

39

Practice

Video Podcasting

In This Practice

- ✓ Exploring the unique demands of a video podcast
- ✓ Allotting enough time to produce quality video
- ✓ Getting the right studio accessories
- ✓ Deciding on a running time

Video production in the late 1990s was just beginning to break into the home consumer and amateur filmmaker market, but getting your computer and your home (or office) equipped with Hollywood-grade hardware usually involved bank loans and a hope that you might break even with what you'd just invested. These days, cinematic special effects, professional-grade cameras, and the capability to produce broadcast-quality video have all become commonplace. Digital video technology is affordable, and creative minds are exploring the possibilities of podcasting their videos to content-hungry audiences around the world.

So, in a nutshell, yes, video podcasting poses many more challenges and many more demands. The end results, though, are worth it all!

Understanding the Demands of a Video Podcast

Video demands a lot of time and attention not only from its audience but also from its creators. Similar to enhanced podcasting (described in Practice 24), video podcasting is a step up in production and more challenging than producing standard audio podcasts.

There's no denying that enhanced podcasting is very, very cool. Unlike enhanced podcasts put together in GarageBand 3 or Podcast Factory, video podcasts are *not* easy to do. Impossible, no. But easy? Hardly, especially when working with various camera angles, lighting, ambient noise, and so on. The advantages of the video podcast are similar to the enhanced podcast in that you have a captive audience and you are appealing to the visual senses. The video you are providing is content found nowhere else, and unlike *webisodes* (exclusive mini-episodes of television shows like *Monk* and *The Office*) viewable only online or television episodes purchased via iTunes, video podcasts are free and reside in your iTunes library or on your iPod until you decide otherwise.

In the same vein as enhanced podcasts, most video podcasts will play only on iTunes (for the desktop computer) and iPods (portable players), depending on the compression format you decide on. Video podcasting doesn't rely on any particular platform, but it is reliant on the playback device. Do you want it playing back on iTunes, by default? QuickTime? Or Windows Media Player? Your choice of format limits how audiences can subscribe to and (in this case) *watch* your podcasts.

Video podcasts, unlike enhanced podcasts however, can be created using a variety of applications running on Windows or Mac OS X. You can use Apple iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, Apple Final Cut Pro (shown in Figure 39-1), or Adobe Premiere Pro to create your episode. (See Chapters 40 and 41 for more on Premiere and Final Cut Pro.) With Final Cut and iMovie, you can export your video podcast directly to a format optimized for the iPod. With a Windows application (as described in Practice 40), there will be an extra step involving QuickTime Pro (a \$30 USD upgrade available from www.quicktime.com) that can do the same export that Final Cut Pro and iMovie can. (Yes, you could do the compression by hand, but we're big believers in letting the software do the heavy lifting for you!)



• **Figure 39-1:** Final Cut Pro from Apple is a fantastic tool for video podcasters and makes exporting the episode to an iPod format a breeze!

As mentioned with enhanced podcasting, your audience must commit to *watching* your video podcast.

In effect, no multitasking is allowed if users want to get the most out of the podcast. Besides, because it's video, it demands attention — audiences have to pay close attention to their iPods (or iPhones) or iTunes. Potential subscribers may reconsider subscribing to your podcast as the difference between watching your podcast and a new television show premiering on Showtime, The Discovery Channel, or NBC.

Playback devices, audience commitment level, and accessibility are only the beginning of what you'll be facing in your list of demands in video podcasting. In this section, we take a closer look at some additional considerations for your new video venture.

Lighting

Unlike audio — recorded just about anywhere, at any time in the comfortable, swanky settings of a dimly lit studio — video needs light of some kind so you can see what you're shooting. Even nighttime video needs some kind of "lighting" (be it digital, infrared, or some other means), so now you have lighting issues to contend with. For your video podcast, here are a few issues to consider to light your way to good lighting:

➤ **Where are your principal light sources?**

Fluorescent light easily fills a room but plays havoc with actors' skin tones, fabric colors, and the general warmth of a room. Natural lighting may produce vibrant colors and realistic looks for on-screen talent, but that means placing your show's lighting in the chancy hands of Mother Nature. Lighting, whether natural or otherwise, directly affects how your talent looks.

Take a look at the lighting of an episode of *24* (studio lighting, accent on shadow, and so on) and then compare it to the film *Sleepy Hollow*, where only natural light was used to light the talent. Then think about how to use light in your own podcast. Are your light sources true to the look and feel you want? Also, consider how your principal light sources affect the look of the show hosts or talent. Which leads us to the next point . . .

- ✔ **How's the weather from one day to the next?** Simply put, lighting on a cloudy day differs greatly from the lighting on a clear day. If you can't shoot everything in one day, will the weather conditions be the same the next day?
- ✔ **Are you filming (or are you able to film) at consistent times of the day?** The position of the sun is very different between 10 a.m., 1 p.m., and 5 p.m. Sure, that point may seem obvious, but when you're filming, you may think in passing, "Yeah, we still have light." You do, but how are the shadows being cast? Do you have the same intensity of light as you did in earlier shots? You have a few more considerations when using nature as your light designer.
- ✔ **If you are investing in lighting, what kind of lighting is it?** Make sure you have enough of this lighting to give your podcast the right amount of warmth and depth. (See "Lighting fixtures," later in this practice.)
- ✔ Stark whites can cause problems such as overexposure and ghosting of video. They can also be extremely difficult to light on account of glare, and even harder to watch.
- ✔ Stripes and plaids are horrific choices, especially when you are attempting to set a visual balance between the subject's wardrobe and the setting.
- ✔ When more than one host or actor is introduced into the podcast, the participants' clothing needs to work well together. You don't want it to clash, making for distracting colors (for example, a formal party setting where everyone is in black tuxedos, but one guy shows up in a pastel-colored tux).
- ✔ If you are working with blue- or green-screen mattes for special effects, this will dictate what your talent will be wearing in the production. *Blue- or green-screen* is where talent is placed in front of a backdrop of brilliant blue or lime-green, and a different backdrop or setting is placed behind them. Films such as *Sky Captain and The World of Tomorrow* and *300* were able to create "virtual sets" this way, but this also meant that the actors were prohibited from wearing shades of blue or green, which might destroy the illusion of the new setting.

Set and wardrobe

Audio creates a theatre of the mind. With the right amount of Foley and effects (described in Practice 19), you can create any kind of setting — museum corridor, waterfront warehouse, deck of a pirate ship — but with video, if you don't have direct access to a desired setting, you have to build it or find the closest likeness to what you picture for the scene.

After finding the right setting, you need to decide whether you need props for your video podcast. If so, what is appropriate for your production? Will the host or screen talent get an opportunity to work with them beforehand or not?

Finally, you need to think about wardrobe. What will your on-screen talent be wearing? Audio gives podcasters the luxury of podcasting in whatever they are most comfortable in wearing. Khaki shorts? Pajamas? Au naturel? Whatever you want to do, you can do because it's audio — all the visuals are in your listeners' heads. With video, keep the following wardrobe considerations in mind:

On-screen persona and appearance

You might hear people jokingly say, "I have a face for podcasting . . .," which is simply a variation on an old radio-industry joke.

Cruel but true: When you're video-podcasting, you have to evaluate the podcast's on-screen talent with visual impressions in mind:

- ✔ **How does your talent look?** This doesn't mean that your video podcast should be a "pretty people" parade, but the talent being filmed should accurately portray your podcast's image.
- ✔ **How relaxed and natural are they on camera?** You want your show host or company of actors to be relaxed, focused, and natural when on-camera, not tense and wooden. If your subjects appear uncomfortable, your audience may also feel uncomfortable watching your podcast.

- ✓ **What kind of makeup do you need?** Yes, even for the guys — *makeup*. Studio lights can catch glares off a person's skin, throwing off the white balance of your video equipment. Also, particularly as high-definition video grows in prominence, you have to watch for slight skin imperfections that stage makeup can correct temporarily.

Makeup brings its own questions and decisions: Do you have a makeup artist on your staff, or will you rely on the actors to provide their own makeup? If they do their own makeup, are the actors consistent in how they look? Is one host's makeup heavy and the other's nonexistent? Along with a balance in the wardrobe, there should be a balance in the makeup as well.

Podcast file size

Now we address the file itself. A standard audio podcast of roughly 28MB will cover around 30 minutes (so if you round up, 1MB = 1 minute). For many listeners, 30 minutes of audio is a lot to take in, particularly when compared to other podcasts that are far more economical in their running times.

With video, 28MB might buy you *three minutes*, depending on the compression settings. If you have a 30-minute podcast and are expecting to get your file down to the same size (or thereabouts), well . . . that just won't happen.

Keep in mind that video demands a lot more in playback because it's playing audio and moving images (29.97 images in one second of video, to be exact), and the audio data and video data also need to say in sync with one another. All these factors will cost you in data size and storage.

Keeping it simple is the Ninja way

One fantastic way of avoiding the problems of set, makeup, appearance, and (to some extent) lighting, is to dress your host in a ninja costume, shoot him or her from the waist up, and change the camera angles and tightness of close-ups in post-production.

Sound a little crazy? Who would watch such a podcast? Quite a few — as one ninja and his crew at Beatbox Giant discovered.

Ask a Ninja (shown in the following figure) is a five- to ten-minute video podcast hosted by . . . well, a ninja. In these five to ten minutes, the mysterious, masked host gives his take on television, politics, film, and just about anything people are asking him about. The end result is a hysterical monologue delivered with a katana-sharp wit and fall-over-dead-with-laughter timing.

Part of *Ask a Ninja's* success can be attributed to the show's simplicity of concept: a host in a ninja costume, a static backdrop, basic lighting, one camera . . . and that's it. Where *Ask a Ninja* becomes a challenge is in its host. Without props, makeup, sets, or any other visuals, all the attention is on him. So, before following the way of the ninja, be certain you have the confidence, the talent, and the timing to pull off that kind of simplicity in your podcast.



Bandwidth demands

As discussed elsewhere in this book, bandwidth can be costly, especially if your podcast is 50MB or higher per download. If you garner over 1,000 listeners, for example, you've gone through 5GB simply for that file transfer. If these 1,000 listeners are going through your archives, the bandwidth your podcast is burning through increases exponentially.

Now, suppose you decide to go for the longer running times for your podcast — and even dare to explore the possibilities of high-definition video podcasting. What happens? Your first episode is 100MB — a very hefty download.

It's even heftier if your podcast is a runaway success and you have 2,000 subscribers. In one week, you have used 200GB — and that's your first week. What about the weeks — and the listeners — to come? Depending on the kind of podcast you want to produce and the audience you want to win over, you'll want to plan for the bandwidth demands.

Particularly with long video podcasts, bandwidth is the sharpest of double-edged swords. You want the podcast to be a success, but that success means you have to work more bandwidth into your operations budget.

Giving Yourself Enough Time to Produce

Producing even a weekly audio podcast — especially if it requires a lot of editing and post-production — is a grueling schedule to keep. This is why, before launching your first podcast, you should have five episodes already completed and prepared for online distribution. By the time you have five in the can, you'll know the demands of your podcast up front.

Video podcasting, no matter how simple the production, can also be a chore — especially because video gives you much more to contend with than audio does. The reality of video podcasting is that podcasts

like *Ask A Ninja*, *Tiki Bar TV*, and *Stranger Things* make this kind of podcasting look easier than it is.

Many of the video podcasts in production that dominate the iTunes top rankings have a crew involved or are simply television segments repackaged and distributed as video podcasts. If you are launching a video podcast independent of a studio, production house, or network, you may find the weekly schedule tough to follow; even with a support crew involved, a weekly schedule is nothing less than intense for everyone involved. By the time one episode is done, another one is already submitted for logging and rough cuts. Video podcasts may even shoot two episodes in one session, doubling the workload for crews as well as cast.

While nonlinear video applications such as Adobe Premiere Pro and Apple Final Cut have dramatically improved the productivity needed for video podcasting, it's still far from a pushbutton technology. Even with simple applications such as iMovie, you need lots of time to render the video and then output it in the desired format — be it podcasting, full-screen video, or DVD. Video created overnight or at the eleventh hour can be riddled with mistakes, continuity errors, sloppy edits, and small trips and tumbles that can affect the impression of the video.

The bottom line is that when you're making the decision to go video, make sure you give yourself time to shoot, time to edit, time to render, and time to review. Log in the time dedicated to those first five episodes of your video podcast — and from there, make the judgment call on what you want your podcast's posting schedule to be.

Exploring Studio Accessories for Video Podcasting

Suppose that your video podcast is a go, but you want to make sure your set is ready for filming. Along with prepping the set, you'll want to have your notes organized and ready for your day of

shooting. As there can be more to an audio podcast than just a microphone and a recording application, a video podcast can be more than just a miniDV camera and a video editor.

Lighting fixtures

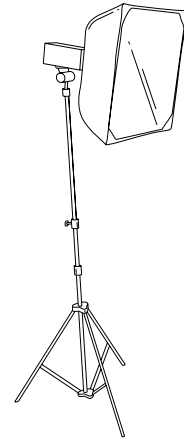
If you're planning to shoot indoors, the natural lighting coming in from outside may not be enough to illuminate your set and talent. This is when you need to go shopping for different lighting fixtures.

On-camera lighting can remedy a lot of indoor lighting issues, but it can also produce hard shadows on set pieces and background. You can invest in *directional lights* that stand on tripods (as in Figure 39-2) and then use *reflectors* to diffuse the light. (Reflectors are shiny umbrellas that soften the light being sent out by the directional units. This will effectively light your subject without creating harsh glares or shadows.) You can get many of these lights and accessories in kits, but the kits can be extremely costly, depending on what you need and what you want for your podcast.

Digital recorders

On-camera recording devices can be very good, but when your subjects are more than 2 feet away from the camera, their voices will sound hollow. This is why it is a good idea to record your sound on a different device than the video and then sync up the digitally recorded sound in post with your video.

Recording devices can be in plain view and part of the set, or you can use a mic attached to a *boom* (a horizontal support that suspends the mic over the on-screen talent, as shown in Figure 39-3). By capturing the sound independently, you can create a clear reproduction of the audio instead of having to rely on built-in camera microphones (which tend to pick up additional room ambience).



• **Figure 39-2:** Directional lighting units, like the one pictured here, can cut down on unwanted shadows or add light to a setting.

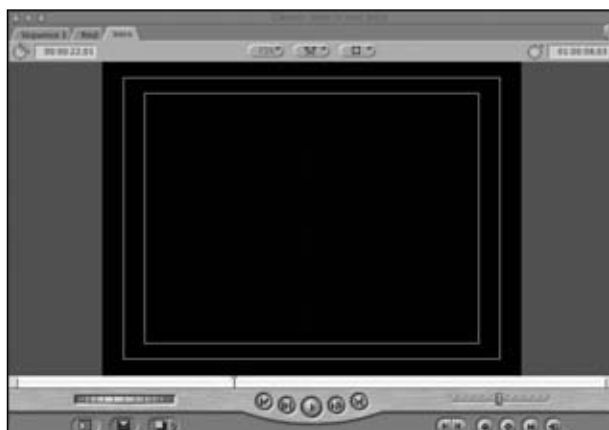


• **Figure 39-3:** Boom mics give the sound crew (like Jeff Traywick of *Stranger Things*, pictured here) the ability to stay out of the video while extending mics closer to the talent.

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When using boom mics, it can be difficult to determine how low can you position the microphone before it is visible on-screen. On many miniDV and HD-DV cameras, the view screen has two sets of boxes visible. The outside box is known as an *Action-Safe Margin*, and the inside box is the *Title Safe Margin*, as shown in Figure 39-4. If your boom mic is outside of the Action-Safe Margins, the microphone will not be seen because anything beyond that margin is cropped out. Using the Title Safe margins during your shoots gives you an idea where captions and IDs will be placed in post-production. In both Premiere and Final Cut, you can view Action and Title Safe Margins — and place text accordingly — or enlarge the video in order to crop out any unexpected “mic in picture” moments.



- **Figure 39-4:** Action Safe and Title Margins appear in both Final Cut (pictured here) and Premiere in order to give you an idea of what televisions will display and what will be cropped out.

Tripods

While *The Blair Witch Project* has been picked on, parodied, and poked fun at, it was an innovative film because it was primarily shot with hand-held cameras. Coupled with the incredible hype of the film, its accomplishments were impressive: An independent film shot and produced on a podcaster's budget earned millions at the box office. Some of its success can be

attributed to the unsteadiness of the hand-held camera, which became an effective way to heighten the scary realism of the movie. However, if you'd rather not take the “reality TV” approach to your video podcasting, tripods are a terrific investment for your camera equipment.

When shopping for tripods, you will probably notice \$10 tripods propped next to a \$100 tripod stand. Videographers will tell you, “Your video will look like it was shot on a \$10 tripod.”

The higher-grade tripods are more stable, you can more easily pan the camera while filming, and their meters allow you to achieve more level angles for a camera on uneven ground (see Figure 39-5 for an example). Look at all the functions offered — and then consider what kind of tripod will work best for your video podcast.



- **Figure 39-5:** On the set of *Stranger Things* (www.strangerthings.tv), tripods like the one pictured here ensure still, stationary shots.

Shooting schedules

A daily shooting schedule is important not only for you but for your cast and crew as well. Will you be shooting the podcast in a linear fashion, or will you be shooting (for example) specific interviews or scenes based on the availability of the subjects or cast members involved?

Shooting schedules are a real benefit to your video podcast. They make clear to you and your company (or, if you're a one-stop shop for a podcast, just you) what the agenda is for the day and what you're going to accomplish with the available time, light, and resources. They also serve as hard-copy progress reports for you on what you'll be shooting, what you accomplish, and what you need to reschedule if something isn't quite right. Shooting schedules are your road map for the day. Implement them.

Putting together a shooting schedule “just for a video podcast” may seem a bit excessive, but if you want to take your video podcast up a notch from Public Access television or the often-mentioned *Wayne's World*, the effort is worth it. The podcast you create is as professional as you make it, and by applying some of the Hollywood approaches to things (lighting, makeup, shooting schedules), you can make the video-podcasting experience a positive and productive one. To find out more about working in video on a shoestring budget (Wow, you got it in your budget for new shoestrings?!), check out Stephanie Cottrell Bryant's *Videoblogging For Dummies* (Wiley).

When to Say, “That's a Wrap!”

Whether you are using Adobe Premiere Pro or Apple Final Cut Pro (covered in Practices 40 and 41), you'll have a good idea of the planning and production demands of a video podcast after editing 20 seconds (okay, 20 and some change) of video. Video

production may seem like a lot of hard work, but it might surprise you when you edit your first video and then note the episode's running time. Time flies not only when you edit video but also when you review your work. You think, “I'm halfway through my first episode . . .,” and suddenly notice that your podcast is nearing the 20-minute mark.

As with any podcast (video or otherwise), brevity is the soul of wit. As discussed earlier in this practice, video demands more production time and — after posting — more storage and bandwidth. So, before launching your video podcast, it may be a good idea to look at your *first* episode (not the first five episodes, but the *very first* episode you complete in your choice video editor) and consider the production schedule you're creating as well as the commitment you're asking from an audience.

Many independently produced video podcasts rarely break the ten-minute ceiling for their running times. These quick, down-and-dirty podcasts are the most popular video podcasts. Shows like the earlier mentioned *Tiki Bar TV* (<http://tikibartv.com>), *Ask a Ninja* (<http://askaninja.com>), and *The Onion News Network* (<http://theonion.com>) are easy (and yes, we're using “easy” as a relative term here) to produce on a regular basis, can require very little in terms of production demands, and are fast downloads for subscribers.

The short-and-sweet video podcasts demand less of a commitment from the viewing audience. A subscriber can watch a few video podcasts on a work break or maybe sneak in a “viewing block” when stuck in rush hour traffic. A video podcast's short running time is one aspect of a show's popularity, be it an audio or a video podcast. If you can keep the running time of your podcast to ten minutes or less, your listenership can be dramatically larger than that of a podcast that sports episodes running 45 minutes to an hour on average.

The Doctor is in!

Tiki Bar TV (shown in the following figure) was one of the early adopters of podcasting with video, and with every episode, this company of wayward actors has taken an unlikely ten minutes to incredible heights of slapstick humor and special effects.

Perhaps *Tiki Bar's* finest moment concerning what you can do with video podcasting on a writing, performance, and post-production level was "Episode 20: The Son of the Internet." In just seven minutes, this episode managed to parody the overnight development of technology, soap operas, the Internet, Internet-speak, and the Disney film, *Tron*.

Oh, and the episode teaches you how to make the "Short Fuse" cocktail. All this, in seven minutes.

With the improv, blooper-esque chuckles, and creative mixology at the bar, Dr. Tiki, Johnny Johnny, and La La produced an impressive (and extremely funny) installment of *Tiki Bar TV* — and proved just what you can accomplish in a short video podcast.



Shorter running times always equate to larger audiences because audiences can quickly consume an episode or two and then return to the podcast later in the day, week, or month, and consume another few episodes.

The major downside of the short podcast is that you have little to no room to explore tangents, establish subplots in your episodes, or introduce a large number of characters, guests, or show hosts without taking the chance of cramming too much in a single episode. Podcasts that keep it quick and brief also keep it simple.

And when you see longer podcasts like *Stranger Things* (<http://strangerthings.tv>), *Missing Pages* (<http://speaking-pictures.com/missingPages.html>), and *Martial Arts Explorer* (<http://martialartsexplorer.thepodcastnetwork.com>), the advantages (and the rewards) of longer running times and intense video production become clear. After you find the desired effect of your video podcast, commit to it; but make certain you are putting in the right amount of time and effort for your video podcast. The end result, whether brief or epic in its presentation, will be worth the investment.