

University of Southampton Using videocasts to engage internally

Read how the School of Electronics and Computer Science at the University of Southampton uses video podcasting to convey powerful messages to its students and employees in a way that traditional communication channels simply couldn't do.

An extract from:

How to use Social Media to Engage Employees
Published by Melcrum, April 2007

CASE STUDY



University of Southampton

Discovering the speed and ease of podcasts

One of the world's leading research faculties in digital media, the Electronics and Computer Science (ECS) school within the UK's University of Southampton, is one step ahead of the pack in its application of social media tools for communication. The school counts among its faculty the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, Professor David Payne, the inventor of the optical amplifier, and Professor Tony Hey, now corporate vice-president of Microsoft UK.

Since 2005, the school's lectures and seminars have been podcasted, allowing students to run them again for revision, or for the first time if they've missed them. A dedicated portion of the ECS website, www.zeplertv.com, was resourced to host the podcasts.

EXPERIMENTING WITH TECHNOLOGY

In early 2006, the ECS communication team began experimenting with turning the technology to its external faculty news. "It seemed a great way to present our research to journalists in a visual and audio format," explains ECS's marketing and communications manager, Joyce Lewis. "It provided an easy and compelling format for them to digest, and a terrific way to provide a cognitive link for them between our research and its potential coverage as a TV or radio news item."

THE BENEFITS OF PODCASTS

The result: "ECS TV" provides a vital link between the university's research work and the outside world. The benefits, says Lewis, are numerous – especially in a

department of only one (Lewis herself), plus one web designer:

- **Low on cost, high on simplicity:** "When we first started it, we were able to do it just by using the video-conferencing technology we already had – fixed cameras, operated remotely, and radio mikes," she says. Editing the programs using the iMovie application that came with her computer, the whole production line was cost-free. "That was the principal attraction of it in the first place – you can do this with a very small number of people and very few tools. It's high impact at no cost."
- **Speed:** The ability to turn around content quickly is an incredible advantage over previous forms of communication media, she says, and brings it closer to rivalling print. "We were able to cover a conference last year and podcast about it each morning for the entire four-day duration. Because the production is simple, it's really a case of a quick edit and you can get it out there."
- **Skillset:** With a designer who has a background in TV production and an IT staffer who had already (for the student lecture podcast series) developed the necessary compression tools to make the video RSS-enabled, "We knew we already had the skillset to do a pretty good job," says Lewis.

(Turn to the case study on page 77 to read about the use of video podcasts at University of Southampton).

University of Southampton

Using videocasts to engage internally

The Electronics and Computer Science (ECS) school at the University of Southampton has overseen the roll out of a podcasting initiative over the past year (see Chapter 3, page 56). Both podcasts and videocasts were originally used to present research to journalists.

The video element appealed, largely because of the ease with which video clips can be generated. “When we first started, we were able to do it just by using the video-conferencing technology we already had,” says Joyce Lewis, marketing and communications manager. Then the programs were edited using the iMovie application that came with her computer. The whole production line was cost-free.

USING VIDEO INTERNALLY

Lewis realized early on that online video, in the form of video podcasts, had great potential internally. “Because of our core research areas, we have a good high-speed network and a lot of people interested in technology,” she explains. “Plus, we realized that we could video things that our staff and students weren’t able to see – like the development of our new Mountbatten Building complex that was, at the time, stuck behind a lot of construction fencing – so it had an immediate use as a visual communication tool.”

Launched in February 2006, ECS TV is a series of semi-regular video podcasts on a variety of topics. One “channel” of ECS TV is reserved for general ECS news (the updates on university research that go out externally to journalists, potential students and alumni), and another for student news

(for all students and potential students).

POWERFUL COMMUNICATION

But, of those run so far, Lewis feels none have showcased the medium’s value as an internal communication tool quite so well as the third ECS TV series, covering the university’s Mountbatten Building – a research facility that was destroyed by fire in October 2005.

“The fire was a hugely traumatic event for everyone in the university,” she explains. “Aside from the obvious, many students lost all of their research work in the blaze and the staff who worked there suffered three years’ severe disruption of their research – 2005 to 2007 – while the facility was being rebuilt.”

One year on from the fire and, after protracted insurance wrangling, October 2006 saw the final demolition of the remains. Lewis recognized an opportunity to use the event, and the anniversary date, to launch a special videocast. Interviewing the head of school on-site as she oversaw the demolition, Lewis captured the raw emotion of what was happening. “By doing it with video – even a simple, handheld video with a small radio microphone – we created this enormously powerful piece of communication on the spot. She just talked very genuinely, unscripted, to the camera about what was going on and how she felt.”

VIDEO VERSUS WORDS ON A PAGE

It brought home to Lewis the power of the medium. “No matter how good the writer, words on a page from a communication department will never get close to



“No matter how good the writer, words on a page will never get close to conveying the sincerity and depth of emotion that one 10-minute video did.”

Joyce Lewis

University of Southampton

conveying the sincerity and depth of emotion that one 10-minute video did,” she says. “It wasn’t staged, it was very intimate, so it felt like you were almost overhearing the head of school talking about it to you privately, and that made it all the more powerful.”

It also demonstrated the production benefits – the interview was completed at 2pm on the anniversary day and by 4pm the podcast had been uploaded.

LEARNING THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

It’s still a project in its learning phases, but already the response has been impressive – more than 750 individual downloads per videocast from a core faculty community of just over 1,600.

The project has been so successful that it has given Lewis the chance and budget to upscale the production. The toolset she began with – a video camera, a radio microphone and a copy of the iMovie desktop application for editing – has since been upgraded to a high-definition camera, handheld microphones, more complex editing software (FinalCut Pro) and, soon to be added, a professional outdoor broadcast boom microphone.

ADVICE FOR VIDEOCASTERS

Updating the process as she has gone along, Lewis has some advice for those thinking of venturing into the world of videocasts:

- **Keep it simple:** The simplicity and speed of the format is what makes it appealing to a tight-budgeted department; the problem is that experience breeds a desire to over-complicate the process for more effect, but in the process losing the thing that makes it worthwhile. “The more you do, the more ambitious you become,” she explains. “Every time we run one, it’s very tempting to imagine what more we could do with professional tools. That can be good, if it’s to a purpose, but you have to be aware of not going too mad, because you lose the ability to do it cheaply and with a quick turnaround – which are the main benefits of the process in the first place.

When we began, we could edit a piece in 10 minutes with iMovie. Now, it takes us a much longer, because FinalCut Pro can do so much more! So it’s a trade-off all the time between what would enhance the experience for the audience and what is just an unnecessary ‘nice to have.’”

- **Keep it focused:** The biggest successes, she says, have been for video podcasts on very specific subjects – both because the viewer’s time is focused and limited, and because it gives them a clear idea of what they’ll be giving up their time to watch. For these reasons, too, it’s best to keep each “program” dedicated to a single topic. “People will sit and watch it deliberately when they have a small amount of time,” she says. “Their attention span will be brief, so they’ll watch until the end of the feature but then if you start on a whole new topic after that, they’re quite likely to say, ‘Oh I don’t have time for this’ and turn it off.”



- **Get the format right:** It's important to match the message with the medium, using it to highlight things that can only really be expressed visually. "When we first started, we were doing most shows along a magazine-style format – me talking and interviewing a few 'talking heads,'" Lewis explains. "We realized then that we might as well have been just doing them as audio podcasts and we wouldn't have lost that much. You have to focus on what video will give you that nothing else will."

TOP TIP: INTERVIEW EMPLOYEES TO ENCOURAGE INVOLVEMENT

One of the benefits of the medium's simplicity (and what allies it to the concepts of social media) is that it can showcase more direct and visible participation from the audience as interviewees. This is not lost on Lewis, who feels that it produces untold side-benefits for internal communication in general.

"If you ask people to be involved as interviewees, we've found they very quickly realize that what they say is going to be part of the school's communications," she explains. The result? You get both increased ambassadorship and a sense of ownership for the process. "So, they will say things like, 'Is this the right thing to say?' or 'Am I putting across the right message?' They clearly feel that they've become part of the communication process themselves, because they're representing the school and there's no intermediary between them and the messages.

"It's a very effective way to move towards a situation where everyone in the

organization is a part of the communication culture. And apart from the obvious benefits of creating a more two-way environment, I think that that gives people a feeling of real affinity with the work of the school."

On the production side, Lewis is also looking to roll out more independent video-making around the faculty in 2008, in line with this vision. "At the moment, we still control it. But from next year, anyone on campus will be able to make their own content to go up on the site as well. We'll still post it up, but the actual invention and work will come from them."

ENCOURAGING CONTRIBUTIONS

To increase this participative, knowledge-sharing environment, her team has already been assisting people to contribute to the regular series. Students are encouraged to contribute segments to the ECS student channel since, as Lewis says, they know most about their own way of life.

One further instance on ECS News saw the showcasing of a team that had completed a research study into the future preservation of online media. Rather than produce the requisite written academic paper on the final findings of the work, the study team asked to do it as a video instead. "So it was an ideal match of form and content, because of the subject matter," explains Lewis. Supported by her team, their work will form one episode in the upcoming schedule of video podcasts.

TOP TIP: USE VIDEO AS A GUIDE TO YOUR SITE

Another idea Lewis has been developing is to change the orientation guide on the ECS website (see Figure 6.4, page 80) from



text-based to more video-based. The idea is simple – icons at various points on the site, which, when the user clicks on them, open a small window with a video running of someone actually telling them about the site or some key piece of information, rather than the text-based equivalent. “Doing the video podcasts has shown us just how quick, cheap and easy online video can be now, and also its impact,” she says. “With the way the web is going, things like that could soon be standard.”

It’s just one small concept, but part of an overarching theme Lewis sees as crucial to the development of web-based interaction for communication. “Rather than: ‘What kind of things can we put on there?’ I think we should be saying: ‘We’ve got the

web, it’s an amazing multimedia source, in what different ways can we use our sites to get our messages across?’

“If you think about it that way, then you think about the web more as one holistic thing, rather than just a place to put content.”

RIPE FOR REVOLUTION

Lewis adds that the time is ripe for revolution: “The IT techie people have brought forward all the technology of the internet, but now we’re taking it over as a communication medium. The technology is not that difficult any more, the platforms are much more open to all of us. Now it’s less about the technology and more about how we seize the opportunity to use it.”

Fig 6.4: The ECS website



University of Southampton: Using videocasts to engage internally