

Podcasting: sharing your museum's story

If you are sitting there thinking that you don't know what Audacity or GarageBand is; you can't find the Voice Memo app on your iPhone or that you couldn't imagine someone in Los Angeles, Dublin or Prague listening to your voice I was you two years ago.

I only fell into podcasting out of necessity. One of my post-graduate courses required me to create a podcast with no instructions, as our lecturer structured his course around the expression 'learning is doing'. Emboldened by my High Distinction, I came to Brisbane's Living Heritage Network, an organisation on which I sit as a Director, with an idea—we should create a podcast.

In mid 2019, we launched *My favourite item: unravelling Brisbane's history piece by piece* as a way to share our member organisations' stories about Brisbane's rich and unique cultural heritage and social history. Today, I am going to take you through the process, tools, challenges and benefits of the art of podcasting and above all, encourage you to have a go at creating your own podcast, as it can provide a cost-effective and engaging way to connect to your audiences, both new and existing.

But, what is podcasting and how popular is it really?

'A podcast is nothing more than a digital file [that] can be downloaded and listened to whenever and wherever you like.'¹ It is an incredibly popular medium that engages and connects audiences. A recent study found that 15% of Australians listened to a podcast in the last week,² with 68% of listeners consuming at least 4 episodes over that same time period.³ Market research company Roy Morgan found that although, 'podcasts are a relatively new part of the media landscape [they are] making an increasing impact as audiences...track up an impressive 70% over the last four years to over 1.6 million Australians in 2019' with millennials constituting over 40% of consumers.⁴ The ABC podcast survey revealed that listeners prefer original content that entertains, educates and informs⁵—which reflects the end game of most (if not all) cultural and heritage institutions. Museum webpage developer Cuberis states, 'one of the reasons podcasts are so popular, is that audio is such a powerful storytelling vehicle. And

¹ Manuel Charr, 'How to start a podcast for your museum', MuseumNext. 24 December 2019, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-to-start-a-podcast-for-your-museum/>.

² Triton Digital, 'The Australian podcast data kit', Triton Digital. 2019, <https://tritondigitalv3.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/Resources/Podcast%20Data%20Kit%20Australia%202019.pdf>.

³ ABC, 'ABC's 2019 Podcast Survey', ABC. 3 October 2019, <https://about.abc.net.au/media-room/abc-podcast-survey-reveals-just-how-engaged-podcast-audiences-are/>.

⁴ Roy Morgan, 'Podcasts growing in popularity in Australia', Roy Morgan. 22 July 2019, <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/8056-podcast-listeners-australia-march-2019-201907190703#:~:text=Average%20interviews%20per%20year%20n,million%20just%20four%20years%20ago.>

⁵ ABC.

museums have so many great stories to tell.⁶ While these statistics demonstrate that podcasts are #ontrend, museums offer something truly unique, with arts journalist Manuel Charr writing, ‘... more and more galleries and museums are making podcasts nowadays but each establishment is one-of-a-kind even if it comes down to location and which communities it serves.’⁷

Coming up with a concept

But, where do you start? Think about:

- What makes your museum unique or one-of-a-kind?
- What great stories do you want to tell?
- What collection, item, person, institution or theme do you want to explore?
- What current event or topic do you want to raise awareness of?

In our case, I thought about our organisation’s aim (to promote and raise awareness of our members) and objectives (to share Brisbane’s rich heritage and unique stories). Given that we represent over 90 organisations comprising of museums, galleries, heritage sites, historic houses, societies and gardens I also had to find a common thread that would bind them all together and provide a point of conversation—their collections. Other important questions are:

- Who is your target audience? In our case, it was people living in Brisbane. This will influence any promotion and marketing strategy.
- What will be the name of your podcast? When thinking about a title Apple (the world’s biggest podcast directory) offer this advice:
 - be specific (our podcast asks interview subjects what their favourite item is, hence our title *My favourite item*)
 - integrate keywords (i.e. Brisbane and history)
 - also think about the author, tags and description now—this metadata should link together.
- What format will you use? Will it be completely scripted, an interview or a recording of a public program. Our podcast uses an interview approach.
- How frequently will you post? We decided that each season would be 5-6 episodes long. We would aim to post twice a month.

⁶ Eric, ‘Let’s hear it for audio!’, Cuberis. 30 January 2019, <https://cuberis.com/lets-hear-it-for-audio/>.

⁷ Charr.

- What is your episode plan? We identified a list of member sites that allowed us to share a diverse range of stories.
- What visuals will you use? Canva (canva.com), a free graphic design tool, has plenty of logo options for you.

Style, structure and scripting

Before you press record, draft a script. This can range from a few bullet points to a word-for-word script. As *My favourite item* uses an interview approach. I meet with the person I'm going to interview first, talk about their favourite item, ask lots of questions and explain the process. I then complete further research, develop a draft script and seek further feedback before I set a recording date.

Like any extended piece of writing, a podcast episode has 3 parts—an introduction, a body and a conclusion. I encourage you to follow a consistent format, even if it's not too rigid, to allow listeners to become familiar with the podcast and develop a relationship and connection to it.⁸ Let's break down my first very script:

INTRODUCTION

When you last visited a local museum, art gallery, library or heritage place did you ever wonder what the curator would choose as their favourite item? Would it be a photograph, a letter, a piece of art, a book or an object? Welcome to My favourite item, unravelling Brisbane's history piece by piece, a podcast brought to you by Brisbane's Living Heritage Network. In each episode join me, Kirsten Murray, as I step inside a different Brisbane based heritage place or museum to learn more about this city's rich and unique history as I ask each guest to choose just one item that shares a story about Brisbane that they love. [MUSIC]

The introduction is quite short and takes me less than 30 seconds to read. It identifies the host, introduces the podcast and sets the tone.⁹ As I use the same introduction for each episode, I don't introduce the listener to the guest, but you can do this if you wish.

⁸ Lena Maculan, 'Producing academic-related podcasts-helpful hints', University of Leicester. No date, https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/projects/impala1/documents/resources-and-tools-for-creating-podcasts/academic_podcast_helpful_hints.

⁹ Sarah Howard, 'Podcasting and museums: a how to guide and object-based examples', Baylor University. 31 July 2020, <https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/handle/2104/10962>, pg. 8.

[INTERVIEW]

In this episode we are joined by Peter Howard, President, Thoroughbred Racing History Association. The Association has an archive housed at Doomben racecourse where we are today and a museum at Eagle Farm. Hi Peter, thanks for joining us!

- 1. We are going to start this episode by talking about the item you have selected. Peter, what are we standing in front of?*
- 2. Is the Doomben Cup still run today?*
- 3. But, every item has a story. To fully appreciate this beautiful trophy, we need to start at the beginning. Peter, what are we looking at here?*
- 4. So who was Bernborough's registered owner?*
- 5. What happened next?*
- 6. How does he compare to horses we see on the track today?*
- 7. Looking back, why is Bernborough so important to Queenslanders and our sporting history?*

This interview uses less formal language, has open-ended questions that sign-post what Peter is going to talk about and (hopefully) takes the listener on a sequential journey. These questions reflect Peter's knowledge on the item he chose.

[CONCLUSION]

*Thank-you for listening to **My favourite item, unravelling Brisbane's history piece by piece.** We hope you enjoyed discovering more about Peter's favourite item- **if you want to learn more, how can people visit you Peter?** [PETER ANSWERS] **You can also find out more about our organisation by visiting our website, blhn.org.** Like this podcast or do you know something more about this item? Perhaps you or someone in your family saw Bernborough ride? Think about leaving a comment, subscribing or sharing this podcast on your social media platforms. **What will be the next favourite item? Tune into the next episode to find out!***

[MUSIC]

The conclusion is similar to the introduction—it states the **name of the podcast**, **who developed the podcast**, **previews the next episode** and gives listeners a way to engage with the museum and us.¹⁰ I want to point out here, that most people stop listening once the main part

¹⁰ Sarah Howard, pg. 8.

of the podcast is over, so don't spend too much time or effort on this part. One of the changes I've made in the second season is to shorten both the introduction and conclusion.

Recording

If you can, record in a quiet, large room—getting a crisp recording with little echo or background noise makes editing easy. Put mobile phones on silent. Set up your microphone (or iPhone) evenly between you (if doing an interview) and do a test recording to check the volume. Have a drink of water. When you press the record button, pause for a few seconds so you have a break. Take your time and do not worry too much about getting the perfect recording, there will be mistakes, stammers, silences and umms (and in my case 'likes'). I never press pause no matter what happens—I just do any re-takes immediately so everything is in one file.

After the fact

Once you have finished recording you have to edit, publish and market your podcast.

Editing is the most time-consuming part of podcasting,¹¹ but two of the most commonly used pieces of editing software are free. I use Audacity (audacityteam.org), but those with an Apple device can also use GarageBand. Any software can be difficult to use at first, but there are a lot of videos, websites and blogs to help you work out what you need to know. Typically, when making an episode, I firstly import the audio file before employing the delete key quite a bit (to remove mistakes), and using the fade in/out, noise reduction and mix/render features. Do this with each audio file before moving onto the next one. I typically have 3 tracks: the introduction (as I record this separately), the interview and conclusion and the music. I will edit the content before taking care of noise issues. Save regularly. After you have finished editing, save and export it to MP3. The most difficult part of creating this podcast was finding music and sounds. I started by googling "royalty free music", but when I couldn't find a suitable sound I purchased one from Jamendo (jamendo.com). Audio Jungle (audiojungle.net) and Story Blocks (storyblocks.com) are two other paid options. Just make sure you buy the right licence.

Once you have the audio file, you upload it to a host. I'd recommend Buzzprout or Soundcloud. These hosts are pretty easy to use, all you do is sign up, fill in the required fields and upload the audio file.

¹¹ Hannah Hethmon, 'How to: super quick DIY podcasting for museums and other nonprofits closed by COVID-19', Medium. 18 March 2020, https://medium.com/@hannah_rfh/how-to-super-quick-diy-podcasting-for-museums-other-nonprofits-closed-by-covid-19-82f5e95691f6.

We use our existing marketing channels (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram), website and e-newsletters to promote each episode. I usually pre-write content for each of these after I finish editing the episode while it is fresh in my mind.

And now cost

Our first season cost less than \$50 to produce—and it's here I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the generosity of our members who freely gave up their time and expertise. The only cost we incurred was for the music (because I couldn't source any suitable royalty free music) and I'd also previously bought a microphone to connect to my iPhone (which was around \$30). In our second season we needed to pay for our chosen platform host (Soundcloud) for less than \$200 annually, although most usually provide you with 2-3 hours for free. In time, I'd like to buy a better microphone, which can cost several hundred dollars. Cost wise, podcasting is a sustainable project for most museums and cultural institutions.

The hits and misses—what you can learn from me

So what tips can I share with you?

- Spend a lot of time thinking about your concept. It helps when you need to advocate for it.
- Write a script. You don't have to follow it to the letter, but it helps build confidence.
- It's ok to hate your voice—I do.
- Get your family, friends or colleagues to give you feedback.
- As someone who had little experience working in this industry, I'm blown away by the passion, knowledge and enthusiasm of its volunteers, curators, researchers and educators. Harness it!
- Nothing can't be resolved with a little searching. Every issue I've encountered (how to convert a file, how to remove background noise, how to find the RSS feed, how to get your podcast on Apple) has been solved by Google.
- Word of mouth is a key way people learn about your podcast.
- Celebrate your accomplishments.

Before I identify my areas of improvement (I was a teacher in a former life), I read this advice when preparing to speak to you today that I want to share with you, 'even the best podcasts had

to start with a few bad episodes. Every show and show host, has to find their footing, and the best way to improve is by continuing to record new episodes.¹²

- Think carefully about where you record. In one podcast you can hear a roof being repaired, in another an air-condition humming away (unless of course you want it for atmosphere).
- Record everything in one sitting—this keeps your voice and even the background noise consistent. For an amateur like me it's hard to even out a speaker's tone, volume and pitch when it changes.
- Stick to a schedule. For someone who takes great pride in their organisation, I've really struggled with this during season two and it's something I need to work on. Yes, COVID-19 threw a spanner in the works (and isn't it great that I almost made an entire presentation without mentioning it!), but I stopped recording when life got in the way. The best way to overcome this—get 3 to 4 episodes completed beforehand to stay ahead.

Has our podcast succeeded in achieving its aims? I think it has, but feel free to judge me. *My favourite item* has:

- been played 1122 times, with each episode having an average audience of 210 listeners
- found listeners beyond Brisbane (United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Spain)
- has a 5 star rating on Apple Podcasts
- been liked 18 times, shared 3 times and had 5 comments
- offered our members an opportunity to share their stories with a wider audience
- provided us with another way to promote our members.

Concluding thoughts

So why should you consider adding a podcast to your engagement activities and what benefits can it bring to your museum. Podcasts allow cultural and heritage institutions to engage with a captive audience outside of the walls of their institutions.¹³ It expands your reach (which is particularly important during a pandemic), creates an intimate relationship with your audience¹⁴, can be cost effective, is flexible, extends the physical space and is another way to increase use and accessibility of your collections.

¹² Buzzspout, 'The step-by-step guide', Buzzspout. No date, https://www.buzzspout.com/how-to-make-a-podcast?gclid=EAAlaIQobChMInP373cfx6wIVjgrCh0cCAY-EAAYASAAEgKxkvD_BwE.

¹³ Maria Trujillo, 'The museum podcast: sparking meaningful connections', Art Critique. 31 December 2019, <https://www.art-critique.com/en/2019/12/museum-podcasts-sparking-meaningful-connections/>.

¹⁴ Hannah Hethmon and Ian Elsner, 'Podcasting in 2019: an introduction for museums', MW19 Boston. 15 January 2019, <http://mw19.mwconf.org/paper/podcasting-in-2019-an-introduction-for-museums/>

Before I take questions, I'm going to conclude with two pieces of advice shared by Hannah Hethmon (the author of the book *Your museum needs a podcast* and a god in the museum podcasting space):

1. Keep your expectations realistic. Because of the lack of algorithmic effects, it is unlikely your podcast will encounter explosive growth. But, podcast listeners report a deep connection and intimacy to the podcasts they listen to.¹⁵
2. Do the best you can in the time you have budgeted and then get it out there. Even when time isn't as critical...aim for 'good' not 'perfect'.¹⁶

¹⁵ Idib.

¹⁶ Hannah Hethmon.