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Spring 5-4-2022

Grabbing Consumers By The Ears: Exploring The Role Of Branded Podcasts In An Integrated Marketing Communications Strategy

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Recommended Citation

Hamm, Lilly, "Grabbing Consumers By The Ears: Exploring The Role Of Branded Podcasts In An Integrated Marketing Communications Strategy" (2022). *Honors Theses*. 2711.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/2711

GRABBING CONSUMERS BY THE EARS: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF
BRANDED PODCASTS IN AN INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGY

by
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford
May 2022

Approved by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my primary thesis advisor, Dr. Graham Bodie, for his priceless support throughout this entire process. Dr. Bodie's guidance helped me get back on track after a bump in the road, and his reassurance pushed me to persevere. I could not have done it without him.

Thank you to my second and third readers, Brad Conaway and Dr. Robert Magee for supporting my thesis.

To my parents, Andy and Suzanne Hamm, thank you for always believing in me, supporting me, and pushing me to achieve my best in everything I do. And thank you Dad for inspiring me to select this topic by introducing me to podcasts in high school.

Finally, thank you to the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for giving me the opportunity to delve deep into my interests and giving the support that was needed to complete this thesis.

Finally, thank you to those who participated in the interviews. This thesis would not have been possible without their time, effort, and invaluable knowledge they provided.

ABSTRACT
Grabbing Consumers by the Ears: Exploring the Role of Branded Podcasts in an
Integrated Marketing Communications Strategy
(under direction of Dr. Graham Bodie)

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is a framework for understanding

how brands can meet consumer needs. Practitioners of IMC use an array of

communication channels like marketing, advertising, sales, and public relations to build a

consistent brand narrative, but they also recognize that strong marketing potential rests in

the hands of the consumer. With the rapid advancement in new technology, IMC

professionals are constantly looking for new ways to reach their targeted audience.

By 2016 and 2017, IMC practitioners began to notice the lack of ad clutter in the

podcasting platform, leading them to flock to this channel to promote their brands.

Today, there are an estimated 850,000 podcasts which, in turn, has generated a new

marketing platform– the branded podcast. Branded podcasts are episodic shows created

by brands that discuss topics engaging to a particular target audience. While branded

podcasts have the potential to elevate a brand, there is a lack of research on the platform

overall. This thesis provides an initial exploration into the role and power that branded

podcasts can hold in an IMC strategy. Through three case studies that cover three

different companies that have successfully created branded podcasts, I have discovered

that branded podcasts are being used not to see a direct return on investment, but instead,

to generate brand awareness and loyalty. In addition, I found that branded podcasts can

be used to humanize companies and build authentic relationships between the brand and

the consumer, which in turn, solidifies brand affinity. Perhaps the most surprising thing I

learned, however, was that regardless of how a brand approaches the creation of branded

podcast, whether it is hiring an out-of-house production team or saving money by

producing it in-house, companies must focus less on directly marketing their brand to

their consumers and more on creating content their target audience enjoys consuming. As

such, the branded podcast seems to fit nicely as an IMC strategy, one built not on the 4Ps

of marketing but on the foundation that the consumer holds the key to a brand's identity.

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INTRODUCTION

It's the summer before my freshman year of high school. My father and I are in the car, him driving, me anticipating my lacrosse tournament north of Atlanta. Then somewhere between Birmingham and our destination, my father was over "Arabella's Summer 2013 playlist." He took over the aux cord, plugged it into his phone, and out of the speakers came…

A Random Encounter

… the podcast Radiolab. I still remember the episode, the first of season 6. "Stochasticity." That word and that podcast were now both indelibly etched in my mind and eventually led me to explore podcasting for this thesis some nine years later.

"Stochasticity" begins with Laura Buxton recounting the story of how one day, when she was ten years old, she released a red balloon into the air outside her home in central England. To the balloon, she attached a note that read, "Please return to Laura Buxton" along with her address in the village of Stock on Trent. Laura's balloon traveled a fantastic 140 miles against a prevailing wind only to land in the hedge of a man who, on his way to tossing the balloon in the trash, saw the name of his neighbor, another Laura Buxton. After corresponding, the two girls finally met and discovered a range of similarities from the same hair color to clothing preferences as well as pets (both had three-year-old black Labs and large gray rabbits back home). To top off these mind-boggling revelations, both Lauras brought their pet Guinea pigs that were identical in coloring and markings – brown with an orange patch.

The episode continues to discuss the role that chance, or stochasticity, plays in our everyday lives - from random events all the way down to a cellular level. From that moment forward, "stochasticity" became my thing. Little did I know it, at the moment, so did podcasts.

Maybe Podcasts and I Were Destined to Be

Among my family and friends, I am the unofficial keeper of random facts. My brain has a large cache of memory devoted to seemingly trivial, unimportant information about everything from those two Laura Buxtons to the fact that Queen frontman Freddie Mercury once went by the name Larry Lurex. Before RadioLab, before podcasts, any knowledge that I did not obtain in the classroom came from books, magazines, blogs, social media, and of course, Google. But after listening to that singular episode, I discovered Apple's podcast app, and a whole new world opened.

For me, podcasts are not only an entertaining means of escape, but a gateway to knowledge and understanding; and there seems no limit to the subject matter relevant for the platform. Podcasts devoted to business, beauty, music, and current events live in the same universe as podcasts that explore such topics as the history of gnomes, dental hacks, or "Being Jazzed Up About Hand Farts." There also seems to be no limit to the number of podcasts that can be produced. For someone whose identity is part Trivia Queen, podcasts and I were meant to be.

Setting the Stage

As I write the first draft of this chapter in September of 2021, there are two million active podcasts featuring over 48 million episodes - a 150% increase from the 800,000 podcasts produced in 2018 ("Infinite Dial," 2021). Podcasts provide endless

entertainment and learning opportunities through an accessible, widely available platform

that simultaneously gives the listener an intimate experience while building a global

community around the content or subject. Like the concept of people gathering around

the proverbial water cooler to discuss current events or recent TV episodes, podcasts

bring together people of every age, race, generation, location, and socioeconomic

situation around shared interests. In terms of diversity of listenership in the United States,

podcasts continue to grow at a higher rate among non-white audiences (see Figure 1.1).

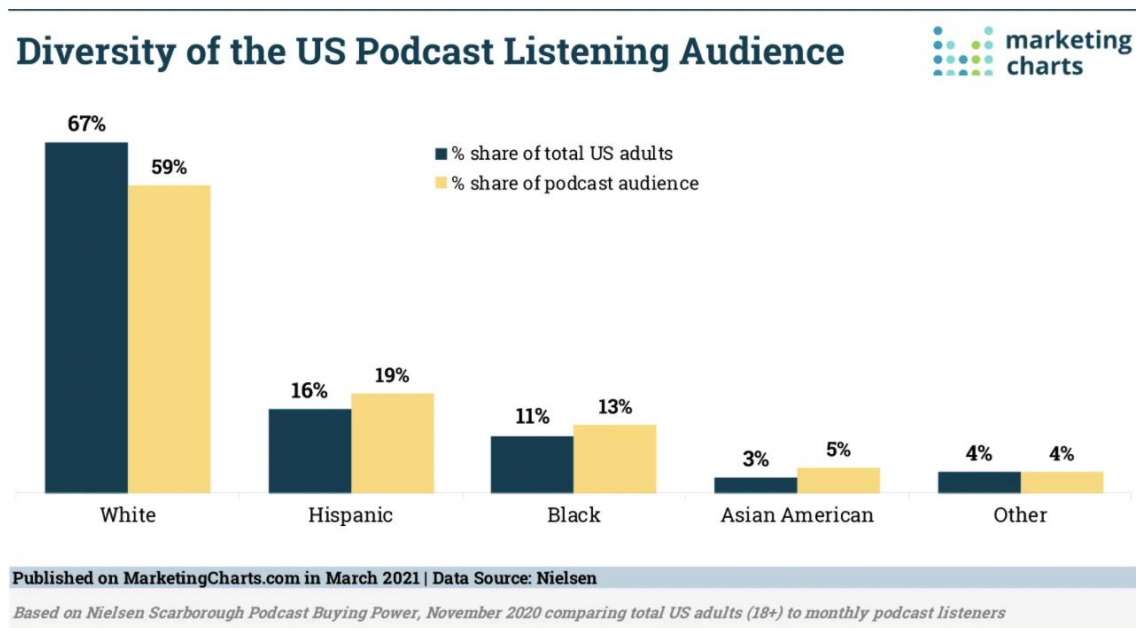**Figure 1.1.** *Diversity of US Podcast Listening Audience: MarketingCharts.com*

2021

I even found a way to apply information I learned through a set of earbuds to my

academic writings. It was actually an episode of the *Savor* podcast in the fall of 2017

tracing the amazing life of Julia Child that prompted me to make the unlikely TV chef the

topic of my application essay for the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

In another step on the journey that brought me to this point, when I entered the University of Mississippi, I declared my major as Integrated Marketing Communications. Even though I had no real career plan laid out, the IMC program, "where marketing meets creativity in a future-focused, real-world curriculum" seemed like a natural fit. My life up to that moment had been spent surrounded by marketing, advertising, branding, sponsorships, and public relations. My mother has been a brand strategist on the agency side and held the title of Chief Marketing Officer on the client-side. My father has been a copywriter, speechwriter, producer, and Creative Director. I have grown up listening to and watching the ins and outs of marketing.

While on my IMC path, I have been continuously drawn towards the account side of marketing as I enjoy digging into the data and analytics of research and the constructing of an IMC strategy based on the discovered data. Like many in the IMC program, I become hypersensitive to advertisements and marketing messages presented to me every single day on a multitude of devices and outlets. And when podcasts became the subject of my IMC studies, I listened to more and more podcasts and wondered to myself if people ever really listened to the ads, usually produced and delivered by the host. I knew that I tended to skip through ads in order to get back to the content quickly. I understood why brands paid for the opportunity to reach podcast audiences, but it seemed counterintuitive knowing the ads were skippable.

I had never really investigated this idea until it was time to focus on this thesis. Brainstorming topics at the beginning of my thesis journey proved to be difficult due to the wide range and diversity of marketing disciplines and media platforms covered in the IMC curriculum. I began thinking about IMC strategies and how IMC has developed

over the years, but I wanted to be more specific when it came to these strategies. Obviously, there are several tools in the "IMC toolbox" when it comes to creating a marketing strategy for a company, but I leaned more towards those elements that represent more forward-looking thinking and that are growing in popularity and success, like podcasts. During one of my usual daily "walking while podcasting" sessions, it hit me: I could combine my love of podcasts and marketing with my thesis topic! I focused on what the future of paid advertising in podcasts looked like as a long-term marketing strategy but quickly realized that this was more of a blanket approach than a true focus.

While looking to redefine my mission of using podcasts as my topic, I was introduced to the concept of "branded podcasts." In fact, it was when I learned that one of my favorite podcasts, *Inside Trader Joe's,* was a "branded podcast" that I knew I had found a subject that met my criteria of being future-focused and poised to grow exponentially. I had a thesis topic!

As a result of my deep dive into the branded podcast space, I realized the true power and potential of the branded platform - a platform that offers brands of every size an even playing field with relatively low entry cost, endless possibilities for intimate engagement, and high yield listener loyalty. Subsequently, I have also unearthed what may be the beginnings of a career path after earning my BS and Masters in Integrated Marketing Communication. My goal is to steer this incredibly stochastic journey towards a destination that, at a minimum, has a branded podcast as a stop along the way.

Reading this Thesis

The purpose of my thesis is to add to the academic and institutional body of knowledge surrounding the use of branded podcasts in a company's marketing strategy.

Given the significant growth of podcasts across multiple platforms including sports, entertainment, and corporate marketing, and recognizing the limited information that is currently available on the effectiveness of branded podcasts, I seek to understand the role that branded podcasts play in an integrated marketing communication strategy. Through three case studies, I aim to discover more about how branded podcasts are being utilized by companies, and further analyze the nature of branded podcasts in a marketing context. In Chapter Two, I not only discuss the history of podcasts and the introduction of branded podcasts to the world, but also the methods I use to choose my sample and population and how I collect and analyze my data. Chapters Three, Four, and Five present the three case studies, and Chapter Six integrates and interrogates my findings from the three case studies.

CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF IMC, PODCASTS, AND BRANDED PODCASTS

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. The first is to provide background information regarding Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC). To analyze branded podcasts and their emergence into the marketing world, and in turn determine their role in an IMC strategy, it is important to understand the principles of IMC as a whole and the tools that marketers employ to achieve the optimal results of brand appreciation and increased revenue. Secondly, the chapter will explore the rise of podcasting, especially as an advertising platform, because that leads us to how and why branded podcasts were created.

A Brief History of Integrated Marketing Communications

At a basic level, IMC is a framework for understanding how marketing works and how influence practitioners should approach their trade (Shultz, Patti, & Kitchen, 2011). As outlined by Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn (1993), an IMC framework shifts the focus of advertising and other forms of marketing from a product-centered to a consumer-driven venture. Early on, IMC merely meant integrating the functions of marketing, finding ways for advertising, direct marketing, public relations, and sales promotion to align and help present and establish a common brand identity across all marketing platforms. At the time, paid advertising, PR, direct marketing, sponsorships, and special events represented the primary tools within a company's marketing mix (Madhavarm 2013). The new millennium, however, brought about a multitude of new technological innovations and intensified global competition (Kitchen & Burgmann,

2010; Schultz et al., 2011). The rapidly changing landscape presented marketers with the challenge of satisfying customer's needs, differentiating their brand from the competition, and building long-term relationships with the consumer. Indeed, the value of IMC, rather than stemming from simplistic notions of tactical coordination, is now understood to lay within appropriately conceptualizing "the audience" or "the consumer" as active rather than passive.

Today, not only do IMC practitioners recognize a panoply of channels used to build a strong, consistent brand narrative, they also realize that true marketing potential lies in the interactivity and engagement of an responsive consumer base. Social media marketing, content marketing, influencer partnerships, SEM/SEO, inbound /outbound marketing, and guerilla marketing have been woven into the mix with more traditional marketing outlets (e.g., television and radio). While there is no single definition of what exactly makes up an IMC strategy, it seems incontrovertible that spreading a brand's message across a wider, yet more targeted, spectrum gives marketers the opportunity to experience greater success that can be measured and adjusted to meet objectives (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010).

Customer relationship management. When exploring the components that make up an IMC strategy, customer relationship management (CRM) is a vital phrase (Ekhlassi, Mehrmanesh, & Maghsoodi 2012). CRM encompasses building a relationship with consumers in ways that ensure "long term profit" (Ekhlassi et. al., 2012, p.761). According to Ekhlassi et al., CRM consists of three stages. First, customer acquisition (CA) encompasses onboarding new customers which largely centers around creating brand awareness through mass media. In the second stage, customer retention, brands

begin to interact with the consumer more (and vice versa), allowing the company to embed themselves into the consumers' identity and way of being. The long-term relationship that is cultivated in this stage is crucial to the success of a brand. The final part of CRM is customer development in which companies increase their efforts to sell by predicting consumer behavior and looking for unfulfilled needs.

These stages and their corresponding goals, tools, and media are presented as Figure 2.1. Ekhlassi's model makes clear that in order to decide which tools a brand should deploy, it is imperative to understand what stage of the CRM process a customer group is in. The stage determines overarching and specific IMC goals. Customer targeting and acquisition have always been critical and important for companies, but the rise of big data that provide key insights into consumer habits, their likes and dislikes, as well as demographic information, has made customer retention easier and less costly than customer acquisition (Zahay, Shultz, & Griffin, 2004). Retention is all about the long-term relationship between the customer and the company and the loyalty that this customer provides, resulting in long term sales value. A survey conducted by OutboundEngine found that it is five (5) times more expensive to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing one. The study also showed that increasing customer retention by just 5% can increase profits by anywhere from 25-95% (Landis, 2021).

CRM stage	CRM goal	MC tools	Media
Acquisition	• Identifying prospects to replacing defected customers • Brand awareness • Short term profit	• Advertising • Sales promotion • Events and sponsorship • Packaging • Personal selling	• Mass media (TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, outdoor media e.g. billboard, catalog and brochure) • Product packaging
Retention	• Make and keep Long term relationship • Customer loyalty • Long term profitability • Reducing CA cost	• Customer service • Direct marketing • Personal selling • Public relations • Advertising	• Interactive media e.g. internet and email • TF and sales meeting • Mass media • Different news media
Development	• Cross selling • Up selling	• Events and sponsorship • Packaging • Sales promotion	• TF and sales meetings • Product packaging

Figure 2.1. *Goals, Tools, and Media of CRM Stages: Ekhlassi et. al., 2012, p.763).*

In order to build these relationships, marketers must act differently than when simply engaging consumers for a single transaction. The idea of the primacy of the consumer has been around for decades, long before IMC swept the marketing world. In the 1990s technology advancement allowed marketers to get closer than ever to the consumer and build more sustainable relationships (Kliatchko, 2009; Schultz & Schultz, 2003). With the rise of IMC, it is now common knowledge that the power of the brand lies in the minds of the consumer. The cultivated brand image is a direct result of consumers' interactions with the company, and the brand image affects how each consumer responds to the marketing efforts of the company (Kliatchko, 2009). Furthermore, brand image can either add to or detract from a company's brand equity. Aaker (1991) concluded that there are five dimensions to brand equity: brand awareness,

brand perceived quality, brand association, brand loyalty, and brand assets such as patents or trademarks (see also, Brunello, 2013). It is vital within an IMC strategy, and for the sake of customer retention, that marketers focus on these five dimensions, specifically the first four. Through focusing on creating brand awareness, understanding what the consumer thinks about the brand and the product, and turning an average customer into a consumer that continues to buy from the brand and could possibly recruit more consumers, marketers can strengthen moderate relationships and reinforce strong relationships (Brunello, 2013). Finally, a company's goal is to increase sales, but this cannot be done without using an IMC strategy to focus on these five dimensions and creating a two-way relationship between the consumer and the company.

The rise of the podcast. The term "podcasting" seems to have been first used in a February 2004 article published in The Guardian (Skinner, 2020). Asking his readers to reflect on the new boom in online radio, Ben Hammersley wrote:

With the benefit of hindsight, it all seems quite obvious. MP3 players, like Apple's iPod, in many pockets, audio production software cheap or free, and weblogging an established part of the internet; all the ingredients are there for a new boom in amateur radio.

But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?

Embodying characteristics of IMC, Hammersley, while discussing one particularly influential early podcaster, Christopher Lydon, continued:

By combining the intimacy of voice, the interactivity of a weblog, and the convenience and portability of an MP3 download, Lydon's work seems to take the best of all worlds, and not just for the listener. The ability to broadcast out, and

have the internet talk back to them, Lydon says, is very appealing to journalists:

professional hack and weblogger alike. It's an approach to a different kind of

radio. My feeling is that traditional media in America is stuck. Let's think of a

new kind of media

Almost as soon as Hammersley's article was published, the first podcast service

provider, Libsyn.com, emerged, and Google searches for the word "podcast" surpassed

100,000.[1] By 2005, podcasts had begun to take off with the creation of a DIY guide to

creating podcasts and Yahoo! creating their own podcast search site (Skinner, 2020). But

it was Apple who paved the way by launching 3,000 podcasts available for download on

iTunes (Bishop, 2010). From 2006 to approximately 2010, podcasts hit numerous strides

including the inaugural Podcast Awards, the first podcast released from Buckingham

Palace, and Edison Research, which has been tracking podcasts since 2005, reporting that

43% of Americans had heard of podcasting (Skinner 2020). Soon after 2010, the

podcasting industry slowly started to plateau due to media conglomerates controlling the

top 10 charts every week. It was not until 2014 when the trajectory of podcasts changed

forever. *This American Life* published a new podcast, *Serial*, an investigative true crime

show which began by reopening a 1999 murder case (Skinner, 2020; Quah, 2019). After

the release of *Serial*, which became the first podcast to win a Peabody Award, true-crime

podcasts were popping up everywhere, and podcast listenership grew from 39 million to

90 million in the five years after 2014 (Quah, 2019; "Infinite Dial," 2019).

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[1] It is important to note two other early pioneers of podcasting, Adam Curry and Dave Winer who coded the iPodder, a system that allowed them to download Internet radio broadcasts onto their iPods (Skinner, 2020). In February of that year, journalist Ben Hammersly coined the term "podcasting" in his article for *The Guardian* about the rise of online amateur radio.

Between 2016 and 2017, the majority of marketers began to recognize the potential of advertising in podcasts. Kurt Kaufer (2017) from *Forbes* referred to podcasts as "this decade's advertising paradigm shift." This sudden attention from advertisers was most likely due to Apple launching the Podcast Analytics feature that tracked listening statistics (Katz, 2018). Midroll, a podcast advertising network, announced that, on average, podcast listeners make it through 90 percent of an episode, and very few were skipping ads. In June of 2017, Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) found that advertising dollars spent on podcasting grew a staggering 85% from the previous year to an estimated $220 million (Kaufer, 2017).

According to a 2019 report by Edison Research, there were an estimated 62 million Americans that listen to podcasts each week, an audience projected to double by 2023 (The Nielsen Company). While the size of this audience and the potential purchasing power it represents has been the catalyst for advertisers to devote significant percentages of marketing budgets to podcasts, there are several other factors driving this adoption rate, including the lack of ad clutter in this medium (Kaufer, 2017). Podcast hosts typically promote and endorse a brand's product and service, and these products enjoy category exclusivity -- meaning no other competitive product is included in the messaging. Unlike traditional channels such as broadcast television, radio, or print on which a brand may be featured in a commercial break with direct competitors, advertising on podcasts allows a brand to own the space. This gives advertisers a way to effectively block their competitors (Kaufer, 2017). Another reason for the exponential growth of podcast advertising is the "authentic nature of the host's endorsement" (Kaufer, 2017, p. ##). The time parameters for ad spots are also much less rigid when it comes to a podcast.

If a host feels inclined to talk longer about an advertiser than a traditional 30 to 60-second radio or tv spot, they have that ability. Endorsements are also more organic and authentic when it comes to instilling trust and confidence in the brand's products and/or services (Katz, 2018; Kaufer, 2017).

Additionally, podcasting is an "opt-in" and "push" and "pull" form of marketing, but unlike an opt-in (e.g., signing up for an email list), listeners tend to form a personal relationship with the host of the show that makes them value their opinion even more (Kaufer, 2017). Finally, there is limited ad-space when it comes to podcasts which means there will only be two 15-second ads and two to three 60-second ads in a typical 30-to-45-minute episode, making listeners more inclined to listen to the select few advertisements. (Kaufer, 2017). Overall, marketers saw the potential podcasts had for not only increasing sales (a transactional mindset), but also for building brand image and equity while deepening customer relationships (an IMC mindset).

The podcast has risen. Fast forward to today (16 October 2021). There are currently over 850,000 podcasts, and a recent survey from Edison One and Triton Digital reported that 37% of Americans listen to at least one podcast each month, up from 32% in 2019 (Adgate, 2021). Furthermore, by the end of 2022 it is predicted that more than 125 million people will be listening to at least one podcast each month (Edison One). As podcasts continue to grow, ad dollars continue to follow. IAB estimated podcast ad spend was $800 million in 2020 and will more than double to $1.7 billion by 2024, an annual growth of nearly 20% (Adgate, 2021). Generally, it is becoming more commonplace for brands to incorporate podcasts into an IMC strategy. In 2015, only 10% of marketers said

they would advertise in podcasts, but when asked the same question in 2021, the number jumped to 37% (Adgate, 2021; Westwood One, 2015).

This dramatic increase in interest can be attributed to the sheer amount of content available and the performance results tracked via advertisements placed in podcasts. In 2021, Edison One surveyed a group of "Super Listeners," defined as people who listen to on average five hours or more of podcasts a week. Of those super listeners surveyed, 54% responded that hearing a podcast ad (compared to other places) makes them more likely to purchase a product, and 48% said they pay more attention to advertising on podcasts than with other media. In an interview with *Forbes* writer Brad Agate, Suzanne Grimes, President of Westwood One and EVP of Marketing at Cumulus Media, said, "Brands love podcasting because audiences pay such intense attention and highly value the content. Hundreds of brand effect studies from Nielsen and Signal Hill Insights provide strong evidence that podcast advertising generates significant lift in brand awareness, favorability, consideration, and purchase."

The branded podcast. Just as placing advertisements in podcasts is becoming a new way for companies to reach their audiences, branded podcasts have now made their rise into the mainstream podcasting world. Instead of only getting a 30-second ad in a true crime podcast, for instance, why not create an entire podcast devoted to your brand, your product, your message, or your values?

Branded podcasts allow companies to speak directly to the target audience while also building loyalty (Nolden, 2021). Moreover, branded podcasts can rapidly drive coveted word of mouth advertising, creating as normal people discussing "that cool podcast" they listened to last week. Simply put, branded podcasts are another form of

content marketing -- an episodic show related to the brand's industry with tasteful and meaningful mentions of the host company while featuring content that is relevant and engaging (CSI Group, 2021). They have vast potential for building strong customer relationships, nonetheless.

While new to the universe of podcasting, the branded concept is anything but new in the world of advertising. During the Golden Age of Radio, and later on TV, brands often sponsored entire programs. Each week, shows like *The Voice of Fireston*e, *The Bell Radio Hour*, *The Texaco Metropolitan Opera,* and a multitude of other advertiser-sponsored broadcasts carried products and services into the homes of millions of Americans along with the content listeners wanted (Britannica "The Golden Age of American Radio, n.d.). Branded podcasts offer a similar way for companies to reach a captive audience in a totally uncluttered environment. This unchallenged landscape is something that is virtually unheard of in today's overcrowded and fragmented media world.

It is uncertain as to which company created the first branded podcast. While some claim they can be traced back to 2006, General Electric's (GE) *The Message* was one of the earliest well-known branded podcasts of its time (Owen, 2015). It was produced in 2015 in collaboration with Panoply Media, Slate's podcast technology company, and BBDO NY. This fictional podcast surrounding the hunt to decode a message sent from outer space hit number one on iTunes' podcast ranking in a matter of weeks, and in 2017 it had more than 4.5 million downloads (Johnson, 2017; Owen, 2015). After the response that GE received from *The Message,* companies began to take branded podcasts more seriously. In 2020, Chartable measured nearly 600 branded podcasts releasing their first

episode, and today, there are around 8,000 branded podcasts available for listening, a number that continues to grow as companies realize the potential that this new form of marketing holds. In an article from NeimanLab about GE's *The Message,* Andy Goldberg, chief creative officer for GE said,

> I don't consider it advertising. It's a podcast show that just happens to be produced by a brand instead of a network. I'm not saying, 'Hey, go out and buy a jet engine.' It's a science fiction story to connect listeners with what the GE brand is about, without selling the GE brand.

The layout for a branded podcast can range from a non-fiction show that speaks about the company behind the podcast frequently to a fiction show, like *The Message,* where some people do not even realize that it is a branded podcast for GE. No matter the show content and set-up, however, each company is seeking to connect listeners with their brand, and hopefully turn these consumers into brand evangelists (Mullin, 2016). At the end of the day, it is difficult to fully analyze which branded podcast listeners are actually contributing to sales, and this could be seen as a reason for companies to shy away from the podcasting world. But the impact of IMC has never been easy to measure, so branded podcasts are no different than any new IMC tool in that regard. Moreover, branded podcasts should be looked at as a long-term strategy -- a tool to drive engagement with a customer with whom would otherwise be unable to connect via traditional or digital media (Preston, 2020). Thus, traditional short-term metrics (e.g., immediate purchase behavior) are perhaps largely irrelevant.

Companies from various industries are slowly beginning to understand the impact that branded podcasts can have on their marketing strategies, but it is not easy to create a

branded podcast to which the average consumer would want to listen. Companies must find topics that lend themselves to a podcast format, while simultaneously connecting the topic back to their company without coming off as overly salesy. There is obviously no specific formula for a successful branded podcast, but several companies have demonstrated that branded podcasts could possibly be the latest way to authentically connect with customers, and analytics provide proof of performance. For example, a branded podcast for the toothpaste brand Zendium seems ridiculous, but their show *2 Minutes of Zen* is quite the contrary (Preston, 2020). The toothpaste company seized an opportunity to create a fun and interesting experience out of the mundane activity of brushing one's teeth while also engaging with consumers and spreading brand awareness. *2 Minutes of Zen* is just one of the countless shows that demonstrate the fact that there is no right or wrong way to go about creating a branded podcast; it just depends on understanding what your audience needs and to what they respond (Preston 2020).

CHAPTER 2: A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING BRANDED PODCASTS

Considering the rise of branded podcasts as a part of the marketing mix, it is important to understand the components that go into creating a successful branded podcast, one that listeners respond to and one that grows over time. In this thesis, my goal is to understand the extent to which branded podcasts are a useful component of an integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy, while also contributing research and data to the body of knowledge surrounding branded podcasts. To accomplish this goal, I conducted in-depth interviews which were then turned into case studies of three companies who have created branded podcasts that ranked in the top 50 of iTunes podcast charts over the past year.

Population

A branded podcast is an "episodic show (usually related to the brand's industry) that only makes small passing mentions of the host company while diving into a specific topic and/or featuring relevant guests" (The CSI Group, 2021). The population of branded podcasts is unknown, but in 2020 Chartable measured 8,000 branded podcasts available for listening on iTunes. There are also more branded podcasts that are not accounted for in this estimate because there are a sizable number only available for listening on a company's website (Zohrob, 2021). To further narrow down my sample, I chose to only focus on iTunes/Apple Podcasts rather than other podcast platforms such as Spotify or Amazon. Although Spotify's monthly podcast listeners just recently surpassed Apple's 28 million podcast listeners by 200,000, iTunes/Apple Podcasts has been the

blueprint for podcasting platforms since the release of podcasts (Götting, 2021).

Furthermore, the weekly rankings on each platform are relatively the same, therefore, the

difference in the platforms are quite small.

Sample

To provide a sample for this study, I decided it was important that I focus solely

on branded podcasts that have successfully incorporated this medium into their overall

IMC strategy. To narrow down successful branded podcasts, I focused on branded

podcasts that have been included in the Top 50 iTunes chart in both the general category

of iTunes and individual specific categories such as "Food" or "Technology" in the past

year. As stated before, iTunes does not display previous lists of these Top 50 charts to the

public, so I had to use Podcharts, a website that allows for tracking a specific podcast

show for any day and category.

To use this website to track each branded podcast, I had to first find a compiled

list of all branded podcasts. Unfortunately, I was unable to find a list that contained all

8,000 branded podcasts, but I was able to find a list of the most well-known branded

podcasts from two websites:

1. jaraudio.com, which published their list on August 10, 2021, and

2. marketingshowrunners.com, which published their list on November 1, 2019.

Between these two provided lists, I was able to compose a list of 154 branded

podcasts to track. I went through the list alphabetically and searched each podcast to see

if it had ranked within the Top 50 of iTunes charts in the past year. From there, I was able

to create the final list of 28 branded podcasts (see Appendix A).

Procedures

Before I began compiling a list of branded podcasts, I created a recruitment script (see Appendix B), approved by the University IRB (#21x-269), to email to each person that I selected to contact. Then I created an interview schedule (see Appendix C), also approved by the University IRB, so that I could keep my questions somewhat consistent for each interview. Prior to the official interviews, I conducted three pilot interviews with podcasters who were not a part of the sampling frame[2]. Dr. Bodie watched all these preparatory videos and provided advice for additional questions as well as basic interviewing skills. From there, I revised my interview schedule to ensure that I was prepared for the official interviews.

Beginning with the first company on my list, I began reaching out to people who were responsible for each company's branded podcast or had taken part in the creation of the podcast (e.g., people on the marketing teams, hosts of the podcasts, and producers). To obtain contact information, I searched for each company's marketing teams and articles about the podcast to narrow down at least one potential interviewee. From there, I searched for email addresses on LinkedIn or websites like RocketReach, a search engine that provides emails and phone numbers. If I did not get a response within two weeks or I could not find contact information for an interviewee, I moved down my list of branded podcasts. Although I reached out to all 29 companies, I was only able to interview four individuals from three companies, Adobe, Red Hat, and Basecamp. Because I was unable to interview the amount of companies I first set out to, I decided to turn these four interviews into three case studies. I chose a case study method not only because of the

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[2] For these practice interviews, I was able to carry out three interviews with Jenna Spinelle from the *Democracy Works* Podcast, Keith Richardson host of the *More in Common* Podcast, and Bob Poole from *The Water Cooler Hangout*.

limited number of interviews, but also because case studies "offer insights and illuminate meanings that expand its reader's experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009 p. 43). Furthermore, case study "insights can be constructed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research, hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009 p. 43).

Before each zoom-based interview began, interviewees provided informed consent to be recorded so I would be able to go back for later analysis. I also ensured that consent was given to be named in my thesis. Each interview was between 30 minutes to 45 minutes each. The transcripts of each interview were recorded verbatim by Rev, a transcription service, which I later used to analyze themes and consistency (See Appendix D).

Learning from Case Studies

In the next three chapters, I present the three case studies I conducted to explore branded podcasts. At the beginning of each case study, I present the reader with background information on each company, their industry, their competitors, and their marketing tactics. I then transition to discussing each interview by beginning with how the branded podcasts for each company came to be and the details of their production and then moving onto broader questions such as how their company views the success of their branded podcast and how they view branded podcasts as a tool in a marketing strategy.

Each case study is presented as a separate chapter in order to derive specific insights from each, individually. The advantage of a method like the case study is to create "thick description" of a limited number of cases. After analyzing and distilling

insights from each individual case, a final chapter presents general findings from these

cases as a whole (Geertz, 1973 p. 311).

CHAPTER 3: ADOBE CASE STUDY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information on Adobe Inc. as a company and discuss their position in the computer software industry. I then go on to discuss the two interviews I conducted with Khoi Vinh and Leah Walker, two employees of Adobe who work on the branded podcast *Wireframe*. Finally, I analyze the interviews and come to three conclusions about branded podcasts based on the interviews.

Adobe Inc.

Adobe Inc., formerly known as Adobe Systems Incorporated, is a leading multinational software company. Beginning with its creation in 1982 by computer scientists John Warnock and Charles Geschke, Adobe made a name for itself when the two founders created PostScript, a programming language that, in simple terms, describes the appearance of a printed page (Norr, 2020). In 1985, Apple Inc. acquired 15 percent of Adobe to become the first licensee of PostScript. In conjunction with The LaserWriter, created by Canon, and PostScript, personal computers now had the power to produce professional reports, flyers, and more. Adobe and Apple soon split in the late 1980's due to PostScript licensing fees, but this gave way to Adobe entering the consumer software market with Adobe Illustrator, "a PostScript-based drawing package for artists, designers, and technical illustrators" (Norr, 2020). Three years later, Adobe introduced Photoshop to the world which quickly became the company's most successful program.

After Adobe's prosperous debut into the consumer software market, they began to add several other applications to the Adobe portfolio including Adobe Premiere, a video

editing program, and FrameMaker, a program designed for creating book-length documents. In the 1990s, the Adobe Acrobat product family was released, allowing consumers to read and print any document that had been converted to Acrobat's portable document format (PDF), regardless of its origin or a user's computer operating system (Norr, 2020). In 2012, Adobe made the transition from offering their products as a one-time purchase to a Software as Service (SaaS) (Bigfoot Capital, 2019). Today, Adobe operates in three pillars of their business; The Creative Cloud portion which includes Photoshop, Illustrator, and Premiere; The Acrobat portion which is all things PDF related; and The Experience Cloud which includes a large variety of marketing tools for people to execute marketing strategies (Vinh, 2021).

The Computer Software Industry

According to Statista, "The software industry consists of the development, distribution, and maintenance of software. It can be broadly divided into application software, system infrastructure software, software-as-a-service (SaaS), operating systems, database and analytics software." Adobe is one of the largest software companies in the world, and in the U.S alone there are 525,000 software companies and IT services. Overall, the software market is projected to grow by $250.35 billion between 2021 and 2025 ("Global Software Market 2021-2025," 2022).

Adobe's main competitors include Microsoft, IBM, Oracle, Google, and Salesforce. In a study conducted by Statista Research Department, Adobe was ranked 7th in the "Largest software and programming companies worldwide by sales revenue from 2017 to 2021" bringing in 13.7 billion dollars in revenue in 2021. In another comparison of their competition, Adobe was ranked at number nine at 91.34 billion US dollars for

"Values of the top 20 technology brands worldwide in 2021" with companies like Apple, Google, Microsoft, and IBM above them (Alsop, 2021).

Adobe's Marketing and Advertising Activities

During the early 2000s, cloud-based subscriptions were becoming more prevalent in the software industry, and previous users of Adobe were now looking to move away from Adobe and towards competitors such as InVision and Sketch due to the more affordable price and no-fuss update options (Siu, 2019). Adobe was hesitant about switching to SaaS, but Shantanu Narayen took over as Adobe's CEO in 2007, and he focused on turning Adobe into an industry standard and honed in on their marketing services. Finally, in 2012, Adobe released Creative Cloud which immediately expanded their audience from primarily creative professionals to everyone from people looking to enter the world of design to members of the C-Suite (Siu, 2019).

Adobe uses in-house marketing teams to create and carry out their marketing campaigns for each pillar of the company. Furthermore, they devote most of their time and marketing resources to launches of their new products such as Adobe XD (Siu, 2019). A large part of Adobe's brand image is their clean design and minimalism. In the grand scheme of things, they are selling products that enable people to create their own beautiful designs. Consequently, Adobe's image must perfectly convey the kind image that their consumers are using their products to achieve. Adobe products are also always updating to ensure a superior user experience to their competitors. Adobe also utilizes search engine optimization (SEO) to the best of their ability (Siu, 2019). For example, from Ahrefs.com, in 2019, Adobe owned the 13th largest website in the world, they had 2 million referring domains, and they ranked for almost 10 million organic keywords. In

addition, their traffic value was $48 million US dollars. Moreover, Adobe was ranked in the top 20 for "Most popular websites on the global Majestic Million ranking as of January 2022 by referring subnets" with 206,283 referring subnets (Clement, 2022). From Adbeat.com (2022), which reports how companies are spending their money on digital advertising, Adobe was seen spending nine percent of their budget on video, 42 percent on direct, and 49 percent on programmatic.

Overall, Adobe understands the power of content marketing, and they appeal to both creatives and business consumers. Adobe acquired Behance, a social media platform for their audience to interact and showcase the content created in Adobe's software, and in 2012, they created the Adobe blog that allows content designers to collaborate with others and see what is going on in the world of design. Finally, the company has leveraged branded podcasts since 2018 (Siu, 2019). In general, Adobe does a great job at using a mix of marketing strategies to encourage continuous growth of their company in an industry that is rapidly changing.

Adobe's Branded Podcast

Adobe's branded podcast *Wireframe* took the number two spot on Apple Podcasts ranking in May and April of 2021 in the "Design" category and number 16 in the arts category in May of 2021. To understand more about branded podcasts, I had the opportunity to interview Khoi Vinh, Senior Director of Product Design at Adobe and the host of *Wireframe*, and Leah Walker, an Executive Producer for *Wireframe* and the lead social strategist for Creative Cloud and Document Cloud businesses.

In 2016, Adobe XD, a "vector-based user experience design tool for web apps and mobile apps" was launched by Adobe. At the beginning of the launch, Adobe had been

working with Gimlet Media to carry out advertising tactics for the XD program by placing mid-roll and pre-roll ads in podcasts, but they knew they needed to go bigger. Leah Walker stated,

> *We were asked, "Okay. But XD is a huge priority. What are your huge ideas to support and market XD?"... And my colleague said, "Well, a branded podcast with Gimlet," because they were just starting to do branded podcasts at the time.*

From there, *Wireframe* took around a year and half to launch. Both Vinh and Walker spoke of the importance of the show's pre-production phase; they did not want to just grab some microphones and interview people; instead, they planned out, and still plan out, what they want to accomplish in each of their seasons. Adobe worked with Gimlet for their first season, but then switched to Pacific Content to help produce their podcast. By working with companies that produce branded content, Adobe was able to hand over the creative direction of the show to Gimlet and then Pacific Content to launch a more professional podcast to their listeners.

For the first couple of seasons, the podcast was focused mainly on design and the marketing plans Adobe had created for Adobe XD because they were, in the background, trying to market this product to the masses. For example, in an episode from 2018 titled "Is Good Design Good for You?," Vinh discussed the ethics of UX design and if the "traditional definition of 'good' design is actually in our best interests" (*Wireframe,* 2018). Throughout the episode, they interview designers such as Justin Rosenstein, a software programmer at Facebook who created the "like" button. However, because of the popularity *Wireframe* gained, starting in season three, the show focused more on "creativity across Creative Cloud or design across Creative Cloud" (Vinh). For example,

in a more recent episode from 2021 titled "Does Burger King's new logo make you nostalgic?" Vinh discusses the pros and cons of using nostalgia to inspire design choices with creative director Lisa Smith who led the project for the Burger King logo.

Wireframe never explicitly speaks about XD during any of the podcasts, and I discussed this with Vinh. He stated,

> *So, from the very beginning we said we're not going to be hawking Adobe products. We're not going to be talking about Adobe constantly. And if we talk about Adobe, it needs to feel like a legitimate part of the story that we want to tell and that we're not going out of our way to mention Adobe. But we've never gotten to a point where we're being asked to mention Adobe X a number of times or anything like that. And I think this is part of the silver lining of not being an explicit part of somebody's marketing budget[3]. It's like when we go and we essentially get internal sponsorship for each new season, we're telling the story like this is a long-term brand play. And I think this is part of the silver lining of not being an explicit part of somebody's marketing budget. It's like when we go and we essentially get internal sponsorship for each new season, we're telling the story like this is a long-term brand play.*

A key component to the success of branded podcasts (or any marketing tactic for that matter) is creating awareness around the product, in this case the product being the podcast. To generate exposure for *Wireframe*, Adobe was given a budget somewhere between $100,000 to $150,000 that was used to promote the podcast on social media, in

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[3] *Wireframe* is not directly given a budget to use from the Adobe marketing department, therefore they have to pull funding from "different business units over time" (Vinh). Overall, it is not a permanent part of anybody's annual budget.

newsletters, and on other podcasts. Each season they reevaluate their media purchases from the season before and strategically choose the platforms and audiences they want to target, but the most successful way of marketing the podcast they have seen is "on other podcasts rather than ad impressions on Google, Twitter, or Facebook" (Vinh).

Finally, I spoke with Vinh and Walker about not only how they themselves see the success of *Wireframe*, but also how they continue to show Adobe that this branded podcast is worth continuing. At the end of each season, the Wireframe team compiles a report which will in turn make the case to acquire budgeting for the next season. The end-of-season report is a compilation of total downloads, the percentage of the episode completed, drop off points, the ratings on Apple Podcasts, and the number of countries they are reaching. Another main indicator of success for their podcast is their annual listener survey. The survey asks questions like, "Do you see Adobe as an innovator in this space? In this market? What is the likelihood of trying our products? And then the overall favorability rating of Adobe?" (Vinh). Both interviewees spoke on the subject that this branded podcast is not about numbers and conversion rates. Vinh stated,

> *It's not going to yield conversions. And it's really about creating a good feeling around a brand. And so, we're not using this to talk up our products or even our team. So, what we focus on is what's the editorial framework through which we look at any potential story and does the story map to that framework. And the framework is essential. We want to tell really good stories about the practice of design, about the way designers think about things and about how designer is relevant to people in a way that's broadly and interesting to a general audience,*

but also deep enough and substantial enough to appeal to a professional

designers as well"

Likewise, Walker remarked,

[W]e are tracking sentiment and building equity into this sub-brand of the

WireFrame podcast that becomes associated with Adobe over time. It's value that

we're bringing back to the community and so forth… podcasts are about shifting

brand perception and helping people know your brand on a deeper level and

coming to trust your brand, because that way when they do see something

advertised by Adobe later on when they're scrolling through Instagram or

whatever, they're more like, 'Oh, yeah. I really trust this brand, I think they're

really credible in the space of design. I'm going to go see what they have to offer.'

So it's really about that brand building awareness and consideration versus

purchase

Although *Wireframe* has become an important builder of Adobe's brand, Walker

felt hesitant on branded podcasts being an available marketing strategy for all companies,

stating,

I think the problem with branded podcasts is it's a very high startup cost. Three to

500k, I would say, is the minimum and that doesn't even necessarily include the

promotion in the whole budget. And you're asking a lot of your consumers to

listen to a 20 to 30 minute podcast. I don't think they're right for every brand. I

think there are a lot of other ways to convey a kind of thought leadership and

storytelling that don't require that much of a startup cost. So, it wouldn't be my

first recommendation if I were going to consult with a small startup on marketing.

I think that they're definitely right for certain brands, especially if they have a thought leader amongst them, like Khoi. So, I don't know if they're ever going to become a common part of a brand marketing strategy, but I do think branded audio in shorter bite sized clips might be in the future. Kind of like audio tweets in some ways. Like bite size nuggets of information or just a few minutes of information. I think that could be. But if I were consulting a startup, I would definitely advise to start a YouTube channel where they can self-produce helpful videos over a podcast to start. I just think it's much easier to distribute that content and get people to consume it when there's a podcast.

Analysis of Adobe's "Wireframe"

After analyzing the Adobe interviews with Vinh and Walker, I came to three conclusions about branded podcasts. The first is that branded podcasts are not for the faint of heart. To have a successful branded podcast, a company must spend a large amount of time not only convincing their superiors to give the green light for this type of project, but also finding sources for funding. Furthermore, in the case of *Wireframe*, they had to decide on which podcast production company they wanted to work with, and with this type of outsourcing, branded podcasts do not come cheap. Secondly, I found that branded podcasts are not about being able to see conversion rates directly. Although *Wireframe* was first created to market Adobe XD, it was never really about seeing how many people bought the design tool. Instead, it evolved into connecting on a deeper level with their audience and establishing Adobe's value in the mind of the consumer. Adobe has seen it firsthand, that although you are not seeing sales spike after a new episode is released, *Wireframe* has created a long-term relationship with their audience that places

Adobe ahead of their competitors. So, when the time comes for the consumer to choose between Adobe and another design company, they will most likely choose Adobe because of the trust that has been built. Finally, Adobe's *Wireframe* is a testimony to the importance of a company finding their niche audience. The tech and design worlds have a "cult-like" following, filled with people who crave consuming new information about these topics and are constantly looking for new ways to do so; and that is why I think so many people enjoy listening to *Wireframe*. It is another outlet for those interested in graphic design to delve deeper under the surface of their niche and satisfy those cravings to learn more. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for a company to find their niche community, and additionally, if a company can have a "thought leader" (like Vinh) host the podcast, they are able to attract those in the community who already know and love the host to further boost the success of the podcast.

CHAPTER 4: BASECAMP CASE STUDY

The purpose of this next chapter is to present my second case study, Basecamp.

Similar to Chapter Three, I discuss the background of Basecamp, and how they got to

where they are today in the computer software industry. I also delve into the ways in

which the company brands themselves to the consumers and distinguishes themselves

from their competitors. Finally, I examine my interview with Shaun Hildner, the producer

and host of Rework, and discuss the conclusions I made from the interview.

Basecamp

Basecamp is an American software company that initially focused on web-design

until their focus shifted to web application development. Previously known as 37Signals,

Basecamp put their name on the map in the computer software industry in 2003 (Fried,

n.d.). The founders of the company, David Heinemeir Hansson and Jason Fried, realized

that there was not a tool or application that could help organize and run their web-design

business, so Hansson created an open-source software called Ruby on Rails, which

became "the heart and soul of Basecamp" ("Our Software," n.d.). When Basecamp was

created, it allowed the company to collaborate better, organize projects, and, overall, run

smoother. By 2004, after realizing others' interest in the company's application,

Basecamp was released to the public to purchase and use, and in 2014 the company

officially rebranded from 37Signals to Basecamp (Fried, n.d.). Hansson, cofounder of

Basecamp, describes Basecamp as, "the one-place-not-all-over-the-place way to organize

your projects and your company. Launched in 2004 as one of the first software-as-a-

service applications and used by millions of people since. It's the original Rails

application, and the namesake of our company." Over the years Basecamp has released

other software for purchase such as Campfire, a web-based real time group chat, and Ta-

Da List, a free to-do list in your browser. But today, they only offer two current products,

Basecamp, which is now in its third version, and HEY, a redesigned email application

(Fried & Hansson, n.d.). Overall, Basecamp is committed to simplifying and organizing

how companies manage projects and work with clients.

As of 2022, Basecamp has generated 7.9 million dollars in revenue. Despite this

large number, they are intent on keeping the company a small business ("How Basecamp

hit $7.9M Revenue," 2022). Jason Fried, CEO and founder of Basecamp, takes a non-

traditional approach when it comes to running his business. He now employs only 94

people.

In 2017, he revealed that he had refused over 100 investment offers from venture

capitalists and private equity firms throughout the 18 years that Basecamp has been

running (Connley, 2017). Fried told CNBC, "Basically, when you take other people's

money you owe them something. You either owe them money back or a business

decision that is kind of no longer yours. Oftentimes that means selling the business or

being acquired and being run by someone else, and we don't ever want to do that." He

believes the way to stay in business and succeed is to make money by selling their

products and making profit, not by raising money from venture capitalists. Fried ensures

his employees thrive in a healthy work environment and enforces a 40-hour workweek

for the majority of the year and 32-hour workweek from May to September (Connley,

2017).

Basecamp's main competitors include Wrike, Trello, ClickUp, and Teamwork

(Swan, 2021). Over 20,000,000 people have worked on projects using Basecamp, and it

is reported that 100,000 companies have used Basecamp (Fried, n.d.). Although

Basecamp does not have a marketing team and does not advertise their products, Fried

and Hannson do an incredible job at appealing to the public and creating a cult of tech

lovers who want to hear what they have to say. They both write articles on their blog

www.world.hey.com, and they take their blog posts a step further when they decided to

co-write four books together: *Getting Real, Rework, Remote: Office Not Required,* and

the most recent one*, It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy At Work. Rework* and *It Doesn't Have*

To Be Crazy At Work. their bestsellers, speak on the strenuous work hours that have

become the norm. Nowadays it seems as though it has been implanted in everyone's'

minds that to be the best, you must work yourself to death or spend your life savings, but

they offer up another way for their readers to become successful entrepreneurs ("Books

Recommend by Jason Fried," 2018). The Basecamp founders push the status quo of what

it means to be founders of a billion-dollar company and do not gatekeep the secrets to

what they believe have made them and Basecamp so successful. Furthermore, they attract

such loyal followers of their tech company because they appeal to the everyday person.

With 289.5k followers on Twitter, Fried actively tweets about Basecamp but with a hint

of humor. In one tweet, he is seen promoting one of his blog posts, with the caption

"How much is Basecamp worth? I don't know and I don't care. A valuation is what other

people think your business is worth. I've only ever been interested in what our company

is worth to us." Hansson has an even bigger following on Twitter with 441.6K, where he

is often tweeting about the latest news in the tech industry and sharing the blog posts he

has written. They also like to "stick it to the man" on social media. In one instance, Fried tweeted "When Google puts 4 paid ads ahead of the first organic result for your own brand name, you're forced to pay up if you want to be found. It's a shakedown. It's ransom. But at least we can have fun with it. Search for Basecamp and you may see this attached ad." "The tweet includes the screenshot of an ad for Basecamp, reading "Basecamp.com | We don't want to run this ad." The copy says "We're the #1 result, but this site lets companies advertise against us using our brand. So here we are. A small, independent co. forced to pay ransom to a giant tech company" (Graham, 2019). Here is just an example of another way in which these two founders distinguish themselves from their competitors. By showing they are not just another tech company trying to take your money, but instead, a company with CEOs that are just like regular people that enjoy technology and computer software, they are able to attract more customers.

Basecamp's Branded Podcast

Basecamp's branded podcast, *Rework*, began in 2017, and took the number 26 spot in the "Management" category on Apple Podcasts on December 16, 2020. To understand more about *Rework,* I emailed Jason Fried who then forwarded my email to Shaun Hildner, the producer and host of *Rework* since 2015.

A little over a decade ago, Hildner was hired by Basecamp as a video producer. The company knew they wanted to do something with video production, but they were unsure as to what that was going to be. After a few years working at Basecamp, a woman named Walin Wong was hired to write "The Distance," which was an online magazine about businesses that endured for over 25 years. From there, Hildner decided to record himself narrating these stories from the magazine and posting them as short audio stories.

Once those audio stories began to gain traction, they decided to stop production of the magazine and fully convert it into a podcast called *The Distance.* After releasing 58 episodes, Basecamp decided to transition *The Distance* into what is now *Rework. Rework* follows mostly the same audio story outline as *The Distance* by discussing the different topics and chapters that are covered in Fried and Hansson's book *Rework*. Each episode begins with Hildner introducing a chapter of the book and conversing the ideas within it with Hansson and Fried over a 28-minute time frame. For example, in one of their episodes "Workaholics Aren't Heroes," Fried and Hansson discuss their previous jobs where they worked 60-hour workweeks in harsh environments such as offices with no windows. They also bring on an employee from Basecamp to speak about his experience switching from a 60-hour workweek to an environment like Basecamp where employees can only work 40-hour weeks. They discuss that people deserve lives outside of work, and that these strenuous hours are actually counter-productive. In another episode "Less Mass," Fried and Hansson discuss how having too much staff, countless meetings, etc. make it harder for companies to be adaptable and change directions. The podcast obviously promotes *Rework* the book, but it rarely ever mentions any of Basecamp products. When asked if the podcast was ever used to directly market Basecamp products, Hindler stated,

> *It was more about just getting the word out there, and word of mouth. It was kind of another version or connected with the blog. But even then, it's always been more about educating our customers or educating potential customers about not necessarily about the product, but in order to get the most out of the product, you sort have to work a certain way. And that's the way that Jason and David were*

writing about in Rework, and that's (the podcast) the way that we would sort of

get that out there. So, it wasn't as much as promoting the products themselves, it

was more about, hey, if you like the way that we're talking about working, you're

really going to love Basecamp or whatever.

From the interview, it was easy to tell that the Basecamp company takes a positively relaxed approach to their endeavors such as the podcast. They do not actively track engagement or ROIs on the podcast, and they view *Rework* more as just an audio blog that "feels good" to put out there. Hildner expressed that he, himself, likes to see his numbers for the podcast grow, but no one else is ever worried about the numbers. Furthermore, he stated,

I have no way of knowing if the podcast boosts Basecamp sales and don't really

care how it affects people that sign up for Basecamp or pay for the products.

Basecamp "prides itself on not having a marketing team," so they invest little to nothing on marketing for the podcast (Hildner). Most of their listenership comes from word of mouth, regular readers of Fried and Hansson's blog, and the existing following that Fried and Hansson have from their already established position in the tech world. Twitter is the only place in which the podcast is promoted or by others tweeting or posting on other social media platforms about *Rework*. Moreover, since the podcast is produced in-house by Hildner, the cost of the podcast is just his salary.

As my interview continued with Hildner, I asked him if he could see more companies using branded podcasts in the future. He stated,

I don't think podcasts are going anywhere. I don't think audio storytelling's going

anywhere. But I think it's going to be a struggle to teach people to not use it as a

platform to talk about yourself or to talk about your products. Instead, it should

be about education. It should be about giving something to your listener and

figuring out a way to make that relate to whatever you're trying to sell.

We also spoke about how the importance and success of branded podcasts stems from companies creating and fortifying relationships with potential and existing customers. Hildner said,

David Heinemeier Hansson was talking to me about this (the idea of creating

relationships with the listeners), that he really likes being able to come on the

podcast because it humanizes him to hear someone's voice. I think like, especially

versus shouting on Twitter or writing in a blog, hearing someone's voice

humanizes them and therefore it humanizes the company. I think that says a lot of

value in that.

Finally, Basecamp's branded podcasts are not going anywhere. After they have finished going through the 85 essays in the *Rework* book, Hildner has three more books by Fried and Hansson that they can convert into podcasts.

Analysis of Basecamp's "Rework"

Delving into the backstory of Basecamp's "Rework" and their approach to branded podcasts has given me a very different perspective on the topic. Some of my findings contradicted my findings from the Adobe case study because Basecamp takes a more relaxed approach to creating their branded podcast. I first found that some people may look at branded podcasts and believe it to be too daunting of a task, but in actuality, all you need is an idea for the episodes, a producer, and people to speak on the show. Basecamp has created a successful podcast for just the cost of one person's salary

therefore, unlike Adobe, you do not need to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to outsource the production of a podcast. Obviously, there are benefits to both options, but if a small company is looking to create a branded podcast, they do not have to spend a large amount of money to be successful. Secondly, Basecamp is overall an interesting subject because they rarely market their products, but instead, rely on word of mouth and the loyal followers of Fried and Hansson to generate sales. Therefore, they are always looking for new ways to further connect with existing and potential customers, and the branded podcast is a perfect way to accomplish this. Like Hansson said to Hildner, a podcast humanizes him, which in return, humanizes the company. If you connect a voice and stories with a company, you are in turn becoming more than just a brand in the eyes of a consumer, and overall, creating an authentic relationship with them. Finally, from this case study I have found that although Basecamp never invests in paid advertising for branded podcasts, I believe they are a rare case in this area. Because Fried and Hansson already have such a loyal and large following on social media, all they need to do is tweet about a new podcast episode, and their followers will listen. Moreover, the company does not really pay attention to listenership or growth numbers, so there would be no reason for them to pay for marketing. But, I do not think this applies to most companies. There are an estimated two million podcasts available, and 8,000 of those are branded podcasts, meaning that if a company does not have an existing loyal following, a branded podcast could get lost among all the noise ("Infinite Dial", 2021 & Chartable, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to invest in advertising to grow a branded podcast, especially at the beginning stages, whether that is placing advertisements in other podcasts or some type of paid social media to really see growth in listenership.

CHAPTER 5: RED HAT CASE STUDY

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly discuss how Red Hat software came to be and what differentiates them from their competitors. I also discuss their brand identity and marketing strategies, including their branded podcast, *Command Line Heroes.* Finally, I examine my interview with Brent Simoneaux, the Director of Content Marketing for Red Hat, and analyze my findings from the interview.

Red Hat Software

Red Hat is an open-source software company that was officially founded in 1995. In 1993, Bob Young, a young entrepreneur was running a computer supply catalog out of his home when he noticed a growing interest in Linux, the most-used open-source operating system available ("Our Story," 2021). At the same time, Marc Ewing was creating his version of Linux which he named Red Hat in homage to his signature red Cornell lacrosse cap he was always seen wearing. Young began to buy Ewing's Red Hat Linux CDs, and he could not keep them on the shelves. Finally, Young decided to buy Ewing's business in 1995, and together they created Red Hat Software with Young as CEO ("Our Story," 2021.).

On August 11, 1999, Red Hat Software went public and "achieved the eighth-biggest first-day gain in the history of Wall Street" (Satell, 2019). Shortly after, Young left the company, and Matthew Szulik became CEO. In 2001, the Internet was becoming more powerful, and more people were interested in the idea of open-source software, but Red Hat needed a new business model to keep up with the rapidly changing times (Satell,

2019). Szulik decided to launch "an enterprise version of Linux on a subscription basis,"

and "Red Hat Linux Enterprise" became its flagship product" (Satell, 2019). With this

reinvention of Red Hat Software, companies could use open-source software, and Red

Hat would help them run it, taking Red Hat from an open-source company to a consulting

company. By 2012, Red Hat hit $1 billion in revenue and Red Hat Enterprise Linux

subscriptions were being purchased worldwide ("10 Years of Red Hat Enterprise Linux,"

n.d.). Beginning in 1999, IBM and Red Hat had been working together to ensure that all

IBM systems were on Red Hat Linux, and in 2000, they had pledged $1 billion to Linux.

Finally, in 2018, IBM announced its intent to acquire Red Hat for $34 billion, a deal that

was finalized on July 9, 2019 ("IBM Closes Landmark Acquisition," 2019).

Today, Red Hat offers seven products, including Enterprise Linux, that all allow

their customers to operate across the cloud. In June of 2020, Red Rat reported a revenue

of $934 million, making them IBM's top driver for total cloud revenue ("IBM Closes

Landmark Acquisition," 2019). Despite having competition in the software industry such

as Oracle, Apache Software Company, Microsoft, and Amazon Web Services (AWS), the

company takes an untraditional approach to the usual software company business model

(Simoneaux, 2022). As expressed by Eric Roberts, Charles Simonyi Professor of

Computer Science at Stanford University,

Red Hat gathers the collective work of thousands of programmers all across the

Internet and packages and sells the resulting product with the Red Hat name on it.

Because Linux is an open-source project, Red Hat cannot claim intellectual property

rights on its product. Hence, people can download Red Hat Linux for free, and then

modify, copy, and redistribute it completely legally. However, by providing a convenient

and polished product, complete with documentation and technical support, Red Hat hopes to attract customers ("Economics", n.d.).

Furthermore, similar to Basecamp, Red Hat also stands out among competitors by ensuring they cultivate an open and safe workplace environment. The company ranked 27th on Fortune's 2021 list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For and 6th on Fortune's list of the Best Workplaces in Technology. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the company guaranteed they would continue to grow, and they did so by adding more than 2,000 employees to the workforce and 900 technical roles ("Red Hat named to Fortune's 100," 2021).

Red Hat's Marketing Strategy

Red Hat's marketing team, also known as RedHat Open Studios, consists of more than 180 members and operates as a "full service internal agency" (Divakaran, 2019). In 2019, the company rebranded with a logo developed with the help of the open-source community, mimicking other types of content creation projects they curate. They include data sheets, briefs, and infographics in their content, but they also focus on the story-telling aspect to deliver the brand's message. They often use customer success stories to demonstrate how Red Hat compares to their competitors, and they publish articles on the company's "blog" known as Opensource.com (Divakaran, 2019). The Red Hat website averaged 1.5 million page views and 90 articles published per month in 2019. Red Hat has also taken steps to engage with their community, collaborating "with Boston Children's Hospital on Chris Research Integration System and deployed it into Mass Open Cloud (MOC) on Red Hat OpenShift. The new system helps Boston Children's Hospital to solve the challenge it had with medical image processing" (Divakaran, 2019).

Finally, they have continued to grow *Command Line Heroes*, a branded podcast created in 2017.

Red Hat's Command Line Heroes

Command Line Heroes took the number 15 spot in the "Technology" category on iTunes on July 29, 2021. To understand more about the creation and evolution of Command Line Heroes, I spoke to Brent Simoneaux who began as a content writer and editor at Red Hat and is now the Director of Content Marketing. I first wanted to speak to Simoneaux about Red Hat's brand identity and how they go about communicating their brand to the public. He stated,

> *Red Hat became hugely popular in the '90s and early 2000s, and it sort of took over the data center. But more recently, we've kind of pivoted toward hybrid cloud. And so, that's what our sort of more recent products and even our Linux product helps people do, is that you can move your applications. You can move them seamlessly between different cloud computing companies. So, all I've got to say, our products are business-to-business products. They are incredibly nerdy. They are incredibly technical and complex, and it is a very niche market. It is a very, very niche market."*

Simoneaux has been at the company since the beginning of the creation of Command Line Heroes. At the time, he was running a team of creative writers and copywriters where they focused mainly on advertising, events, and video scripts, but a product marketer from the Linux team came to Simoneaux and said that Red Hat Enterprise Linux 8 wanted to create some sort of big campaign for the release of the new product. The original idea was a social media campaign, but Simoneaux wanted to do

something bigger. With the help of his creative partner, they asked for six months to go out and talk to people in the tech community and to come up with a few ideas based on their research. Simoneaux explained to me how they conducted their primary research;

> *We affectionately called it* Comics and Coffee. *We started convincing people on our events team to let us have just a little bit of space in the booth at different events. And this was a challenge at first, but we just said, "give us a little bit of space in the booth." So, we decided to bring in a caricature artist to these big tech conferences and events, and they set up with us. And while they were sort of drawing your caricature, we would sit in front of them and we would be like, "Can we just talk to you?" And they were like, most people, 99% of the people were like, "Hell yeah. I'll talk to you, whatever." And so, we got to know software developers and system architects, sys admins, things like that as people. And our first question was always, "Tell us your origin story. Tell us how you got where you are today. What makes you tick?" And we just carried on conversation month after month. And from all of that qualitative research, we ended up deciding that people wanted to learn more about their profession, and there was a role for media to play in that. And so, we were like, "Should this be a video series? Should it be a long-form article series? What should it be?*

After conducting their primary research, Simoneaux and his team commissioned an outside research company to understand more about media consumption among software developers, and to Simoneaux's surprise, the company offered up the idea of a podcast. Because Red Hat's internal creative team did not have much experience with audio or podcasting, they reached out to production companies and decided on Pacific

Content, a production company based in Vancouver. But, there was still another issue

with the idea of a branded podcast: Simoneaux's team did not have any funding to create

a podcast. So, they convinced their bosses to give them $30,000 for the first two episodes

of *Command Line Heroe*s, which was the "epic history of the operating system wars of

the '90s and 2000s" (Simoneaux). Simoneaux was walking around Copenhagen,

Denmark when he was sent the finalized versions of the pilots, and he said, "Oh, there is

some magic here. There's some magic here. This is going to be a big hit. It was just great

storytelling."

Their bosses told them to continue with the podcast, but they still had the issue of

funding. Simoneaux and his team began going around to other product teams and

business units and making a deal with them. Simoneaux described it this way,

> *This is why the first season of Command Line Heroes is really weird and*
>
> *disjointed. There's an episode about the operating system, and that came from the*
>
> *Linux team. There's an episode about data in there, and that came from our*
>
> *storage team. So, we kind of cut a deal with them where we were like, "If you give*
>
> *us money, we'll produce an episode about... Not about your product, but about*
>
> *your topic."*

And this idea of not talking about the actual products is where the podcast created some

tension with the marketing and PR teams. They could not understand why they were

creating a podcast that barely even mentioned Red Hat or their products, but Simoneaux

and his team decided to continue to pursue the podcast based on a gut feeling. And by

season three of Command Line Heroes, they finally had their own budget, meaning their

own editorial freedom to create episodes based on their qualitative research instead of

promising episodes to other teams for money; this is when Command Line Heroes really

took off. Simoneaux stated,

It's funny if you look at a map of downloads, it's like season one, season two, and

then season three just shoots up

I asked Simoneaux how they determined the success of their podcast, besides the

downloads and listenership, and he stated,

Originally, our metric of success was we are going to basically pull people into

our web properties. So, the idea was we would be like, "Hey, you just listened to

an episode about storage on our website, redhat.com/command-line-heroes. You

can go read additional information about storage." And so, we were creating blog

posts and basically more content about the topic and then trying to get people

after they listened to the podcast to then go to our website. So, we did that for a

while. And well, okay, we thought it was smart and it makes sense. It totally

makes sense, but it didn't work. It didn't work. We were looking at traffic, and

there was virtually nothing. So, we were spending a lot of time generating extra

content and no one was reading it. So, we were having trouble getting people to

go from podcast to website, but we had no trouble getting people from redhat.com

to the podcast.

From there, Simoneaux came up with another theory. He believed that maybe the

podcast was never about generating traffic, but instead, "it was more about brand

awareness and affinity." But, he still needed to figure out how to measure brand

awareness and affinity. So, he reached out to Jeff Vidler, the President and Founder of

Signal Hill Insights, a company that researches different audio platforms for specific companies. On working with Signal Hill Insights, Simoneaux stated,

> *We worked with him to do an audience survey and then a brand lift study, and it gave us information about our audience that we didn't know because the data, especially demographic data and things like that, that you can get from podcasting platforms is very limited. So, one example of that is, we know that we want our personas, or the demographics that we really want to be reaching. We want to be reaching developers, and we want to be reaching system administrators. But, there's no way to tell that through Spotify or through Apple podcast data or data that we can get from our hosting platform. So, we did an audience survey, and it turns out, it's mostly people who work in IT. It's mostly developers, it's mostly system administrators, and it's mostly people who have been in their jobs for 10 years or so. So, we get all this rich audience information that we can then bring back to the company and say like, "Hey, we are reaching the right people." The big questions that have been really helpful for us with specifically brand awareness are brand recall. So, in that audience survey we ask the question, who produces this podcast? And we don't say anything in the survey about Red Hat. Even the URL for the survey is commandlineheroes.com/survey. And it's a fill-in-the-blank, not a multiple choice. And every year, like year over year, 99% of people know that it comes from our brand which is crazy because we only say Red Hat exactly twice in every episode.*

Simoneaux went on to speak about tracking brand affinity;

Brand affinity is more difficult to measure, but I think we found a way. And we do that through what's called a brand lift study. And so, what that is, is in the same audience survey, again, without tipping our hat to who produces the podcast at all, or who's behind the podcast, we ask our listeners to basically rate their opinion of all of these enterprise software vendors, which is basically us and our competitors. So, they basically rate their opinion on a scale of zero to one of like Microsoft, Red Hat, IBM, Amazon, and Cisco, all these companies. So, the trick that we do is, once that survey is done, we field another survey. In the other survey we look at the same demographics of people that filled out that survey and we match those demographics with another sample group, and the only difference in the people that we recruit there is that they have not listened to our podcast. And we run them through the same question. And one of those questions is, rank your opinions of these software vendors. Totally the same questions. And what we found year over year is that people who have listened to the podcast rank Red Hat higher than the people who have not... And it's significant. It is a significant jump in the numbers. And not only that, but they tend to rate our competitors lower as well. So, it's not just that they're ranking us high, they tend to rank other people lower.

Simoneaux continued sharing with me his findings on whether their listeners have used Red Hat products or know the brand, and year after year they always receive 50/50 feedback. That is, 50% of their listeners have never heard of Red Hat, and the other 50% have. Furthermore, when they look at website traffic on the Command Line Heroes page

within redhat.com, they find that 50% of that traffic is unknown users, meaning they have never been to redhat.com before then.

> *So, we're able to tell this really compelling story to our CMO and our CEO and*
> *really anyone who will listen, which is to say, there's a lot of people listening to*
> *our shows. Upwards of like last year and we've already exceeded it this year,*
> *more than half a million people. These aren't downloads. These are people. Half a*
> *million people a year are listening to Command Line Heroes and our other*
> *podcasts. Is not exact, but if you can extrapolate out about 50% of those have*
> *never heard of our brand before.*

Overall, from these surveys, Red Hat was able to not only understand but actually show higher-ups in the company that the podcast was not only introducing the brand to listeners but also increasing brand perception because they can present listeners an entertaining show without asking anything in return.

Simoneaux and his team have also employed the use of Chartable, a podcast analytics platform, to track their podcast promotion. With Chartable, instead of relying on a promo code or URL to track downloads, it relies on pixels and marketing technology to track how many downloads are coming from placing advertisements in other podcasts so they can better grasp how to spend their marketing dollars. Having been exposed to how Chartable works, Red Hat is now on the cusp of using these pixels and marketing technology to "basically match up podcast listeners with redhat.com visitors and then any conversion point" (Simoneaux). On the topic Simoneaux stated,

> *If we're successful, it's going to unlock revenue for us. So, we're going to be able*
> *to say that people who listen to, for example, Command Line Heroes are 40%*

more likely to make a purchase than people who haven't, or people who were
introduced to the brand through our podcast then led to 50 million worth of
revenue. We don't have trouble selling the value of the podcast internally. That's
not why we're doing it. We're still going to get funded. We have a large budget
now. I think people listen to it internally and they're like, "I get the magic." They
just trust that it leads to things. But if we could definitively say, here's the amount
of revenue that we spent $1.5 million in podcast production this year and that led
to $20 million worth of revenue. That's gold. That's a return on investment right
there.

Simoneaux and I also discussed how they advertise *Command Line Heroes* to increase listenership. In the beginning, they had a very limited promotions budget so they only focused on paid social promotion, but they soon realized that they were spending around $200 on a download, which they could not afford to continue. So, with Pacific Content they began exploring advertising within other podcasts, and it showed to be incredibly profitable and successful. The true mastermind behind how they determine which podcasts to advertise Command Line Heroes in was Dan Misener, the Director of Audio Development at Pacific Content. Misener built what they like to call, a "podcast neighborhood map." Simoneaux explained,

We basically loaded in the technology charts in Apple podcasts, and it takes that
and then scrapes audience numbers and audience overlap and then creates a
network map of all the top 200 technology shows. And when it does that, you start
to see the links between the podcast, and you get these little neighborhoods of
people who tend to listen to this cluster of shows together. And so, what we did

was we looked at that and we said, oh, here are all these other shows, and that

are very similar to Command Line Heroes and share some of the same audience.

Let's start forming relationships with these other shows, and we can basically pay

for advertising on our shows. And that has been incredibly successful.

Red Hat has taken further steps to explore branded podcasts and the way companies produce them by branching out on their own and having a hybrid model of production where some of their shows are created in-house and their bigger shows rely more on the help of Pacific Content. In 2021, Red Hat launched a new podcast called *Compiler,* to be able to make a name for themselves in a new category of enterprise technology podcasts in which Microsoft is dominating at the moment. For *Compiler*, Simoneaux and his team made the decision to produce the podcast in-house, but due to difficulties with production, they hired a full-time producer to cut the show and bring it to the assembly edit stage, and they then send it off to Pacific Content for post-production. Red Hat is planning on having three shows within the next year, two of which will be produced in-house and one show with Pacific Content. One of the main reasons for switching over to this hybrid model is because of cost. To give a sense of the comparison of cost between in-house and out-of-house production, Simoneaux explained that, in total, *Command Line Heroes* costs $37,000 to produce, while Compiler only costs $5,000. But, despite this $32,000 difference between the two, Simoneaux stated,

I believe you really do need to have out-of-house first. It's worth it. But it's scary.

It's a big investment. If you don't know what you're doing there, and it's scary. It's

really, really scary, but I don't think you can do it otherwise. You really need that

outside perspective. Because they also, in addition to all the production expertise

and industry knowledge, audio industry knowledge, they bring us a perspective

that is not Red Hat's. And every brand is like this. You get really myopic. You see

everything through the lens of your brand. And it's really hard to understand or

listen to your show from the perspective of an audience. But Pacific Content

comes from the perspective of "what do listeners want to hear? What is going to

be most valuable to them and what experience do they want to have and how can

we shape that show?" And so, there are so many times where we're like, "Here's

what we think we should do." And they're like, "I don't think you should do that."

And that's really valuable. That's part of the success of all of our shows is that we

are able to listen to them and they feel comfortable giving us that feedback. And

we listen to them.

Finally, I spoke to Simoneaux about whether branded podcasts will ever become more of a staple in marketing strategies for companies, or if it's more of a fit for specific companies. He stated, "I think that it will become a staple in people's marketing strategies. I really think that it will. I think that it is a very immature medium right now." To delve into the question more, he spoke about how he is working with GritHub to create two crossover episodes between *Command Line Heroes* and GritHub's *ReadME* podcast.

I was learning by working with them that this is their first podcast, and they are,

as a marketing organization, where we were four years ago and it's not that we're

smarter or even doing anything's better, it's just, we've just been doing it for

longer. And so, when I talk to people about this, I talk about the podcast maturity

scale within an organization. And I think it's the more people do it and the longer

they do it, the more of a staple it will become. But the key to that is that you have

got to show the value of it to the business. A bad branded podcast can do damage

to your brand, so you have to do it right. And doing it right is very hard. But when

it's great, it can create amazing opportunities for your company

Analysis of Red Hat's *Command Line Heroes*

Simoneaux's interview provided me with so much insight into the world of

podcasting and where it is headed. He has taken a very experimental and analytical

approach to branded podcasts, and he has shown me how companies can benefit from

branded podcasts more than they know. Firstly, I found that, unlike the assumptions of

many companies, there are ways to track brand awareness and brand affinity. I have

written a lot about how branded podcasts' main purpose is to create brand awareness and

cultivate a deeper connection between the listener and the brand, but with the surveys that

Simoneaux, in partnership with Signal Hill Insights, there is now a way that companies

can quantify brand awareness and brand affinity. In the end, companies want to see

statistics to ensure that their money is not going to waste, and with surveys like the ones

that Red Hat is using, it is now possible to present something tangible to higher-ups.

Furthermore, surveys with Command Line Heroes listeners are evidence that brands do

not have to constantly remind listeners of the brand throughout a podcast for them to

remember. Simoneaux explained that even though they only mention Red Hat two times

throughout each episode, 99% of survey respondents know that Red Hat is the company

that is creating the podcast.

Secondly, I believe that branded podcasts are still, as Simoneaux stated, at an

immature level, but as we see analytics technology grow around podcasts, more

companies will begin to understand the importance of this marketing tool. As seen from

Red Hat, the technology to track engagement between the podcast and the actual product

is in the works, which should, in turn, inspire more companies to create branded podcasts.

If companies were able to definitively see the return on investment from branded

podcasts, that would change the game, and Red Hat seems close to creating and utilizing

this type of technology.

Finally, I have found that no matter the company, the branded podcast should be

about what the listeners would want to hear, not what the company believes their

audience should hear. The core of integrated marketing communications is listening to

what the customers are saying and acting upon their wants and needs, and branded

podcasts are no different. Companies must think about what experience listeners want to

have when listening to their podcast and shape their show around it. Branded podcasts are

more than just knowing which category of podcasts yours fits into, but instead

understanding how to differentiate yourself from the hundreds of other podcasts just like

yours, and this goes to show how invaluable feedback is when it comes to branded

podcasts.

CONCLUSION

The branded podcast is a tool available to companies to elevate their brand in a world filled with constant marketing noise. The three case studies presented in this thesis sought to understand the role that branded podcasts play within an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) framework. Through these case studies, I was able to discover several different insights.

First, and present throughout all of the interviews I conducted, is that branded podcasts are not viewed as a marketing tool that can generate a direct return on investment. In each interview, these leaders expressed, instead, that their branded podcast is most useful for creating brand awareness and brand affinity. In addition, there remains the hope that branded podcasts can convert those who already love the brand into brand evangelists. Furthermore, like in the Basecamp case study, branded podcasts have the potential to humanize a company, further contributing to a stronger relationship between the brand and the consumer.

Second, it was evident, after conducting and analyzing these interviews, that each company takes a different approach to how they go about creating a branded podcast. For example, while Adobe believed the only way to create a "successful" branded podcast was by spending a large amount of money to out-source the production, Basecamp took a simpler approach by producing a branded podcast on just one person's salary. Red Hat combines these two approaches by outsourcing the production of some of their branded podcasts and taking an in-house approach to their smaller podcasts. Overall, there are

likely advantages to all of these options, and the decision for how a company wants to produce a branded podcast is going to be based on the size of the company and their aspirations for the podcast (e.g., reach, scope, influence). If a company has no idea how to enter the world of podcasting, I believe it is beneficial to hire an out-of-house production team, but for those like Basecamp that already have an in-house producer and know the basis of what their podcast is going to be about, there really is no reason to spend a large amount of money on out-sourcing.

Finally, I found that for branded podcasts to be impactful and attract listeners, companies must not only find the podcasting category and niche community that is right for them, but they also need to research and understand what their audience wants to hear. At the end of the day, the success of the podcast, much like the success of a brand more generally, is determined by the listeners.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study was an important first step to understanding the place of branded podcasts in the IMC mix, it is limited in several important ways. First, I was only able to secure interviews with three companies, all of which are in the technology space, and all focus on selling different software. Second, the findings are limited to the interview questions I asked, all of which were informed by what I wanted to learn in this particular study. Some interviews were less detailed than others because I wanted the coversation to flow naturally. Thus, part of the learning process for this thesis was about how to conduct useful and generative interviews. To further the findings on branded podcasts, one could select a different population and conduct more interviews with all different types of companies that have branded podcasts in a broad range of categories.

Finally, follow up interviews would be beneficial to future studies to grasp the ways in which these companies have evolved their branded podcasts.

These limitations notwithstanding, this thesis does provide several important implications for organizations looking to add variety to their IMC mix. Clearly, the research on branded podcasts should continue, and I look forward to doing some of that work.

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APPENDIX

A. BRANDED PODCAST RANKING 2020-2021

COMPANY	BRANDED PODCAST	PEAK RANK ON APPLE PODCAST IN THE US
Andreessen Horowitz	*Bio Eats World*	Sept. 23, 2020 #1 in Life Sciences (stayed at #1 until April. 13, 2021) // Sept. 23, 2021 #6 in Sciences
Robinhood	*Snacks Daily*	Sept. 20, 2020 – Sept. 15, 2021 stayed in #1- #5 spots in Business News // Jan. 29, 2021 #14 in News// #72 Jan. 29, 2021 in All Categories
REI Co-Op	*Camp Monsters*	Oct. 21- 26, 2020 #1 in Drama // Oct. 23-26, 2020 #1 Fiction
Trader Joe's	*Inside Trader Joe's*	March 10, 2021 #1 in Food // March 10, 2021 #8 in Arts // Stayed above top #30 in Food from Nov. 25, 2020 to Sept. 15, 2021
Allure	*The Science of Beauty*	Nov. 2, 2021 #1 in Fashion and Beauty // Oct. 17, 2021 #7 in Arts
Adobe	*Wireframe*	May 21-26, 2021 #2 in Design // May 20, 2021 #16 in Arts
Chanel	*3.55*	Jan. 17, 2021 #3 in Fashion // Beauty/ Jan. 17, 2021 #22 in Arts
Blinkist	*Simplify*	June 1-2, 2021 #5 in Education

Reddit	*Endless Thread*	Oct. 11, 2020 #5 in Technology
Charles Schwab	*Choicology*	May 13, 2021 #8 in Science
Zip Recruiter	*Rise and Grind*	Dec. 1, 2020 #9 in Careers
Expedia	*Out Travel The System*	Dec. 19, 2020 #9 in Places and Travel
McKinsey	*The McKinsey Project*	Nov. 10, 2020 #10 in Management
REI Co-Op	*Wild Ideas Worth Living*	Jan. 4, 2021 #12 in Sports
General Electric (GE)	*LifeAfter/ The Message*	Sept. 25, 2020 #12 in Science Fiction // Stayed above top #40 the whole year
Red Hat	*Command Line Heroes*	July 29, 2021 #15 in Technology
Bank of America	*That Made All The Difference*	Aug. 9, 2021 #17 in Tech.
LinkedIn	*Hello Monday*	May 17, 2021 #17 in Business
Village Global	*Venture Stories*	Dec. 26, 2020 #19 in Management
Fresh books	*I Make A Living*	May 4, 2021 #21 in Entrepreneurship
Basecamp	*Rework*	Dec. 16-17, 2020 #26 in Management
Mailchimp	*Partners*	Dec. 6, 2020 #26 in Relationships
WHOOP	*The WHOOP Podcast*	Aug. 18, 2021 #28 in Health and Fitness
Cineplex	*Hello Movies*	Feb. 2, 2021 #30 in Film Interviews
Maison Margiela	*The Memory of… With John Galliano*	Feb. 2, 2021 #31 in Fashion and Beauty
Melissa & Doug	*Living Playfully*	March 15, 2021 #40 in Parenting
John Deere	*On Life and Land*	Dec. 6, 2020 #43 in Business News

B. Recruitment Script

Dear *Participant Name,*

My name is Lilly Arabella Hamm, and I am a junior at the University of Mississippi currently conducting research for my thesis as a requirement for my graduation from the Sally Barksdale Honors College with a degree in Integrated Marketing and Communications.

My thesis seeks to add to the academic and institutional body of knowledge surrounding the use of branded podcasts in a company's marketing strategy. I worked with my advisor to select this topic, given the significant growth of podcasts across multiple platforms including sports, entertainment, and corporate marketing, and recognizing the limited information that is currently available on the effectiveness of branded podcasts.

I understand **insert company name** has leveraged branded podcasts since *insert year here,* and I am contacting you as my research consists of several one-on-one interviews with individuals such as yourself.

The interview will be very casual and typically last 30 to 45 minutes and can be done over video chat or telephone.

I would greatly appreciate your insights into what I believe is an emerging and currently underutilized channel within the marketing mix. **Insert company name** has a long history of marketing innovation, and your input will significantly add to this area of study for students and marketing practitioners to use.

If I can answer any questions or provide additional information, I can be reached by email (lahamm@go.olemiss.edu) or phone (901-409-4051).

Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Lilly Arabella Hamm

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

C. Interview Schedule

Research Question: This thesis seeks to understand the extent to which branded podcasts are a useful component of an integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy and add to the body of knowledge of branded podcasts.

<u>Introduction</u>

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my thesis research. As I mentioned, my name is Lilly Hamm, and I am a current Integrated Marketing Communications student at the University of Mississippi. We are here today to talk about your work with XXX and specifically about the podcast XXX. I promise to take no more than an hour of your time, and I would love it if this could be more of a conversation than feeling like an interrogation.

To help me fully listen and engage, do you mind if we record this conversation? I would like to be able to review it as I write my thesis. Is that okay?

1. So, if you don't mind, could we just start by you telling me a little about your professional journey? What got you into this profession, what's your story?

Additional Interests/Probing Questions:

· Could you tell me a little bit about your roles or responsibilities in your current positions?

2. So you are currently the TITLE of COMPANY. Tell me a little about COMPANY's brand and how you go about communicating a consistent brand image.

LISTEN FOR what "mix" of communication strategies and platforms they use.

Possible Probing Questions Here

4. Can you tell me about your understanding of the story of the podcast? How did it come about?

    4a. What was the concept process? How long did it take?

5. What was the expected lifespan of the podcast? What was originally thought it to be, and did it change over time?

6. Can you tell me about any ways in which the team had to alter the podcast?

3. I'd like to focus a bit on your experience with how you envision the podcast within the context of your overall marketing mix. I wonder if you can speak to the role that the podcast plays in an overall marketing mix?

7. All of the components of a marketing mix has different markers of success. Can you talk a little bit about what success looks like for the podcast?

LISTEN FOR/PROBING QUESTIONS:

    o How were listeners sought out for the podcast? Was there any acquisition costs?

    o Were there any formal ROI metrics that you can talk about?

8. Why do you have the podcast/ decide to make the podcast? What was the main reason the company decided to make the podcast?

9. Was there struggle making the case to others about the podcast? Was it difficult to get the funding or convincing leadership to sign off on the creation of the podcast?

9. Can you give a brief synopsis of how the podcast was produced?—

10. At what point do you think the podcast wil end/ how do you know (how did you know) when to stop the podcast?

As we close out our time today, what have I not asked – or what would you like to share that you have not been able to share?

And, do you know of any other brands or companies that I should be talking to?

Thank you again for your time today. I will follow up when I complete my project with a topline for you, and I hope we can stay in touch as I continue my own career.

D. TRANSCRIPTS

Khoi Vinh Interview:

Khoi Vinh:

At the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. And so for the Honors College here, we have to all do a thesis that correlates to our majors and I'm an Integrated Marketing Communications major.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Ah, cool.

Khoi Vinh:

Alrighty. Oh yeah I'm recording. If you don't mind, just starting out telling me a little bit about your professional journey and what got you into this profession, just kind of like synopsis of your story.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Sure. I've been a designer for two plus decades now. I've worked at small companies and large companies. Early stage ventures, late stage tech, media services, all kinds of stuff. And the through line is my interest in the practice of design and the community of design. Really trying to elevate the discussion around what is design and why does it matter. And

so I've been at Adobe for six years now, leading product design teams there, and we've been doing this podcast for three or four years now.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. So, maybe a little bit more about your roles and responsibilities as the... You're the senior director of product design, is that correct?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, so I lead a team of people who design products for Creative Cloud. So we're creating tools for professional designers, people who create apps or websites or designers who are creating solutions for their clients. And also increasingly tools for the people that those folks work with, like stakeholders and clients like marketing folks or strategy folks and so forth. And so I run a team. I handle the overall design vision for where the products go in collaboration with the team. Of course I partner with our products management and engineering folks to plot the roadmap and then handle the resourcing of our team and, and think about from a business perspective, what can design do to contribute to the success of products?

Khoi Vinh:

Very cool. So I'm coming from obviously more of a marketing standpoint. So I had to get questions reviewed by a board to make sure they were allowed. And I have questions about the brand of the company and how Adobe, the brand image of the company. Do you have what your perception of the brand is and how Adobe wants to be perceived as a brand?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, I mean Adobe is really a company that makes tools for creative people and for makers. And also for marketers. We have three pillars of our business. The Creative Cloud portion of it, which is Photoshop and Illustrator and Premier, all of those apps. And then we have the PDF business, the Acrobat business, which has many more users in general. And then we also have our Experience Cloud outside the business, which has our marketing tech tools for people to execute marketing strategy. And we sort of see that as all one big continuum for digital transformation of business.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

You can develop a marketing plan and use Acrobat for all the work products that comes out of that in order to get buy in and then even write creative briefs that will go over to Creative Cloud that people will then execute the creative side of market plan. It's just one simplistic journey. And so Adobe is really about a whole idea of digital transformation through creativity. And we want to enable creativity for all these pillars, not just Creative

Cloud, but also for people who are, who are working or working on Acrobat or experienced Cloud Schools. And the idea is we were trying to reduce friction and give them the opportunity to put more creative thought into the things that they're doing.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. So the branded podcast. So I want to know how, because for my thesis I'm trying to answer the question of how a branded podcast fits into a marketing strategy. And also, there's not a lot of knowledge and literature about it. So I'm trying to add to that because there's really not much to go off of because it is such a new thing. And so I want to get like a background of the beginning, like how did it come up if you were a part of that.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

In some ways I'm realizing I think the interview you really wanted to do was with my colleague, Leah Walker, who is on our communications team, basically responsible for the... She's sort of like an executive producer for the series. But she and I have been involved with it since the beginning with another person who's on parental leave right now. So how does it fit into an overall marketing strategy? Well, in the beginning the podcast was expressly intended to help with the marketing of Adobe XD, which is a fairly new tool that we created for people who create apps and websites. And so we really closely aligned it with the marketing plans for that product, but because there was no real precedent for like funding and sustaining a podcast, it was all very much ad hoc.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Adobe's marketing plans tend to be very conversion focused. And we also really felt that for the podcast, it was much more of a brand awareness play. And so we really tried to shy away from committing to converting listeners to paying drivers of Creative Cloud or something like that. And so what we emphasize is brand sentiment generally as detailed in a season end report that we would generate based on social reach, based on downloads and completion times. And also based on surveys that we did each season with our listenership. So over the past few years, the podcast has morphed a little bit in its intention. So now it's not just about XD anymore. It's really just about creativity across Creative Cloud or design across Creative Cloud.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

So you're trying to help people think about how design in a bigger sense can help them accomplish their goals or how they can put design thinking to use. I think generally it's been more of a matter of fine tuning the way we talk about the podcast to executives. And it is a matter of just really making a major change. It's essentially the same show with a slightly different focus, slightly different intent. And I think we're still in that realm where we're not like an explicit part of the marketing plan in terms of we're still not

signing up for conversions, but we're tracking overall sentiment. And then the idea that we're building equity into this sub-brand of the Wire Frame podcast is something that becomes associated with Adobe over time. It's value that we're bringing back to the community and so forth.

Khoi Vinh:

That's what I'm started writing my first few chapters. And you can definitely tell branded podcasts, most aren't going to be able to see conversions from that whatsoever. But I talk about the idea of you can change a person that's not so familiar with Adobe to someone that is, and then someone who is into a brand evangelist, someone that really supports. And I think that's what people are afraid of about branded podcasts sometimes. It's because you're not going to see like, "Oh, they listened to this and then what and bought this." So when the idea came about, how long did it take to launch it?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Well, from when a few of us first started talking about it to when we really kicked off production, that was about a year. And then from that start of production to when the first episode shift, so to speak, there was another four to six months. So it took a year and a half.

Khoi Vinh:

And for that first episode, I listened to it the other week, when the idea of the podcast came up, did you all know what that first episode was going to be about or was it brand into production?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

So a key decision that we made are really Leah and Lindsay, the person who's on the leave, they really were very insistent on this approach was instead of just getting some microphones and recording some interviews, they really wanted to do a serious production. And so part of that year of pre-production, so to speak was spent really finding the right partner and hiring that partner. And it was Gimlet Media and talking over the creative direction of the show. And so the pattern that we've established is at the beginning of each season, we switched production partners because Gimlet got out of that business so it actually got recorded by Spotify, but it's essentially the same every season. There is a pre-production phase where we're talking about what we want to accomplish that season. One of the priorities of the business from a marketing standpoint.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And then there's a pitch phase where we're essentially pitching different concepts for the episodes. And then there's talk about what the spots look like inside the episodes so forth.

We've changed it up a few times, season to season. So all that happens in pre-production. And so in answering your question, we very much knew what that first episode was going to be in context with the other five or so episodes we had that season. Because it's like we had a board with, I mean the episodes weren't all done at the same time, but we had an idea of what they were going to be and then what the sequencing would look like.

Khoi Vinh:

Yeah. Okay. When you all brought it to executives, was there ever a struggle making the case about the podcast? And maybe getting the funding or convincing leadership to sign up?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah well, I think yes and no. There's generally pretty broad support for the podcast. People are really happy with the podcast. But when it comes time to funding it that doesn't always translate directly into fundraising. So there's always a lot of leg work to actually get commitments for money. And we have had to pull together pieces of funding from different business units over time, and we've managed to pull it off for four seasons, but it hasn't yet got to the stage where it's like a permanent part of anybody's annual budget plan.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. Was there an expected lifespan of the podcast and was it originally allowed to be something or start it and let's keep going?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Well, when we started, we knew we were going to do one season of six episodes and we checked on a bonus episode. But we had no idea whether we would get past the first season. And it was similar with the second season. We did second season and we started a few more momentum. And then we were like, "Okay, we'll probably get a third season," but we had no commitment for the third season.

Khoi Vinh:

Was that continuing dependent on the listeners, amount of downloads or your ranking?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. Well, I mean, what we do is at the end of the season, we compile a report of like how well the season did. And then, I mean, our budgeting happens on an annual basis. So when we get to budget time, then we start to make the case for funding the following season, we fund a season at a time.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. One second. So, obviously, it's hard to measure a success of a branded podcast or a podcast in general. Can you talk about what success looked like for this podcast and what was it determined to be?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, so I have a sheet that I want to pull up.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

(silence)

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay, I can't find the one that I have in mind, but I have an older one from preseason we have there. So we talked about total downloads for a season. We talked about percentage of the episode completed. How far into the show they get. We talked about the drop off points, like where are the major drop off points in each episode. I need to start [inaudible 00:17:47]

Khoi Vinh:

You're good. Take your time.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. Here it is. We talk about our rating on Apple Podcast and how and what the trend is. The number of countries we're reaching. And then we have the annual listener survey that I mentioned. And the big questions we're asking like, "Do you see Adobe as an innovator in this space? In this market?" And so we track that roughly from season to season. And then we ask about their likelihood of trying our products and then overall favorability rating of Adobe.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. That's very good to know. Those things especially are very hard to find. And even your podcast ratings and stuff, it's very hard to find for me. So that's really good to know.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

You mean, aside from what's on the Apple Podcast?

Khoi Vinh:

Yes, because I went in, so the way I compiled a list of branded podcast to reach out an interview was the past year of reaching top 50 of Apple Podcast, whether it was main top

50 or top 50 in a certain category like design. And it's very difficult to do. But just as apple doesn't keep they don't show you a history over the past year. So did you seek out listeners for the podcast? Did you use social media for it? Was that one of the big things?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. I think what we found is that the most successful way of doing that, marketing your show is on other podcasts rather than ad impressions on Google or Twitter or Facebook or anything. So finding other podcasts where we could run a spot or doing specialty as I can remember. This is not really my territory, but we've had other shows carry an episode of our show, it's like an introduction from the host of that show. To say this is a great podcast, I'll just do rit, et cetera and stuff like that. And then doing interviews on other shows and stuff like that too. So really trying to mine a networking potential of other podcasts.

Khoi Vinh:

Yeah. Okay. Let's see. Was there any way, I guess you talked about it from season to season just altering the podcast and stuff, I think you covered that. But I was also going to talk about all branded podcasts do it differently. There's the Trader Joe's one and they're obviously talking all about Trader Joe's and stuff, for Adobe was there ever a conversation about how many times I'll actually want to mention Adobe because I know you really don't at all very much. So was there a conversation about that?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, it's a continual conversation. So, from the very beginning we said we're not going to be hawking Adobe products. We're not going to be talking about Adobe constantly. And if we talk about Adobe, it needs to feel like a legitimate part of the story that we want to tell and that we're not going out of our way to mention Adobe. But we've never gotten to a point where we're being asked to mention Adobe X number of times or anything like that. And I think this is part of the silver lining of not being an explicit part of somebody's marketing budget. It's like when we go and we essentially get internal sponsorship for each new season, we're telling the story like this is a long term brand play.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

It's not going to yield conversions. And it's really about creating a good feeling around a brand. And so we're not using this to talk up our products or even our team. So what we focus on is what's the editorial framework through which we look at any potential story and does the story map to that framework. And the framework is essential. We want to tell really good stories about the practice of design, about the way designers think about things and about how designer is relevant to people in a way that's broadly and interesting

to a general audience, but also deep enough and substantial enough to appeal to a professional designers as well. Yeah.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. I don't know if you may know this because this is definitely not your area. Do you know if Adobe runs ads not about the podcast, but in general in regular podcast y'all do.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

We have. I mean, I think various products have over time and we did for XD and so forth, but I don't know what the general strategy is.

Khoi Vinh:

Yeah. And then more about your listeners. Okay. I know a certain amount of males or a certain... Like the metrics on that. Do y'all have that when y'all go-

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Demographics?

Khoi Vinh:

Yes. Or like-

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

We may, but we never surfaced that as part of our season end reports.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. I asked like the lifespan of it and what was the going season by season. Do y'all have an idea, okay, we do this many seasons and then it's done and then we go to a new one. Or is it just the same as season by season we'll just figure it out as we go. This ending point of the podcast.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I'm not sure I understand your question.

Khoi Vinh:

Sorry.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

That's all right.

Khoi Vinh:

I was talking about how do people know when do you stop a podcast? You've created this podcast for Adobe. Just so I can get a-

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

When will we know we've done enough seasons or?

Khoi Vinh:

Yes.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. I think it's season by season. I imagine it'll be some combination of, are we still serving the overall brand interests of Adobe and is the market for this content? Because it's changing, because there are a lot more brand podcasts than there were when we started four years ago. So there's a lot more competition for attention. So I think we take it as it comes each year.

Khoi Vinh:

I talked about what I'm asking about how branded podcasts where they are in a marketing strategy. And do you see it as you were saying a brand awareness? Turning, making connections and relationships with the listeners and hoping that they're buying Adobe products? Is that where you see branded podcasts?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, I think so.

Khoi Vinh:

It's hard because I know you're not marketing. So definitely different.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I guess the way I look at it is that even though the company Adobe tends to be more conversion focused when it comes to marketing. How we play in this arena is part of the overall brand story, regardless of whether we do it or not. Because there are people who are talking about us in this way on shows like ours. And so it's sort of like a cost of doing business in some respect, but also it's an opportunity to do something that over time will produce some value, maybe harder to anticipate today.

Khoi Vinh:

Yeah. What are the listeners like are they interactive with y'all on social media and stuff?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yes, not extraordinarily, but yes. We get good feedback on each episode and we also get really good response rates for the annual surveys stuff that we do as well.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. That's good to know. I think I'm pretty much almost done. I've got a really good idea. This is my first one, this is my first interview. So if I seem nervous, that's why.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

You're doing great.

Khoi Vinh:

Thank you. I really don't have a lot more questions. I've got a good awareness of y'all's branded podcasts and how it started, how it's going. Is there anything else you'd like to share about it?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

If you're interested, I could introduce you to Leah as well from the market team.

Khoi Vinh:

I would love that.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, so I'll do that over email and then hopefully she'll be able to make some time for you.

Khoi Vinh:

She's the... Did you say producer? Executive producer?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

On the show she's executive producer and she's essentially on our communications team.

Khoi Vinh:

Okay. Very cool.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And basically our social team at Adobe.

Khoi Vinh:

Yeah, that would be awesome if you could do that. But thank you for everything. It's been great.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Sure, yeah.

Khoi Vinh:

Perfect.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. Well, good luck.

Khoi Vinh:

Thank you. Have a good one.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay, bye.

Khoi Vinh:

Bye.

Leah Walker Interview:

If you don't mind just starting out by telling me maybe just a little bit about your professional journey, how you started, just a brief synopsis.

Leah Walker:

Yeah. So I got into social media because I had a Tumblr blog back in the day when Tumblr was a whole thing. And someone who read my blog referred me to my first agency job in social media. And I worked at that agency for a few years and then moved to the in-house side. I went to Microsoft. I was the kind of social media and advocacy lead for the LuLeah Walker division, which was their kind of smart phone organization at the time, now it's no longer. And then I came to Adobe and I've been at Adobe for the last, I think, six years now.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Neat. Very cool. Do you like in-house or agency better? I'm a marketing major, so I'm...

Leah Walker:

I think starting at an agency is a really good way to get experience across a variety of different brands. But then, I mean, for me personally, I'm happy to have landed in-house because I think you get to kind of set the strategy more than just kind of executing on whatever strategy is kind of approved by the client. So I think it was a nice trajectory though to start agent side and then go in-house. But hey, if you start in-house I'm sure that's fine too.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. So what are kind of your roles and responsibilities dealing with the social media at Adobe?

Leah Walker:

So I actually oversee all of creative cloud and document cloud social. So I have people on my team that kind of lead strategy for all of the products and segments within creative cloud and document cloud. So I manage those people, I kind of help set the overall vision and strategy for our team. I make sure that we're allocating budget properly. I help prioritize and I ideate against big launches and campaigns and events. And then, yeah, we have a team of agency partners and vendors who support kind of the day to day operations of posting and curating content and moderating.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. And then so before we get started kind of the story of the podcast and the production of the podcast, so I just kind of get the idea... And I talked to [Coi 00:03:21] about it a little bit, but kind of how Adobe goes about creating what the consistent brand image is for the company and how y'all kind of go about communicating that for the goal of y'all's brand image and what y'all want it to be.

Leah Walker:

Yeah. I mean, we have a whole brand team that that's their kind of dedicated [inaudible 00:03:40] is the brand image. But, yeah, I mean, I do know that we have kind of defined our brand values and we really want to make sure that everything we do conveys those brand values. And I think in recent years we've really been trying to focus like, okay, what are those causes that Adobe stands for? When will we kind of lend our voice to a conversation and when is it not going to be part of our message.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. Were you there when the idea of the podcast came about?

Leah Walker:

Yeah, I think I was. This was maybe four years ago-ish, I want to say. So our product Adobe XD was a huge priority at the time, and we had been doing advertising with Gimlet Media. And so we'd been advertising Adobe XD with mid-roll and pre-roll ads. And then I think we were asked, "Okay. But XD is a huge priority. What are your huge ideas to support and market XD?" And I actually wasn't around when the podcast was approved, I was on maternity leave. But my colleague was like, "Well, a branded podcast with Gimlet," because they were just starting to do branded podcasts at the time. And it was approved. So we got the budget for it. So that is how it originally it came to be.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Are you allowed to say how big the budget was at first? Is that...

Leah Walker:

I don't see why not. I mean, I think they charged pretty standard amount for all of the podcasts. I think it was around 500.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay.

Leah Walker:

I know we paid anywhere between three and 500 for it over the years. So I can't remember what it was at the time. Maybe it was 300 then and then it went up to five. Yeah. And then we switched production partners, so the cost changed.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. And then so can you tell me a little-

Leah Walker:

By the way, you're not using this in a public facing [crosstalk 00:06:03].

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

No, no, no, no, no. I won't use those numbers or anything, but just-

Leah Walker:

Okay.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. Okay. No, you're good. The thesis will be published, but just let me know anything that you don't want me to put in, I just won't put it in.

Leah Walker:

Okay. No, I think this is all pretty.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. So how did y'all go about the production of the podcast? You were working with Gimlet, but did you know, "Okay. We're going to talk about XD, but we're not going to make it crazy noticeable-"

Leah Walker:

We were basically like, how do we create a podcast that we could target to aspiring designers, but also get people interested in design, in UX UI design, who maybe don't even know what it is or they work on another part of design. So it's all about getting more people into the UX UI kind of pipeline and creating content that would be interesting for them. Yeah.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And then I asked Coi this too, but was there any discussion of how much y'all wanted to say Adobe? Because I know y'all don't really talk about Adobe a lot. Was there ever that discussion of how much of [crosstalk 00:07:09].

Leah Walker:

Yeah. It was intentional that we don't have a heavy hand of our branding in the podcast, because we wanted it to feel just like valuable content, not shoving the brand down your throat. So I think in the first couple seasons we just had mid-roll ads that were XD focused and we kept the rest of the content it's just about UX UI design, but we're not going to insert Adobe every which way. And we actually had conversations about, should we tell that Adobe story in the podcast? And we ended up not really doing that because we just don't want to seem like we're being self-serving. We really wanted the podcast to be valuable and entertaining. And so we just didn't feel like we could do that in the context of be being heavy handed with branding.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And then was there ever in a conversation kind of about the lifespan of the podcast or were y'all just like, "If it does well, it does well. We'll do another season." Or...

Leah Walker:

Kind of. Yeah. It was kind of like that. We don't ever know. I mean, we budget yearly, so we never know the next year are we going to have the budget for it. So we've just kind of

always fought for that next season because it always does pretty well. And we think we're building equity in this show.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And so a big part of my thesis is talking about... What I'm trying to understand is where branded podcast kind of fit into a marketing strategy. And also there's [inaudible 00:08:43] a lot about branded podcasts, so I'm just adding to the knowledge of that. But what I talk about a lot is measuring the success of a branded podcast, which I know is hard because you're not going to be like, "Oh, they listened to this. And then they went and bought whatever." But kind of how did y'all go about measuring the success of the podcast?

Leah Walker:

Yeah. So we did measure traffic sent from those mid-roll ads in the first couple seasons, but I don't think that was ever huge. We definitely had KPIs around downloads, how many people listened and we would always kind of meet or exceed those KPIs. I think we, for the first season.... I can't remember when it was, we set a KPI of... Oh, I don't even know. I just remember we get 20 to 30,000 listens per episode and it's growing, and so we end up building... Because people will listen to current seasons and then go back and listen to past seasons, so we end up getting more downloads over time. So we really feel like if they're listening to the content, that is our goal, right? We aren't going to really expect it to drive traffic directly.

Leah Walker:

We want these people to get interested in design and then think of Adobe. Oh, the other thing that we do is a listener survey after the podcast. And I think we target people who've been targeted with the podcast [inaudible 00:10:19]. Something like that. To get the right people. I think... [inaudible 00:10:25]. It's going to be a little loud. So we do a listener survey, we always are able to show that the brand perception is increased and people associate Adobe design, the percentage points of that increase. So that's a really important part of, yeah, kind of how we analyze success.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Let me look real quick. One second. Let me see. Okay. Yeah. Well, I guess we kind of talked about how the podcast was envisioned within the marketing mix and kind of the role that the podcast plays in y'all's overall marketing strategy. And I think you kind of got it. I think branded podcasts, the more I'm researching, it's more about just creating, not more of a relationship with the consumer than rather selling to a consumer.

Leah Walker:

Right. I feel like podcasts are about shifting brand perception and helping people know your brand on a deeper level and coming to trust your brand, because that way when they do see something advertised by Adobe later on when they're scrolling through Instagram or whatever, they're more like, "Oh, yeah. I really trust this brand, I think they're really credible in the space of design. I'm going to go see what they have to offer." So it's really about that brand building awareness and consideration versus purchase.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yes.

Leah Walker:

Yeah. Totally.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And then y'all's marketing or advertising for the branded podcast, did y'all do a lot? Did y'all do social media or targeted ads or anything?

Leah Walker:

Yeah. Every season we've had a pretty large... Well, not pretty large. I would say a reasonable media budget of a hundred or 150k that we use to promote on social. And then we also use it to promote through other podcasts and then on relevant newsletters and other platforms. We always do a pretty strategic media buy for each season.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

All righty. And then I guess Coi talked about this also, but kind of thinking about the long term of the brand, is there an expected end to it? Or is it just, "We're doing well. Let's just keep going"?

Leah Walker:

Yeah. I don't know. I mean, we're trying to find resources for season five and I feel like these are the kind of things that really continue to give return on investment, if [inaudible 00:13:13] continue in investing in them. It's just kind of a slow burn. But you really do build credibility, and you build listenership, you build dedicated fans. As long as it keeps performing, I would love to keep it going because it's more valuable than... Again, it's really about that brand authenticity and credibility for me. Yeah. I hope we can keep going.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. So when y'all sat down to start making it, was it like you had a season planned out and you had the episodes for it and then you had the content and then you started recording? Or was it kind of just like, here's an idea, here's an idea, just write a script.

Leah Walker:

So the production teams that we partnered with, they really helped us with the editorial process. So we kind of gave them the brief of here's what this podcast is about. And then we would kind of give them some ideas and then they would come back with like, "Okay. Here are some ideas for episode one, two, three, four." And then we would hone and shape the ideas from there. We really worked closely with the production team.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. Y'all went from Gimlet to... Who did y'all switch to?

Leah Walker:

It's called Pacific [crosstalk 00:14:27] Production. And just because Gimlet got acquired by Spotify and then they weren't doing branded podcast anymore. So it wasn't really an option.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. That's good to know because there are a bunch of... When you first look up branded podcasts, there's so many that are Gimlet, but I didn't know that about them changing.

Leah Walker:

I don't think they do them anymore. I mean, if they do, I don't know, we have to start using them.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

So seeing how branded podcasts have played a role at Adobe, do you think for other companies, I mean, there are so many now, but kind of the idea of even smaller companies creating a branded podcast, do you think it is an effective way? We have social media, we have branded podcasts. Do you think it'll ever become something that's... Do you see what I'm getting at? I'm trying to explain.

Leah Walker:

Yeah. So I think that branded audio is going to be a part of the marketing mix at some point. You have Clubhouse and then you have all these other kind of Clubhouse imitaters like Twitter spaces or whatever it is, and Spotify because they're making one, Broom. I can't remember. But I think the problem with branded podcasts is it's a very high startup

cost. Three to 500k, I would say, is the minimum and that doesn't even necessarily include the promotion in the whole budget.

Leah Walker:

And you're asking a lot of your consumer to listen to a 20 to 30 minute podcast. I don't think they're right for every brand. I think there are a lot of other ways to convey kind of thought leadership and storytelling that don't require that much of a startup cost. So it wouldn't be my first recommendation if I were going to consult with a small startup on marketing. I think that they're definitely right for certain brands, especially if they have a thought leader amongst them, like Coi is definitely a thought leader in this space.

Leah Walker:

So I don't know if they're ever going to become a common part of a brand marketing strategy, but I do think branded audio in shorter bite sized clips might be in the future. Kind of like audio tweets in some ways. Like bite size nuggets of information or just a few minutes of information. I think that could be. But if I were consulting a startup, I would definitely advise to start a YouTube channel where they can self-produce kind of helpful videos over a podcast to start. I just think it's much more easy to distribute that content and get people to consume it when there's a podcast.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. I think the financial side of it and the fact that there's no really great ROIs on it that a lot of people are scared of it.

Leah Walker:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, yeah, definitely isn't an obvious tactic [inaudible 00:17:35].

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. I feel like we've gotten mostly everything. I don't really have that much more to ask. I went kind of fast, but you answered all of them really well. Is there anything else you would like to share about branded podcast and Adobe's branded podcast?

Leah Walker:

Well, tell me what is your thesis about actually?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

So it's pretty much just... I'm writing it right now, but I'm three chapters. But it is just kind of the idea of branded podcast and how companies are now recognizing that it is such a great thing to put into their marketing mix and how well it can enhance a marketing strategy. And I'm kind of just going through almost answering the question,

but also at the same time just adding to the body of knowledge of branded podcast because I'm trying to find research right now and there's absolutely nothing, any source of good information on it. So kind of just doing that, but how it enhances a marketing strategy.

Leah Walker:

Okay. Have you talked to other Brandon podcasts?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I have Base Camp on Friday and Red Hat on Thursday. So Adobe's still my first one.

Leah Walker:

Okay. It's a very interesting topic, very niche. So that's interesting. [crosstalk 00:18:59]. No, go ahead.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

My degree is integrated marketing communications. And so when we're writing a thesis for the honors college, it's such a broad... You get to literally almost pick anything. So I love podcasts and I didn't even really know what a branded podcast was until I started researching advertising in podcasts. And then I realized that Trader Joe's inside Trader Joe's was a branded podcast and I listen to that all the time. And then I was like, "Oh, wait. I'll do that."

Leah Walker:

Cool. Very interesting topic. And if you have any other questions, you can always reach out.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. Okay. Perfect. Well, thank you so much for your time.

Leah Walker:

Yeah. Thank you so much. Good luck.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Thank you. Have a good one.

Leah Walker:

You too. Bye.

Shaun Hildner Interview:

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

All righty. So if you just want to start out telling me maybe just a little bit about your professional journey and kind of what got you into this profession, just like a quick little synopsis.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah. So I was actually hired on at Basecamp little more than a decade ago as a video producer. And I'm not sure they knew what they wanted out of video. It was kind of like, you know, very old person way of going about things saying like, "Hey, those kids are really into video these days. Let's get one of those." So I spent a few years just trying to figure out what to do. And around six, seven years ago, they hired a woman named Wailin Wong to write something called The Distance, which was like a online magazine covering businesses that were sticking around for more than 25, 30, 50 years. And as part of that, as I was trying to figure out, oh, video work is drying up, can let me figure out what I can do. I just started taking those stories and making little narratives out of them and releasing them just as voices.

Shaun Hildner:

And so that kind of took off and we're like, oh, well, why don't we just make a pod... We turned The Distance into a podcast only. We got rid of the magazine. And that was our first show, and they really liked that. And after a few years we decided to bump it up to Rework.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:
Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

Which was just taking the book, or the ideas in the book, and kind of the same idea as The Distance, we were covering businesses basically that we're sort of following the rules in the book. And that's where we are now.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. So I am like kind of focusing on the marketing aspect of branded podcasts, and it's okay if this question doesn't apply to you, but when y'all were talking about the branded podcast and the first one, The Distance and stuff, was there a way that y'all wanted your brand to be communicated to your listeners? Or what did you want your listeners, kind of your brand identity almost.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah, it was never a concern. This company, Basecamp, has always kind of prided itself on not having a marketing department.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

And getting its word out there, word of mouth. So it was kind of connected with the blog. But even then, it's always been more about educating our customers or educating potential customers about not necessarily about the product, but in order to get the most out of the product, you sort have to work a certain way. And that's the way that Jason David were writing about in Rework, and that's the way that we would sort of get that out there. It's like, hey, so it is possible to work this way. There are successful companies that work this way. Here's an example of that. Here's how that happens.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Very cool.

Shaun Hildner:

So it wasn't as much as promoting the products themselves, it was more about, hey, if you like the way that we're talking about working, you're really going to love Basecamp or whatever.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

So when you kind of switched over to the podcast platform, was there ever any kind of question or from maybe higher ups of like, is this going to work? Should we do this? No.

Shaun Hildner:

No. There was never any, and even now, every once in a while they'll ask me like, hey, how's our listenership? But like, it's not tracked. It's not.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Really?

Shaun Hildner:

We've tried mid-roll ads of like, hey, we have a new book coming out. So we'll put an ad in there. But like none of that engagement is tracked. Anything like that. It was always

about like, hey, does this feel good to get this kind of stuff out there? Similar to an audio blog kind of.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. So, I've talked to other companies who have outsourced their branded podcast. So they're paying like a-

Shaun Hildner:

Right.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Media or something. And I mean, the numbers are through the roof, like how expensive it is. When you're doing it in house, is it, you don't have to stay as specific number, but were the cost regular?

Shaun Hildner:

The costs are my salary. So Wailin's no longer here, it's just me.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay.

Shaun Hildner:

And it's almost full time.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

I still have some work to do, some video work to do, which I can squeeze in, but it's basically one person's salary. The equipment costs are negligible.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. And so-

Shaun Hildner:

Even working from home, I mean, you can see this is, I've turned my coat closet into like a tiny little office.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Amazing. One second. So when you went to Rework and you were basing it off the book, was there any alteration? So first season, did you have like, okay, we're going to talk about this, this episode. This business, this episode, or was it just kind of like just episode to episode, we're going to figure it out?

Shaun Hildner:

It was episode to episode, and Wailin was really good at it. She's an actual journalist. She actually just had a show on Planet Money today, which I got to hear. So she was very good at picking topics and doing the interviews, and things like that. I was more on the technical side, I was doing the editing and the actual production work.

Shaun Hildner:

But we relaunched season, what I'm calling season two, is going chapter by chapter in the book and it's just conversations with Jason and David. And that's more along the lines of educating customers of how we see this style of work.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

And I'm just one of those people that needs that structure of, hey, I need to know exactly what I'm recording next week.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yes. So I guess you kind of took me a little bit about the concept process when it came to the podcast. Could you explain just a little bit, like, so you all sat down, you had The Distance and then you were like, let's change it.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah. So I took the first story, I was just on a whim, like, hey, I mean, I really like podcasts. I listen to podcasts constantly, because I can't stand being in my head for more than five minutes.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Right.

Shaun Hildner:

So I think I just sat down. I had like made this little tiny studio where I was doing screen recordings and stuff where I needed it to be a little bit quiet. This is back when we had an

office. And so, I sat down there and we had like a little tiny microphone, this is before we got all fancy. And I just sort of read, like almost like a audio book style, read the first Distance story.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

Which was, I think Horween Leather, I can't remember. It was a long company profile and I added some music and they just sent it out to the company via Basecamp, like, hey, here's an idea. I don't think it's a good idea to go back and just have someone read these stories, but we could produce these as both an audio story and a written story. And that took off and we did them side by side for, I want to say six months maybe. And then finally I think readership was going down, or podcast listenership had overtaken readership for the magazine. And we decided, oh, let's do this full time and then it just was Wailin and I producing it.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Very cool. Was there ever an expected lifespan of the podcast or were you like, let's just see how the episodes do and then just keep going?

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah, it was let's see how it goes. That's kind of how everything here at Basecamp is. It's either if someone higher up gets bored with it, fine. But there's never been like if our numbers got too low, or hey, we fixed it. We've covered all the companies, or things like that.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

And even in this new format of doing Rework chapters, I think there's like 85 essays. So that's a good two and a half years of content.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Got a lot of content. So I'm kind of looking at like not, I know it's really hard to measure kind of success of a branded podcast, because it's not like you're getting direct, oh, they listen to our podcast, Now they're going to go use Basecamp. That's not [inaudible 00:08:54]-

Shaun Hildner:

Right, we're not using custom URLs or something.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah, exactly.

Shaun Hildner:

Like a regular advertisement. Yep.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yes. And so, my thesis is all just kind of about how branded podcasts kind of fit into a marketing strategy, and if they actually do enhance a marketing strategy, which I think they do, but that's I'm running a thesis on. You said you really didn't track listeners, but what was kind of your marker of success, and what determined success for the podcast?

Shaun Hildner:

That's tough. I mean, success is they keep hiring, like I'm still working for them.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah, I do like to see it growing. I like to see my numbers growing, even though no one else looks at them, I still look at the podcast numbers. But yeah, as far as... I have no way of knowing and don't really care how that affects people that sign up for Basecamp or pay.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Do you have a lot of feedback on the podcast? Like interactions with listeners?

Shaun Hildner:

No. I've been begging listeners to contact me. Usually they contact Jason and David, because they're the famous people to talk to, but we're trying to work on that.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah. I wish I did.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

No. Yeah. And then, you said that y'all don't have a marketing team, which is interesting, but did y'all ever like-

Shaun Hildner:

We're hopefully fixing that soon.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Really?

Shaun Hildner:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Did y'all like post on social media or have other podcasts talk about your podcast? Or was it just kind of word of mouth?

Shaun Hildner:

It was just word of mouth. So yeah. Basecamp and the founders, Jason and David, have giant followings because they're just from that old school world of blogging and tech that they're just around.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

So that was going to be our audience anyway. So it was just promoting on there. They also took really strong stands about where we can and can't advertise. Like they just hate Facebook. So we are not allowed to promote on Facebook.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I mean, I get it.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah. Yeah. No, I mean, I also hate Facebook, but I also like have to have that struggle of like, but my job requires for more people to listen to my show.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

So, it's basically Twitter and begging the people in the company that have a larger network than I to say something nice about the show.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

And then the constant Apple podcast call outs, like please leave a review. That definitely does help, especially in the early days of The Distance, when you're first growing, it really does help.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I feel like I don't have a lot of more questions, but branded podcasts have been around for, I mean a little bit of a while now and kind of taken off in the past few years, do you see them growing even more? More companies using them, using them for marketing?

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah, I do. I mean, I don't think podcasts are going anywhere. I don't think audio storytelling's going anywhere.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

It's so nice that we all have this little thing in our pockets.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

So they can just talk [inaudible 00:12:18].

Shaun Hildner:

[inaudible 00:12:19]. Yeah.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And there's it's-

Shaun Hildner:

I'm not... Go ahead.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

No, you're good. You're good. Keep going.

Shaun Hildner:

I don't remember what I was saying. Oh, I'm not entirely convinced, because I'm not sure I'd listened to any branded podcast myself, in my sort of recreational listening, you know what I mean?

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I didn't even know that Trader Joe, or not Trader Joe's, GE the Message, like that was such a big one. And you literally could never tell it was made by GE, but-

Shaun Hildner:

Ah-huh.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

It was [inaudible 00:12:55] podcast. So they did branded podcasting like completely differently, and I think that kind of changed the game. And I talked about them for a while in my thesis, but other ones, like no offense, like the entrepreneurship ones, like I'm not going to be listening to that in my free time. You know what I mean?

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah. No, no. Me neither. Don't put that in there. I'm just kidding.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

No.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah, I think it's going to be a struggle to teach people to not use it as a platform to talk about yourself, to talk about your products. And I know I make a good podcast where I interview my bosses. I get what that sounds like, but it should be about education. It should be about giving something to your listener and figuring out a way to make that relate to whatever you're trying...

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

And I've kind of found-

Shaun Hildner:

I think that's where it's successful.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. I've kind of found this more, like just like relationships with the brand, you're like, oh my gosh, I love their podcast. Like interesting.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Maybe I can learn more about them, stuff like that. It's definitely... I don't think, I don't know.

Shaun Hildner:

Yep.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I'm going to keep rambling about it, because I'm talking all about this every single day.

Shaun Hildner:

No, please.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

But I feel like I don't have a lot more questions. So one second, let me just look at all this to make sure, because you really-

Shaun Hildner:

One of the things I noticed on your last point is, especially versus writing, I've noticed, David, was my boss David Heinemeier Hansson, was talking to me about this, that he really likes being able to come on the podcast because it humanizes him to hear someone's voice. I think like, especially versus shouting on Twitter or writing in a blog, hearing someone's voice humanizes them and therefore it humanizes the company. I think that says a lot of value in that.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. Just relating to a company, making it more of an organic relationship.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

I honestly think we're good. I mean, you've got what, two and a half years of content after that? I mean, I don't even know if y'all are thinking that far ahead, but do y'all think you'll keep going with it, just coming up with new ideas?

Shaun Hildner:

They've got four more books. I'm set.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

You're so secure [inaudible 00:15:16].

Shaun Hildner:

No, I don't know what my plan is after this.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah.

Shaun Hildner:

Yeah, I'd like to, you know, the way I've structured this, is pretty simple. So I'm trying to bank a bunch of episodes so I can go back to doing a little more video, and stuff like that. But yeah. I don't know what the plan is. I'll talk to you in two years.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Okay. Well I think that's it. We've kind of really covered everything that I need to. Definitely, I-

Shaun Hildner:

Oh, perfect.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

Yeah. So thank you so much. I mean-

Shaun Hildner:

Of course. I am so sorry, I'm 20 minutes late.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

You are so good. Do not worry about it. Thank you so much for your time.

Shaun Hildner:

Absolutely.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

All righty. Have a good one.

Shaun Hildner:

All right. Take care Lilly.

Lilly Arabella Hamm:

You too. Bye.

Shaun Hildner:

Bye.

Brent Simoneaux Interview:

Speaker 2:

All righty, so this shouldn't take too long. Just going to ask a few questions.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Probably about 20 minutes, not a big deal.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

So I thought we could start up by maybe you could just tell me a little bit about your professional journey and how you got to Red Hat, and just a little synopsis.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. The short version of the story is, I came out of academia, so I was working on a PhD and I was doing a lot of pretty in-depth qualitative research like ethnographic research. And so I had four years of funding for my PhD, and because I was doing such

intense fieldwork, I finished in five years instead of four, which means I needed some income in my fifth year, and health insurance.

Speaker 1:

And so, I had always imagined myself being a professor and teaching and doing research and writing, but I had a good friend who worked at a tech company called Red Hat. And he was like, "Hey, we have a role here on my team. If you want it, you should apply for it." And I was like, "Cool." So that was a copy editing job. So I took the copy editing job and I was like, "This is great because I don't have to think about it, it's easy work, so I can continue my research and just..." The pay wasn't great, but it's what I did. So yeah, it turns out I loved copy editing, and it also turns out that people don't love it when you also give them editorial feedback when you're just a copy editor, but that's what I did anyway.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So I finished the PhD and yeah, and after that, I just loved working at the company and I loved working in marketing. I loved what I was doing.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 1:

So I told my boss, I was like, "Hey, I'm done with my PhD. I'm ready to take on more things," and that was it. After that, I just started taking on more and more and more and more, and here we are today.

Speaker 2:

Very cool.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

So could you tell me a little bit about Red Hat and kind of the brand, the company's brand and how y'all go about communicating the brand? Because it is a very specific brand for [crosstalk 00:02:46] people.

Speaker 1:

Oh, yeah. It is a very specific brand.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So Red Hat is... We're an open-source technology company, an open-source software company. We are most well-known for a Linux product, so it's called Red Hat Enterprise Linux, which is an operating system that is open-source. So we are most well-known for that, and we became hugely popular in the '90s and early 2000s for that product. It sort of took over the data center. So almost everyone is running that product, from the New York Stock Exchange to airlines to everyone. That's more or less what everyone's data centers run on. That's a wild exaggeration, but it's not untrue.

Speaker 1:

But more recently, we've kind of pivoted toward hybrid cloud. So we made a bet a few years ago about where cloud computing was going.

Speaker 2:

I got it.

Speaker 1:

And a lot of people were developing, and this is like Amazon, AWS, Microsoft Azure, those types of companies were kind of betting on companies and users going all in on one cloud technology, you know?

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And so, we kind of made the opposite bet where we were like, "People are going to have a mixture of things. So any given company might have part of their apps running in Amazon, part of them running with Microsoft, part of them running on-premise," that whole thing. And so, that's what our sort of more recent products and even our Linux product helps people do, is that you can move your applications. You can do all of your cloud computing in a distributed manner.

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

You can move them seamlessly between different cloud computing companies. So all I've got to say, our products are business-to-business products. They are incredibly nerdy. They are incredibly technical and complex, and it is a very niche market. It is a very, very niche market.

Speaker 2:

My dad... I'm sorry, [inaudible 00:05:23].

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

My dad was trying to explain to me. He's such a tech and nerdy guy.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Poor Dad, he's on the phone, he's like, "[inaudible 00:05:34]," and trying so simply to explain it to me. I was like, "I don't really get it."

Speaker 1:

It's hard. It's hard to learn too, as a marketer and someone [crosstalk 00:05:46]. And I don't have a technical background, so I've had to learn all of this, and I still don't understand it. I still don't understand it all. Yeah.

Speaker 2:

So let me see. Sorry, I just got so off track in my brain.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, [crosstalk 00:06:04].

Speaker 2:

Were you there when the podcast, the idea of Command Line Heroes was... Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about when the podcast was brought up and concept process?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Totally, yeah. So yeah, I've been there since the beginning, since before day one. Yeah, since before day one. Do you want the longer story or the shorter story? Because it's-

Speaker 2:

[crosstalk 00:06:30]. If you're good telling the longer, the longer, because that'll help me.

Speaker 1:

Let's do it.

Speaker 2:

Okay.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Let's do it, yeah.

Speaker 2:

Thanks.

Speaker 1:

So the way that this happened was, so I was running a team, right? So I sort of worked my way up, I became a manager, and so I was running this team of basically creative writers and copywriters. So we were working on advertising, events, we were writing video scripts, things like that. So this request came into my team, right? Because we work in... At least, it used to be more of a service organization within the company, so when other product marketers or other teams needed to create a marketing asset, they would come to us.

Speaker 2:

Okay.

Speaker 1:

And so, my team was [inaudible 00:07:28] that were kind of doing those things.

Speaker 2:

Okay.

Speaker 1:

So this happened, this was like 2017, probably. Someone from our Linux product, he was a product marketer, came him to our team and he said, "Hey, Red Hat Enterprise Linux 8, a new version of this big product is coming out in..." I think it was like a year and a half or two years, "And I want to make a big splash. I want to do something." And his original idea was some sort of social media campaign, whatever.

Speaker 1:

So me and a couple of other people started working with him. My creative partner, his name is [Casey 00:08:10], well, he went to another company, but at the time, his name was Casey. And we started working with him and we basically told our bosses, we were like, "We want to work on this, but we want you to give us six months before we come to you with ideas. This is a big deal. We want to do our due diligence. We want to do some research, so give us six months. Literally all we want to do is go out and talk to people. We just want to go out, talk to people, and then after we've talked to people, we're going to have some ideas and we'll present some ideas to you." And to their... And this never happens, right? This never happens. But they were like, "Yeah, sure. Go for it." And so, we were like, "Oh yeah, this is great." So this started what we affectionately call "comics and coffee".

Speaker 2:

Okay.

Speaker 1:

So what we did, and it sounds so cheesy, it's so cheesy, but it really, really, really worked, we started convincing people on our events team to let us have just a little bit of space in the booth. And this was a challenge at first, because they were like, "No, you can't have any space. We need this, it's all taken up." And we were like, "If we could have literally like two feet. It doesn't even need to be a lot. Just give us a little bit of space in the booth." Because our thinking was that's the easiest, fastest way to reach people and talk to people, is you just have a huge concentration at these big tech conferences and events, AWS re:Invent and [inaudible 00:09:59], caricature artist, right? And they set up-

Speaker 2:

[inaudible 00:10:04].

Speaker 1:

No, you're good. They set up with us. And while they were sort of drawing your caricature, we would sit in front of them and we would be like, "Can we just talk to you?" And they were like, most people, 99% of the people were like, "Hell yeah. I'll talk to you, whatever." And so, we got to know software developers and system architects, sys

admins, things like that as people. And our first question was always, "Tell us your origin story. Tell us how you got where you are today. What makes you tick?" And we just carried on conversation month after month. And from all of that qualitative research, we ended up deciding that people wanted to learn more about their profession, and there was a role for media to play in that. And so, we were like, "Should this be a video series? Should it be a long-form article series? What should it be?"

Speaker 1:

So after that, we commissioned some research and we worked with this outside research company, and they provided a lot of insights about media consumption with software developers. And they kind of floated this idea of like, "Well, what if you did a podcast? What if you did a podcast for this?" And we were like, "Interesting. Never would've thought of that." But avid podcast listeners, but we had never thought to apply it. And we were like, "Cool." So after that, we were like, "That's very promising. Let's see what happens there."

Speaker 1:

So we searched around for a production company, a production partner, because we had never made a podcast before. We had no idea what we were doing. We have a pretty robust internal creative team, and we do documentary films. We do pretty high production film work, but we have no experience with audio or podcasting. So we asked around and we eventually ended up having a conversation with this production company called Pacific Content. They're out in Vancouver, and they are, turns out, fantastic. They are absolutely fantastic, and we clicked with them immediately.

Speaker 1:

So we didn't have any funding, right? We didn't have any funding for this. And so, we pitched our bosses and we said, "We want to make a pilot. We need..." I think it was like $30,000. "Give us $30,000, we'll make you a pilot, and then no harm done." So we made basically the first two episodes of Command Line Heroes, which was this epic history of the operating system wars of the '90s and 2000s. And so, that was a huge process. It was a huge process, whatever. And then, I remember I was in Copenhagen when the pilots were done, and I remember this moment. My creative partner sent them to me and I was walking around Copenhagen, listening to the pilot, and I was like, "Oh, there is some magic here. There's some magic here. This is going to be a big hit."

Speaker 2:

[crosstalk 00:14:07]. Even me, someone that has no interest in software, any of that, [crosstalk 00:14:15].

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

And it's insane how I'm like, "I want to keep listening." Because it's such good storytelling.

Speaker 1:

[inaudible 00:14:24]. I know. Yeah. I was like, "There's magic here. We have to keep going." So we let our bosses listen to it, and they were like, "Cool, continue." But we had this problem of funding, right? We had this problem of funding. We didn't have any money to make the rest of the season. So we went around, and this took a while, but we went around to other product teams and other business units across the company, and we basically said, "Do you have any money in your budget? Do you have any money in your budget? Can you give us $5,000? Can you give us $30,000? Can you give us $70,000?" We basically just went around with a hat and we were like, "Can you give us money? Can you give us money? Can you give us money?" And in return, we ended up...

Speaker 1:

That's why that first season is really weird. Looking back on it, it's actually really weird because it's kind of disjointed. There's an episode about the operating system, and that came from the Linux team. There's an episode about data in there, and that came from our storage team. So we kind of cut a deal with them where we were like, "If you give us money, we'll produce an episode about... Not about your product, but about your topic."

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

That first season is super weird and kind of disjointed. It's still a great season, but it's kind of weird. But we had some trouble at the beginning, and this is a tension that, as I've been talking with a lot of people who do the same job that I do, I think it's a pretty common tension. And the tension was, one, it was with other marketers, right? So other marketers in the business were like, "I don't understand this. You're not talking about our products. You're not even really featuring our people. So we don't even have a lot of Red Hatters in the show itself. [inaudible 00:16:27].

Speaker 2:

Oh my gosh. Sorry, I'm trying to figure out my internet right now. You just broke up for so long.

Speaker 1:

There you go.

Speaker 2:

No, my... Yeah, I think I [inaudible 00:17:02]. This Wi-Fi here is so ridiculous, yeah. Okay, sorry. You were talking about the... Oh, the getting the funding for it, higher ups and stuff.

Speaker 1:

Oh, yeah.

Speaker 2:

Sorry. Hold on.

Speaker 1:

Oh, you're still breaking up a little bit.

Speaker 2:

Am I? I may get on my phone. Hold on. Am I good now? Am I good now?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, you're breaking up a little bit, but you're still frozen.

Speaker 2:

I'm going to get on my phone.

Speaker 2:

Is it any better? I'm trying to figure out how to get on this.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

It is?

Speaker 1:

I think so. It's choppy, but you're not broken up anymore.

Speaker 2:

Okay. Hopefully this stays. Okay. My Wi-Fi's an ongoing nightmare with me and my roommates. It's so bad. All right. Sorry about that.

Speaker 1:

No, it's all good.

Speaker 2:

When did y'all finally... What season was it where you finally got a set amount of money to make the show?

Speaker 1:

Season three.

Speaker 2:

Oh, wow.

Speaker 1:

It was season three. Yeah, it was season three. So yeah, it's wild, but very few people believed in the show, honestly. Not a lot of people wanted to do it.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Our PR team, especially, they were like, "Please don't do this." It was really scary for them. We did it anyway. We got yelled at a couple of times, but it's fine.

Speaker 2:

It is difficult to understand from a marketing view, like, "Why wouldn't you? Is this doing anything? Are people actually using us when they listen to this?"

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

It's not about that, though.

Speaker 1:

Well, we figured some of that out.

Speaker 2:

Really?

Speaker 1:

But at first, we had to go on faith. Yeah, we figured some of that out, so. And we can talk about that in a little bit.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

But we were... It's this weird thing where it's like when you're trying to do something new within a corporation. Sometimes, especially on the creative front, and especially on the marketing front, some of it is your gut. Some of it is you do your homework, you talk to people, you do your research. But some of it is like, "This is our best guess, and we just need to do it. We just need to do it and we'll figure out the rest of it later." But it's really funny, though. Season three, we got our own budget, which then gave us editorial freedom, because we weren't promising episodes to people.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So we were able to produce on topics in anything that we thought was best based on all the qualitative research we were doing. And it's funny, if you look at a map of downloads, it's like season one, season two, and then season three just sort of goes up like this.

Speaker 1:

We had no idea, and we had very little expectation. So what we did was we wanted... There we go.

So yeah, we had no idea. we were hoping for 5,000 people to listen to each episode.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

That's what we were hoping for. We had no idea we'd be doing this four years later. Absolutely, no idea.

Speaker 2:

That's [inaudible 00:00:48].

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

So, you were saying about figuring out, because the biggest thing about my thesis and my branded podcast, it's so hard to determine success with the branded podcast, besides downloads and listening.

Speaker 1:

Yep.

Speaker 2:

So, what were you saying about how y'all were able to see if people were using Red Hat?

Speaker 1:

So, this is one thing that we have. It's taken us a long time to figure out and we're still refining it, but it's basically our measurement strategy. So, how do we know that this is successful?

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And then how do we tell that story of success to the rest of the business?

Speaker 2:

Exactly.

Speaker 1:

So, we started out our metric of success and this turned out to be a wrong hypothesis. Right?

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 1:

But originally our metric of success was we are going to basically pull people into our web properties. Right?

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So, the idea was we would be like, "Hey, you just listened to an episode about storage on our website, redhat.com/command-line-heroes. You can go read additional information about storage." And so, we were creating like blog posts and basically more content about the topic and then trying to get people after they listened to the podcast to then go to our website. So, we did that for a while. And well, okay, we thought it was smart and it makes sense. It totally makes sense, but it didn't work. It didn't work. We were looking at traffic, nothing or virtually nothing. So, we were spending a lot of time generating extra content and no one was reading it. So, we were having trouble getting people to go from podcast to website, but we had no trouble getting people from redhat.com to the podcast.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So traffic, we could get it to go from our web properties to the podcast, but we couldn't get the traffic to go from the podcast to our website.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

We couldn't do it. We tried so many things. It wouldn't work. So, I was like, "Damn, this is hard." I was like, "What is going on here?" So, we pivoted. And so, I have this theory that, again, a new hypothesis since the other one didn't work out that maybe it wasn't about generating traffic, that it was more about brand awareness and affinity.

Speaker 2:

Exactly.

Speaker 1:

So, maybe this is more of a brand play than a conversion play, like getting people's contact information or getting them quickly into the funnel or converting them to a known visitor of redhat.com. So, I said, well, how do we measure that? How do we know if we're actually doing that? So, we started working with... His name is Jeff Vidler. And he's also... For some reason we worked with Canadians a lot. I don't know why. But he is also up in Canada and he has been doing research with radio stations for like, I don't know, 20 years or something. He's just like this veteran, awesome person who knows audio deep.

Speaker 1:

And so, he runs this consulting company called Signal Hill Insights. And we worked with him to do an audience survey and then a brand lift study. We're actually in the middle of one right now. And one, it gave us information about our audience that we didn't know because the data, especially demographic data and things like that, that you can get from podcasting platforms is very limited.

Speaker 1:

So, one example of that is, we know that we want our personas, or the demographics that we really want to be reaching. We want to be reaching developers, and we want to be reaching system administrators. There's no way to tell that.

Speaker 2:

No.

Speaker 1:

Through Spotify or through Apple podcast data or data that we can get from our hosting platform. You can't tell that. So, we did an audience survey and it turns out, it's mostly people who work in IT. It's mostly developers, it's mostly system administrators, and it's mostly people who have been in their jobs for 10 years or so. So, we get all this rich audience information that we can then bring back to the company and say like, "Hey, we are reaching the right people."

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

The big questions that have been really helpful for us with specifically brand awareness are brand recall. So, in that audience survey we ask the question, who produces this

podcast? And we don't say anything in the survey about Red Hat. Even the URL for the survey is commandlineheroes.com/survey. So, it's not redhat.com/survey or whatever.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So, we don't tip our hat at all. And it's a fill-in, it's not a multiple choice. It's like you type in this box who produces this podcast. And every year, like year over year, 99% of people know that it comes from our brand.

Speaker 2:

Wow. That's amazing.

Speaker 1:

And we say Red Hat exactly twice in every episode. And it's literally all we say is, this is Command Line Heroes an original podcasts from Red Hat.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

We don't talk about Red Hat. We don't talk about our products. We don't feature Red Hatters, only mention of our brand. It sticks with people. People know it.

Speaker 2:

That's amazing.

Speaker 1:

So, that's our brand awareness metric. Is that recall. It's a recall. The other one it's a little more difficult, which is brand affinity and that one's difficult to measure, but I think we found a way. And we do that through what's called a brand lift study. And so, what that is, is in the same audience survey, again, without tipping our hat to who produces the podcast at all, or who's behind the podcast? We ask our listeners to basically rate their opinion of all of these enterprise software vendors, which is basically us and our competitors.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So, they basically rate their opinion on a scale of like zero to one of like Microsoft, Red Hat, IBM , Amazon, all Cisco, all these companies. So the trick that we do is, once that survey is done, we field another survey. So, we look at the same demographics of people that filled out that survey and we match those demographics with another sample group.

Speaker 2:

Okay.

Speaker 1:

And the only difference and the people that we recruit there is that they have not listened to our podcast. So, they haven't listened to Command Line Heroes. And we run them through the same question. And one of those questions is, rank your opinions of these software vendors. Totally same questions. And what we found year over year is that people who have listened to the podcast rank Red Hat higher.

Speaker 2:

Wow.

Speaker 1:

The people who have not... And it's significant. It is a significant jump in the numbers. And not only that, but they tend to rate our competitors lower as well. So, it's not just that they're ranking us high, they tend to rank other people lower.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. That's amazing.

Speaker 1:

Which is wild.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And you also end up finding out other things from surveys like that. One of the questions that we ask is, are you a Red Hat customer? Have you ever used Red Hat products before? And have you heard of Red Hat before listening to the podcast? And what we find is that it's about 50/50. And this is year over year. It's like 50% of our listeners have never heard of our brand before listening to the podcast.

Speaker 1:

And this tracks with things like website data as well. So, when we look at the Command Line Heroes website within redhat.com, about 50% of that traffic, they're unknown visitors, meaning they've never been to Red Hat or our digital properties before. So, we're able to tell this really compelling story to our CMO and our CEO and really anyone who will listen, which is to say, there's a lot of people listening to our shows. Upwards of like last year and we've already exceeded it this year, more than half a million people. These aren't downloads. These are people. Half a million people a year are listening to Command Line Heroes and our other podcasts. Is not exact but if you can extrapolate out about 50% of those have never heard of our brand before.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

After listening to the podcast, there's high brand recall, meaning we've just introduced them to our brand.

Speaker 2:

Exactly.

Speaker 1:

And their perception of us has increased. They now have a higher opinion of us because we've brought them this really entertaining show that's not salesy. It doesn't turn them off. It just entertains them and helps them out, and we literally ask nothing in return from them.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. That's amazing.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

And y'all are the first company that I've talked to that... Because in my whole thesis, it definitely is about, I talk a lot about creating brand evangelists.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. And I think that's the whole point of it, but y'all the first company that I've talked to that... Adobe does surveys, but they don't do anything with brand recall or brand affinity like that. So, that is really great. And that numbers are crazy for y'all.

Speaker 1:

They're wild.

Speaker 2:

It's so hard to find stats and stuff on-

Speaker 1:

Yeah. I know.

Speaker 2:

I had to get on to this one website to even find ranks of podcast throughout the past year, just so I could get my population or my sample size or whatever.

Speaker 1:

People are so secretive about this stuff for some reason. And I don't know why.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

But we're pretty open about our numbers. I will say the thing that we're working on right now with measurement, which I think is going to be pretty eye opening. If we can get it in place. We've been working on this for about a year and hopefully... I've just gotten some traction with our data scientists. But the big thing that we're doing right now is using a technology called Chartable.

Speaker 2:

That's the website I used.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Chartable's amazing. We use Chartable all the time. It enables so much with our podcast promotion. So, anytime we do ads under the podcasts or really anything, it allows us to track, not just impressions and not just click-throughs, but it allows us to through

download. So we know, for example, when we run an ad on another podcast, we know exactly how many downloads that has led to.

Speaker 2:
Wow. That [inaudible 00:14:10] great.

Speaker 1:
We don't have to do any guesswork about like, oh, well, it reached this many promotions. So, we're able to say literally a cost per download. And we're able to make decisions about how we're spending our advertising money. About that. So there's that, but they also offer this other technology that's really meant to solve... It was created to solve the advertising problem and podcast, which is like attribution. So, if you're an indie podcast or whatever, and you're a mattress company comes to you and they're like, "We want to run an ad about our mattress on your show." There hasn't been a really easy way to know if that's ever successful. So, the best thing that people could do in the past was say, "Go to this vanity URL." So go to-

Speaker 2:
Use a code.

Speaker 1:
Yeah. Here's a code or here's vanity URL and that's how we're going to track the success of this campaign. So Chartable actually came up with this, like an attribution, basically software to be able to track that without using a code or a vanity URL. And it relies on a pixel and marketing technology and that kind of stuff to be able to do this. But we have plans right now, if we can get it through InfoSec review, which is what we're going through right now. But using that same technology to basically match up podcast listeners with redhat.com visitors and then any conversion point, right?

Speaker 2:
Yeah.

Speaker 1:
Or purchasing on our site. So, we would be able to tell that this podcast listener is the same, that just bought a storage product. We would be able to know that those two people are the same people. And right now we don't know that they're the same people because it's two different data sets, right?

Speaker 2:
Yeah, exactly.

Speaker 1:

But using both of those pixels, it's like, we know that these two people are the same people.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And so, what that's going to do is that's going to actually unlock. If we're successful, it's going to unlock revenue for us. So, we're going to be able to say that people who listen to, for example, Command Line Heroes are 40% more likely to make a purchase than people who haven't.

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

Or people who were introduced to the brand through our podcast then led to 50 million worth of revenue.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. That's like a game changer for branded podcast.

Speaker 1:

That's goals. And I don't know of anyone who's doing it.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. That's why people are so scared I feel like, because there aren't numbers like that anywhere right now.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. There just aren't. We don't have trouble selling the value of it internally. That's not why we're doing it. We're still going to get funded. We have a large budget now. I think people listen to it internally and they're like, "I get the magic."

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

And so, they still fund it and they're like, "Okay, I understand this."

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

They just trust that it leads to things. But if we could definitively say, here's the amount of revenue that we spent $1.5 million in podcast production this year and that led to $20 million worth of revenue. That's gold. You know what I mean? That's like return on investment right there.

Speaker 2:

Yes. You were talking about y'all's advertising. So, do y'all mainly just advertised Command Line Heroes in other podcasts or do y'all market anywhere else for the podcast?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. This was an evolution over time too. So, we used to only do paid social promotion. So yeah, we only did that. We had very limited promotion budgets at first. So that's what we did. And then when we started using Chartable and we started like really measuring the success of those campaigns, we realized that they weren't working. So, we would be spending $200 on a download. What? And we were like, excuse me, that is so high. And so, we were like, we can't be doing this anymore. We need to experiment with other things. So, what we started doing was we started advertising on other podcasts and that's been incredibly successful. Our cost per download is unreal after doing that. So, I can talk a lot about that. Pacific Content has taught a lot.

Speaker 1:

His name is Dan Misener, but he does a lot of their audience development work, but he has this really cool, actually thing that he built, which is... We call it a podcast neighborhood map and it basically... And I can share this with you too, but it's a network map. And so, we basically loaded in the technology charts in Apple podcasts. And it basically takes that and then scrapes audience numbers and audience overlap and then creates a network map of all the technology shows. The top 200 technology shows. And when it does that, when you start to see the links between the podcast, you start to get these little neighborhoods of like, people tend to listen to this cluster of shows together.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

If you're interested in this show, you're probably going to be interested in these other 10 shows.

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

And so, we call the neighborhood the developer neighborhood, the software developer neighborhood. And so, what we did was we looked at that and we said, oh, here are all these other shows, and that are very similar to Command Line Heroes and share some of the same audience. Let's start forming relationships with these other shows, and we can basically pay for advertising on our shows. And that has been incredibly successful.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. Very cool. I feel like you just covered so much. Thank you so much for this interview.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

I could write my whole thesis off this interview. But I feel bad taking up any more of your time because this definitely was longer than I thought, but great things. All great things.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Do you see branded podcasts? I think what I'm trying to answer is, do branded podcast enhance a marketing strategy? And that's my overall question. Do you see branded podcasts becoming more of a staple in a marketing strategy for companies? Or do you think they're only for specific companies?

Speaker 1:

No, I think that it will become a staple in people's marketing strategies. I really think that it will. I think that it is a very immature medium right now.

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

As in like, people have not been doing it for long enough.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. I can [inaudible 00:22:27].

Speaker 1:

And they've not been doing it well enough to really understand it.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 1:

And so, one example of this is we just started a new show called Compiler, and we did a crossover episode with GitHub. So, they have a podcast, it's called the ReadME Podcast, I think. And we had their host on our show and they're going... We're basically producing two episodes together.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And hopefully we'll get some audience crossed over there. But I was learning by working with them that they just started podcast. This is their first podcast. And they are, as a marketing organization where we were four years ago and it's not that we're smarter or even doing anything's better. It's just, we've just been doing it for longer. And so, when I talk to people about this, I talk about the podcast maturity scale within an organization. And I think it's like, the more people do it and the longer they do it, the more of a staple it will become. But the key to that is there are some very bad branded podcasts out there that can actually do damage to your brand. And can have a negative effect as well. So it's like, you have to do it right. And doing it right is very hard. And then you've got to show the value of it to the business.

Speaker 2:

Exactly.

Speaker 1:

And those are two things that like, I don't know that we've totally figured out as an [inaudible 00:24:09], and it can't become a staple until you'll have at least those two things in place.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. I definitely agree. Well, I think we're good. We've covered a lot. Do you have anything else to say about branded podcasts overall? You've really covered it all.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. I don't think so. I will say, as a continuation of the story that we are expanding our audio strategy now. So, we've been a single show company for three and a half years or whatever. And I don't know. We've just been so successful that we were like... We talked to our CMO a while ago and we were like, this is a very powerful medium, how can we apply this to other marketing problems? Where other business challenges that we had. And so, next year we're going to have... We launched a new show this year, Compiler. We've got a new show that we're piloting right now called Behind The App.

Speaker 2:

Wow.

Speaker 1:

And we have another show in the works for next fall. That's going to replace Command Line Heroes, actually.

Speaker 2:

Gosh, that's amazing.

Speaker 1:

So, potentially we're going to have four to five shows next year.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. That's insane. That's so cool though. Because I was definitely-

Speaker 1:

It's very cool.

Speaker 2:

I was going to ask, when is it time to stop your podcast? They're-

Speaker 1:

Oh my God. That's such a good question because... And we've struggled with that one because Command Line Heroes has been such a hit. It's hard to stop it.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Because it's like this works. If we stop it, that's a gamble. Mm. That is a big gamble for us, but we're going to gamble a little bit. So, one is like, it's a creative decision, one. So part of it is, as a team, we want to end on a high note.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

We don't want to make... I'm trying to think of a TV show that had a bad last season or like, you know those TV shows where like, you should have stopped two seasons ago.

Speaker 1:

[crosstalk 00:26:38].

Speaker 2:

You should have stopped [inaudible 00:26:40]. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Exactly. We don't want to do that just as creative people. We want to end on a high note where everyone loves us and like, let's just stop now. The other thing pulling back the curtain a little bit, and this is not something I ever expected to do in my job, this just straight up talent handling. Straight up talent handling. So our posts for Command Line Heroes, her name is Saron. She is fan freaking fantastic. She is wonderful. She's gotten really busy. She's gotten really popular. She's gotten real busy and production is really difficult right now because of that. And I'm super happy that she's successful and doing incredibly well. It's really hard to produce that show and I'm not sure we could continue much longer.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Because she's starting new businesses and she's just all over the place. It's hard. So, that was also part of the decision. But we also realized that we needed to reach new people and we wanted to reach new people. So, using that neighborhood map again, we were like, what if we started a show in the startup neighborhood? What if we did a show that was targeted at startups?

Speaker 2:

Cool.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. And one of the reasons we started Compiler is we were like, there's this enterprise technology neighborhood where Microsoft has shows in there and we were like, we're not really in there. Let's make a show that fits in with those podcasts. And that's where a Compiler came from. So, there are other audiences that we can reach and should reach. But we have limited... Our team is only so big. We only have so much budget. We can only do so many things. So, in order to do new things, you can have to stop old things. Even if it's heartbreaking and a gamble. We can't produce Command Line Heroes for 20 years.

Speaker 2:

I'm sure those other ones are going to be great. Makes sense.

Speaker 1:

I hope so.

Speaker 2:

They definitely will. Are y'all still working with Pacific Content and all that?

Speaker 1:

That's another big thing. And this gets to the maturity model or the maturity scale is we also made a pretty... This was a gamble. Honestly, this was a gamble too. With our new shows or some of them. So Compiler, we decided to bring that production in house and this big for us. This was really big for us. We had never actually produced a podcast on our own.

Speaker 2:

Interesting.

Speaker 1:

And that presented a lot of challenges. So, currently the way that we work with Pacific Content, it's very hand in hand. We make all of our editorial decisions together. The writers on my team, they produce what's called... They call it an idea doc or basically a research document.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

And it's literally 17 single space pages for a single episode. That's just like, here's the research, here's the focus of the episode, here are guests that we should book, all of this. They take so much work.

Speaker 2:

[crosstalk 00:30:17]. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

But then we hand over that research to document to a writer who actually writes the scripts. So he basically... His name is Michael, is so fantastic. He's such a good writer. He's so wonderful. But he actually writes all the scripts for Command Line Heroes. So, we're all of us on my team. We're writers at heart. We don't understand audio production. We just don't. We're writers. That's what we do. But we decided just to jump in and we were like, "We can learn this stuff." And so, we basically in this last year have taught ourselves how to produce a podcast and it was hard. The early episodes of Compiler are terrible. They were not even airable. They are bad.

Speaker 1:

And I say that with all the humility in the world. I know when something is bad, and those were bad episodes. No one is allowed to listen to them. I always joke that we're going to put them in the Disney vault and they're never coming back out. So, we produced some really bad episodes. And then we realized that we actually could not do this on our own. So, I hired a producer, an outside producer that is actually coming on full-time in two weeks.

Speaker 2:

Wow.

Speaker 1:

So, we actually were able to bring her onto the team full time and [inaudible 00:31:49] employee. But she's a freelance producer. She's worked in film and audio and she directs us. She cuts it. She gets it to the assembly edit stage. And then we ship it off to post-production and like sound design and Pacific Content. That's all they do on that show is, post-production.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So, we're planning on doing two shows in house next year and one show with Pacific Content. So, we want to have this hybrid model where we're producing our big tent-pole shows with specific content. And then our smaller shows like Compiler, and I think behind the app is eventually going to be... We're going to produce this in-house. But what that does is it allows us to produce more content at scale. So, it's a lot cheaper. It is a lot cheaper. So, we're-

Speaker 2:

[inaudible 00:32:57].

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Pacific content they are... And it'll be this with any production company working with the brand. It is not cheap. But you also don't want to go with the cheap option because you get what you pay for most of the time. And so, it's going to end up being a shitty show if you go with the budget option. So it's like, we've always believed in invest in quality and the people will come. The people will come. So, they also bring a lot of industry knowledge and expertise and things to us. So, we want to have a continued relationship with them. We want to keep making stuff with them. We just know that just budget-wise we just can't do it. We just can't do it. So, we end up spending... And this will give you a sense of the budget. So, Command Line Heroes, production costs are about... Sorry, are $30,000 per episode.

Speaker 2:

Wow.

Speaker 1:

And then add in... So, we also pay our host. We pay her very well because she's very talented and very valuable, but we pay her about $7,000 in episode. So, to produce an episode of Command Line Heroes, it's like $37,000 not including our staff time. It is expensive. Is worth it but it's expensive.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

We can't do that at scale. And to give you a sense of like... It costs us $5,000 total to produce an episode of Compiler.

Speaker 2:

Wow.

Speaker 1:

So, in house versus out of house is like a $32,000 difference per episode.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Multiply that across season, multiply that across multiple shows across a year. It's a lot of money. It's in the millions of dollars.

Speaker 2:

That's insane. That's what scares people up too from branded podcast is that.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

You really do need to have out of house at first. People doing it. And that price is insane. You have to be a big company to be able to afford that.

Speaker 1:

You do. Yeah, you really do. It's worth it. But it's scary. It's a big investment. If you don't know what you're doing there and it's scary. It's really, really scary, but I don't think you can do it without-

Speaker 2:

I agree. You need that-

Speaker 1:

I don't think you can do it otherwise. You really need that outside perspective. Because they also, in addition to all the production expertise and industry knowledge that they bring, audio industry knowledge, they bring us a perspective that is not Red Hat's. And every brand is like this. I don't care what you say. Every brand is like this. You get really myopic. See everything through the lens of your brand. And it's really hard to understand or listen to your show from the perspective of an audience.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 1:

So it's like, we tend to, as an organization, come to the problem with what does Red Hat need people to know? Right?

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

What do we, as a marketing organization need them to do? But Pacific Content comes from the perspective of like, what do listeners want to hear?

Speaker 2:

Exactly. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

What is going to be most valuable to them and what experience do they want to have and how can we shape that show? And so, there are so many times where we're like, "Here's what we think we should do." And they're like, "I don't think you should do that." And that's really valuable perspective because... And that's part of the success of all of our shows is that they...

Speaker 2:

People [inaudible 00:37:12] want to hear.

Speaker 1:

It's not what people want to hear. And we are able to listen to them and they feel comfortable giving us that feedback. And we listen to them.

Speaker 2:

That's so true.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Well, I think we're good. We've covered so much. I'm so excited to use all of this.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for your time. I'm trying to think. I feel like I've asked everything and we're over an hour or so.

Speaker 1:

No, you're good. And feel free to... If you have any more questions or follow up as you're writing or anything, let me know. I love talking about this stuff.

Speaker 2:

Wait, and I love that you love it. Because you're the first person that's finally actually really wanted to talk about it. So I'm really [crosstalk 00:37:58].

Speaker 1:

I love this stuff. I think it's like a puzzle.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

It's like a puzzle for me that I really want to figure out.

Speaker 2:

I like that.

Speaker 1:

And it's really motivating that not a lot of people have figured it out. So I'm like-

Speaker 2:

Exactly.

Speaker 1:

I want to figure this out. I really want us to figure this out.

Speaker 2:

That's amazing.

Speaker 2:

Alrighty. Well, thank you so much again. It's been great.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. It's good to talk to you. I'm really... I want to know what you find out because I'm curious.

Speaker 2:

I'll send you the thesis when I'm done.

Speaker 1:

That would be great.

Speaker 2:

It'll be spring, but yeah, I'm excited.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Bye.

Speaker 2:

Thank you again.

Speaker 1:

All right.

Speaker 2:

[inaudible 00:39:48].

Speaker 1:

You too.

Speaker 2:

Bye.

Speaker 1:

Bye.

E. AUDIO RELEASE FORM

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