additional task when you have a full-time job, generating enough ideas and meeting deadlines can start to keep you awake at night. Eventually, everything is done at the last minute, and you exist in a state of panic.

To avoid the difficult third-, fourth-, and fifth-episode syndrome – and sleep soundly – you need to plan the workflow, not the episode. That means committing to a release schedule, and deciding your topics, guests, and storylines well in advance, before you are swamped with production tasks. Work backwards from your release dates and allocate time for approval, editing, recording, research, and contingencies. There may be special dates to hit or avoid: product launches, anniversaries, and holidays will all limit the available recording windows. It takes careful planning to recruit the best guests, to match the best topics, at the right time.



Perhaps the most important admin skill when managing your podcast isn't the ability to set up an audio interface or write a killer intro, but instead is the knowledge of how to read a Gantt chart (like the one on the left).

If this sounds intimidating, remember that there are people who can help you. At Talk Normal, we emphasise series planning rather than episode planning. We know our clients often find this overwhelming – which is why we manage the planning and workflow for most of them.

¹ – For data scientists among you, <https://is.gd/3rdalbum> investigates the drop-off in quality of the third album.

✂ Ten things they don't tell you

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MOST POTENTIAL LISTENERS DON'T KNOW YOU EXIST

First the good news: if you are a listener and you are looking for a podcast, there are more than 48 million episodes already published.² If no one ever recorded another episode and you decided to do nothing except listen to what's already available, it would take you every waking minute until your 4,000th birthday.

But if you are a podcaster and you want to build an audience, this isn't so great. It's hard to find an unusual theme that will make your podcast jump to the top of a search for "podcasts about ...". That's why research from Discover Pods found that four out of five listeners found new podcasts through cross-promotion, three-quarters through recommendations, and 56% through social media.

This means that publishing the podcast is just the beginning of the task of building an audience. There's nothing more discouraging than recording and editing a great episode, but no one listens because they don't know it exists. You need a strategy to build your audience.

You need the right promotional tools to find and excite that audience, and the patience to let that process work. Creating compelling Reels on Instagram, crafting engaging audio clips on Twitter, or finding partners for cross-promotion is time-consuming. But for your podcast to succeed, it's not optional.



That's why at Talk Normal we make social media content for many of our clients as a part of the contract: for example, audio clips, short videos for Twitter or LinkedIn (example, left), and teasers. We also provide a range of complementary content: transcriptions, blogs, or powerful images.

Finally, we also make sure that your most powerful advocates – your guests – have early access to this so they can publicise their interview too using words and images that we provide.

This requires organisation and creativity. But when making a podcast, this is as important as anything you do in front of a microphone.

✎ Ten things they don't tell you

03

THE OPTIMAL EPISODE LENGTH IS SHORTER THAN YOU THINK

A few talented performers and broadcasters can speak and interview in such a compelling and engaging way that they never seem outstay their welcome. We love our favourite talk radio shows for precisely this reason, and we can listen to them for hours at a time. But this is not true for every presenter, guest and podcast topic. When we are recording, it's easy to go on for too long.

The "Goldilocks" duration for an episode is the one that is neither so short that your audience want more depth and detail, nor so long that they get bored. You should always have an optimal duration for the episode in your mind before you start, and your guests should know what that is too, so you can shape the conversation to fill that time.

✎ At this point, you're thinking: "What is the correct length?"

There is no easy answer to this question. All you can do is watch your analytics closely (see the next section) and use what you know about your audience. At the most basic level, think about what is competing for their attention. For example, we have spoken to clients who described their podcast to us as "something to listen to while commuting," although the episodes they were planning were far longer than a journey to work.

When we work with clients, we always discuss this before we start planning any content, because episode length influences the choice of topic, the treatment, the number of guests, and even the number of episodes you want to produce – in short, everything else.

✎ Here are some ways to think creatively about that Goldilocks length:

- **How often will I publish?** If you are publishing several times a week, with updates (for example on a news topic or cryptocurrencies), you want to avoid repeating yourself, and you are looking for an audience that will listen on a train or at breakfast. Short, punchy episodes of 10 minutes each will leave them wanting more.
- **How deep do I go?** An analytical investigation with original research needs time for you to explain – you are expecting a niche audience who will make a priority. In that case, high-quality hour-long episodes would be the sort of thing your audience longs for.
- **Am I talking about too many things?** You have two hours of conversation with an interesting guest. But is it a single conversation, or two, or three? Your audience might flag after 45 minutes (or get off the gym running machine and hit the shower) and miss your hilarious final segment. So, cutting your interview into two or three shorter episodes might make sense, especially if each episode then covers one subject.

This is always a matter of judgement, but one solution might be to check what do the most successful podcasts in your market choose. Or, of course, ask us to do it for you.

✂ Ten things they don't tell you

04

ASK "HOW MUCH?", NOT "HOW MANY?"

A survey on how listeners choose a podcast by The Podcast Host found that listeners are twice as likely to say no to an episode because they thought it would be too long, than to reject an episode because it might be too short.

Buzzsprout reports that one in six of the podcasts it hosts is longer than an hour. We don't want to cramp your style, but you'd better have some compelling conversation if you deliver regular episodes of this length.

The first, and only, number that many of us look for when we publish is the number of listens. We spend a long time worrying about why one of our episodes has been more popular on this metric than others, and a lot of effort trying to repeat the magic.

Tracking your analytic data is good, and should always inform our discussions of what is working. But the number of listens is, at best, the second-most-important indicator on your dashboard. If we listen back to an episode to discover why it inspired more listeners to click play, we're making an error of logic.

- **Why is the number of listens misleading?** Because, at the moment the listeners press play, they have no detailed idea what will be in the episode. They might have been responding to the guest's name, a newsworthy topic, or were following a link from another podcaster or blogger. You might have got your social media marketing or your description just right. All good to know. Any good podcast agency should be able to help optimise these things.
- **Track and prioritise engagement as well.** By far the most important way to build a podcast audience is by inspiring and engaging listeners. You know when you have done this, because more of them will listen to the end. Our statistics show it is much more likely that a listener who completes an episode will be a subscriber, compared to one who dips in for five minutes and then finds something else to do. This is hardly surprising.
- **How much attention do your listeners give you?** Less than you might expect. The box on the left shows the average podcast consumption for a series of podcast episodes at the end of 2022, taken from Apple's excellent podcast analytics website.³

This is a fairly typical level of engagement. Figures of around 75% or more are acceptable, and if average consumption is 85% or above (the blue episodes), you're doing great. Note that one episode in this list is down at 51%, another at 59% (marked in yellow). This is important information, and it's someone's job to listen back, and to work out what went wrong. It might have been the length, as above. But it also might have been the choice of topic, the quality of the recording, the guest, or the structure.

The technical skill of the host, the quality of the guests, and the quality of the recording all matter. All podcast providers work to maximise these dimensions.

At Talk Normal we go deeper, because we also use our experience as journalists, authors, broadcasters, and filmmakers. Great podcasts pull you in to their stories, and using the techniques that storytellers have perfected since well before podcasts were invented will help you to keep (and build) your audience. Try to work with experienced storytellers: they can often suggest new ways to organise the information, to hold back surprises, or to paint a picture that will maximise your audience's engagement.

AVERAGE PODCAST CONSUMPTION (%)
69
85
74
80
59
79
51
91
72

³ - If you have a podcast, find Apple PodCast Analytics here: <https://podcastsconnect.apple.com/>

Ten things they don't tell you

05

YOU CAN BE TOO AUTHENTIC

It's tempting to hit record, talk, talk some more, save, and then publish straight away. That's the fun of podcasting for many creators: the immediacy, the chance to publish completely unfiltered conversation.



Publishing that unfiltered conversation means you pass on all your habits of speech too, that sort of, you know, ah, really, um, test the audience's patience.

Also, most of us over-talk, slowing the pace and padding the length. In interviews, this is a problem for hosts as well as guests. (We would argue that it's particularly a problem for the type of hosts who can't resist competing with the invited talent).



An experiment: listen to a published podcast (one of your own or someone else's). Write down the questions exactly as they were asked, then delete phrases and words that weren't necessary. What do you have afterwards? Usually, better questions.

The solution for both these problems is the same: edit. Digital editing makes it possible to cut out the fat and remove mistakes without destroying the flow and energy. When recordings were made on tape, "cutting" literally meant hours of patient work with a razor blade to trim the episode. Today, those cuts can be done in a matter of minutes using free or inexpensive software tools, many of which will automate simple tasks. A baggy 45-minute ramble becomes a tight 30 minutes that pleases your guests just as much as your audience.

Like many digital tools, editing software takes 15 minutes to learn, but years to master. Your time has a value, so why not use the skills of an expert who, in a few hours, can transform your recording in a way that might take you days (if you could do it at all). At Talk Normal our digital editors work to improve everything we publish.



Our editing process has two stages.

We create pace and fluency by cutting obvious flubs and pauses. Then we listen again, to consider questions like:

- **Are there repetitions?**
- **Are some answers too long?**
- **Do the guests talk over each other?**

A few careful snips will emphasise the freshness and creativity of your natural conversation by emphasising what's good. Your audience will thank you if you make these editing steps a part of your podcast workflow (or hire experts to do it for you).

✂ Ten things they don't tell you

06

GOOD EQUIPMENT IS CHEAPER THAN YOU THINK



You can make a podcast by sitting next to a laptop and pressing record. On the left is the image of just such a recording. The bottom panel shows the frequency response of the laptop's microphone. The good news is that it captures a wide range of frequencies, especially the high frequencies that many laptop microphones miss. The bad news is that it is picking up all sorts of extra noise too. In the gap between words in this recording there is a thin bright yellow line along the bottom. This is a background hum for example air conditioning. The whole recording looks cloudy and indistinct, because the sound is bouncing off flat surfaces and the mic is picking up this reverberation.

Some reverb and background noise is ok for day-to-day Zoom calls but, in a podcast, it will sound like you are doing the interview while sitting in an empty swimming pool. It literally gives your audience a headache.

Poor sound quality is, again literally, a turn-off for more than half of podcast listeners.⁴

If you are recording your own podcasts (or recording with remote guests), then the most important investment you can make is an external microphone. There are models you can use at many price points, but if you spend \$100, £100, or €100, you can now find podcast mics with a good frequency response. They are designed to eliminate reverb and they don't pick up room noise.

If that's too much to spend, the wired headphones that came with your mobile phone often have remarkably good microphones that are optimised to reject ambient noise, and which naturally sit close to your mouth. Additional cost: zero. Some inexpensive headsets designed for call centres might also be an upgrade.

Beware though: not every external microphone is an improvement. Some wireless gaming headsets or earbuds for example will compress the signal by cutting out high frequencies. Also, where you stand or sit while you are speaking really matters. A room or an office with hard, flat surfaces increases reverb. Smaller rooms with soft furnishings, books or uneven surfaces can improve sound. If you're at home, your bedroom is usually better than your kitchen.

Choosing and setting up recording equipment can be intimidating – but hiring a recording studio can be expensive and inconvenient. At Talk Normal we specialise in how to get the best results when time, location and money really matter: we advise our clients who are buying on a budget, or we choose and set up equipment for them. We have years of experience in creating pop-up studios in offices, meeting rooms – even a client's bedroom closet (ask us why!). We can send DIY kits to your guests, meaning they can set up their home podcast studio for less than the cost of a round of drinks.

⁴ - ThePodcastHost.com

 Ten things they don't tell you

07

A SCRIPT IS NOT A STRAITJACKET

Newsreaders have an autocue. Talk show hosts use cue cards. But often podcasters use only the contents of their own memories to prompt them. When we listen back the results, it often makes us think: why on earth did they do that?

Yes, podcasts are informal and are best when they are unpredictable. Yes, you're often featuring experts in their subject, so you expect them to know what they are talking about. But experienced broadcasters know that speaking and thinking at the same time is the most difficult part of the job. Working without any help from notes is only making a difficult job harder.

One solution is to tightly script the podcast. This is sometimes used for business podcasts where the company is worried about saying the wrong things about regulation, compliance, or a legal process, or if the speakers are nervous. But this can be stilted and unnatural. If the host and the guests read out a set of pre-approved questions and answers with fake surprise or unconvincing "I'm glad you asked me that" interjections, it's hard to make it to the end.

If you do this, you will always sound like robots. Only very good actors can fake authenticity convincingly, and even an Oscar-winner might struggle for many podcast topics.

This may be why so many presenters and guests go completely the other way and use no scripting at all. The risk is that when you throw out the script you throw out the structure with it: suddenly there is no beginning, middle, and end, and a nervous guest will blurt out everything at once in the first five minutes.



When we work with clients, we help create a middle way – one that is tailored for the hosts, guests, and format of each podcast. Complex topics in risky markets often benefit from a collaborative planning process and a shared briefing document. This helps to capture what guests feel is important or clarify answers with legal and regulatory implications. It also means that inexperienced guests feel comfortable holding information back, because they know we will get to it later.

It's still possible to be informal in the recording. In fact, in our experience, it's easier because you're not trying to talk and think at the same time, all the time.

Even if there's no time for a prep call with your guests, we recommend you create and share a basic structure that also contains helpful facts, names, job titles, dates, and statistics to drop into the conversation. The same is true for a video podcast. No one cares if you have a piece of paper in front of you. It's not cheating. What matters is that you're never befuddled or lost for words.

✂ Ten things they don't tell you

08

BIG AUDIENCES AREN'T ALWAYS THE BEST AUDIENCES

If you have built a big audience already, congratulations, you're one of the lucky few. How many listeners do you think it takes for a podcast to be more popular than average?

If you're thinking a few thousand, or even a few hundred, think again. Buzzsprout's statistics shows that during 2020, for a show to be more popular than average, in its first week it would get ... 27 listens.

To be in the top 10%, the first week audience would be is 229, and if you are the 1%, it's just a little more than 3,000 listens in the first seven days.

But it can be tough to even get 27 listeners for your new podcast. If you have a message that you want the whole world to hear, and you have decided to convey that message through the medium of podcasting, this news may be discouraging news.

Do not lose heart. There is a difference between success and mass popularity. Some of the most successful podcasts are not looking indiscriminately for more listeners. Instead, they know who they want to reach, what that audience wants to hear, and are narrowcasting for that segment only.

A tightly focused, limited-circulation podcast can be successful precisely because it is so intimate. It might be a for customers only, for (and by) your work colleagues or project team, or it might be part of a conference or meeting. You can geek out on niche knowledge and spend time on details that only your audience cares about.



Here are some reasons to target a well-defined niche:

- **Every episode can be relevant to everyone who listens.** You don't have to please different types of listeners. You know what your podcast family wants. So you have permission to go narrow and deep – giving them the sort of material and insight that they can't find anywhere else, in a format that makes them feel special.
- **It is one part of a multi-channel marketing or comms strategy.** You can use other elements of the strategy to build a tighter community, for example with a newsletter, with downloadable content, or on LinkedIn, and use this to deepen the relationship. At Talk Normal we regularly work with marketing teams to produce inexpensive and fun communications that are part of a bigger campaign.
- **A more intimate conversation.** Shared experiences or values create a relaxed closeness: you are talking to friends. This means that the conversation is more authentic and revealing.
- **Talk with your audience, not down to them.** Episodes are made by, and for, the same people. And you're one of them. This is especially useful when the people in your audience know each other or provide mutual support..

We have found that the most common reason that promising podcasts lose momentum is a lack of focus, which is often an understandable by-product of the desire to reach a bigger audience. You don't have to do this: defining a niche can help the audience know what to expect, the presenters understand which topics to discuss, and the guests know why they are there.

 Ten things they don't tell you




09

THE ROBOTS HAVE NOT REPLACED US (YET)

Adobe, the publisher of Audition, one of the most popular sound-editing suites of software, is one of many companies developing remarkable abilities to improve and enhance audio recordings. You want to deliver the best results. Should you go on a course in sound engineering, hire a professional, or trust the increasing number of services that promise to optimise your sound for you using artificial intelligence?⁵

In theory, you can now record using basic equipment and rely on the robots to do the rest. An AI can now enhance the quality of audio and help you cope with the tedious edits (for example, recognising breaths and “ums”, and automatically getting rid of them). If you want to investigate the best AI-driven recording and mastering technology, drop us a line at Talk Normal.⁶ We will be delighted to explain what's available.

Why would we do this? Because we firmly believe there is still an important role for the human (or, more likely, humans) in helping your podcast to excel. This is partly because of what AI still can't do, and partly because of what it was never designed to do.

-  **AI doesn't know what's interesting.** It can't yet decide whether a conversation is funny or dull, interesting, or obvious. An expert editor not only recognises this instinctively, but also knows how to use the edit process to create the mood, or tension, or suspense, that you seek.
-  **AI can't make the big judgement calls.** Occasionally, you wonder why an episode isn't working, and it might be that it requires a few bigger snips: pruning to create impact and pace, or even moving an entire section to a different place where it fits better. This requires the instinct of a skilled human editor.
-  **AI can't decide what to record.** When new tech removes the most tedious tasks in podcasting, we can give all our attention to the strategic, valuable tasks. The pre-recording process of research, discussion, scripting, and briefing is not only creative, but it is also what ultimately decides whether your podcast succeeds or fails. AIs can't do this, but they can eliminate tedious time-consuming jobs, giving you more time to do the things that matter.

⁵ – If you want to test out how good Adobe's AI-based sound enhancement is, try this: <https://podcast.adobe.com/enhance>. But also contact us. Andrei, our sound editor, has some interesting test results that show where it's amazing ... and where it isn't.

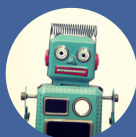
⁶ – That's contact@talknormal.co.uk, or there's a form on our web site <https://talknormal.co.uk>.

✂ Ten things they don't tell you

10

HELP IS EVERYWHERE

Team



Tim Phillips
Producer and host



Megan Bieber
Assistant producer



Karolina Smolova
Video editor



Andrei Zargarian
Sound editor

If you are stuck, downcast, exhausted, or just clear out of inspiration, there is a free, easy-to-use source of help: your fellow podcasters. There are hundreds of forums on which you can ask for help. Podcasters are communicators, and so they love to share their tips and experiences, and you can find advice and ideas in blogs, on YouTube, and even on the web sites of equipment suppliers.

At Talk Normal, we're proud to be part of that community. If this paper has inspired you or raised questions, ask us to help. You don't have to do business with us – though of course, we would be delighted if you did – but we're happy to share what think, help you to avoid making the mistakes that we made, or to recommend equipment and software. Hopefully we can inspire you.

Then, if you want to join the satisfied clients who use our services, you know who we are, and where to find us.

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