

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

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## **RESEARCH NOTE**

### **Podcasting and Tourism:**

### **An Exploratory Study of Types, Approaches and Content**

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#### **Abstract**

This research note explores the current issue of using podcasting as a resource for tourism marketing. It investigates the websites of Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVB) in US cities for the use of podcasting to promote tourism. The findings show that only five CVBs currently use the technology of podcasting and the application is varied in form, approach and content. Many more travel and destination podcasts exist separate from CVB sponsorship. The conclusions suggest that podcasting will become an important marketing tool for tourist destinations and merits study by tourism researchers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** podcasting, podcast, iPod, tourism, marketing, convention and visitors bureaus

#### **Introduction**

The term “podcasting” was first introduced in print in February 2004, and was derived from the words “iPod”, a brand of portable digital audio players made by Apple Computer and “broadcasting” (Hammersley, 2004). The *Oxford Dictionary* chose “podcast” as Word of the Year for 2005 and defined it as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player” (BBC News, 2005b). Technically, podcasting is a relatively simple and easy way of sharing audio content to multiple users. A podcast is an audio file, typically in MP3 format, that uses an RSS (Real Simple Syndication) file for distribution to listeners. A listener can subscribe to podcasts using a “podcatcher” program, which uses the RSS file’s information to download (or “feed”) the latest edition of the podcast to the subscriber’s computer. Users can then copy the file to an MP3 player, such as an iPod, or listen to the file on their computer. Alternatively, listeners can use their computer to go to a website to listen to the audio file without downloading it first. Most, but not all, podcasts are provided free of charge to listeners. By April 2005, it was estimated more than 6 million American iPod owners have listened to podcasts (*Hotels*, 2006). On 28 June 2005, Apple Computer’s iTunes music download service began to support podcast subscriptions (i.e., iTunes became a “podcatcher”), in addition to music purchases (BBC, 2005a). The popularity of iTunes greatly expanded the number of podcast listeners. More recently, video podcasts (also know as “videocasts” or “vodcasts”) have increased in number, though their much larger file size and greater production effort have so far limited their numbers. The downloaded podcast is highly mobile and can be played and listened to anytime and anywhere. The more than 30,000 active audio and video programs that are listed on many podcast directories encompass a wide variety of topics and themes, and the largest MP3 players today can hold up to

80GB of content, which equates to some 20,000 songs or the equivalent in podcast and video files.

The advent of podcasting has transformed corporate communication, social communities, marketing and public relations (Alexander, 2006; Haythornthwaite, 2005). It is no longer a question of how many people the message reaches, but rather how many of the *right* people are being reached. Most importantly, this new social media has the potential to bring about major changes for travel and tourism industry (Lew, 2006c), where these “virtual tourist communities” (Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier, 2002, p. 407) can significantly challenge traditional models of communication between businesses and customers.

Travel related podcasting has become a popular and growing sub-genre in podcasting (Lew, 2006b) and deserves attention from tourism researchers. In terms of numbers, as of August 2007, Apple’s iTunes service lists 105 podcasts in its Places and Travel category, while the IdiotVox.com (2007) directory lists 173 podcasts in its Travel category, and the Yahoo Podcasts directory lists 6042 podcast series that are tagged with the word “travel” and (2007b), but only 96 with the tag “tourism” (2007a). Any registered user can add a tag to a podcast listed in Yahoo Podcasts, so the diversity of topics with the “travel” tag is considerable. Because the delivery system is digital, podcasting expands the horizon of the information sharing. Viral distributions (sharing and linking among listeners) can even allow the smallest market podcast to grow in influence with the right conditions.

Travel podcasts can be generalized into the following three basic types:

(1) Destination podcasts – These may be sponsored by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), but are more likely to comprise the insights and experiences of an avid booster who lives in, or often frequents, a place. Examples of this type of podcast include: *Five Hundy by*

*Midnight: The Original Las Vegas Podcast* (at [www.fivehundybymidnight.com](http://www.fivehundybymidnight.com)) and *iPod Traveller Podcast*: “The Best in European Travel” with a focus on budget travel (at [www.ipodtraveller.net](http://www.ipodtraveller.net));

(2) Travel Experience podcasts – These podcasts relate the experience of travel, typically from a personal perspective. They may focus on the logistics of travel, such as trip planning, the flight experience, hotels and meals, or descriptions and experiences of a variety of different places. Two examples of this type of podcast include: *Travel Commons Podcast*: about road warrior (business) travel, “more about the journey than the destination” (at [www.travelcommons.com](http://www.travelcommons.com)) and *Amateur Traveler Podcast*: personal travel experiences and destination reviews by the host and interviews with other travelers (at [amateurtraveler.com](http://amateurtraveler.com)); and

(3) Travel and Tourism Industry and Education podcasts – These podcasts are more focused on special areas of travel and tourism. They are less oriented toward the general travel consumer, though they may still generate popular interest. Examples of this type of podcast include: *The Home Based Travel Agent Podcast*: how to run a home-based travel service (at [hometravelagent.net](http://hometravelagent.net)) and *Geography for Travelers Podcast*: social science perspectives of travel and tourism (at [travelgeography.info](http://travelgeography.info)). Foreign language learning podcasts are also often “tagged” as travel-related.

Although there is substantial and growing literature on the web-based marketing strategies (Buhalis, 1998; Sheldon, 1997; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006; Werthner & Klein, 1999), a review of the tourism literature has found no prior research examining the role and uses of podcasting in travel and tourism as it may apply to destination marketing. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory research is to heighten the awareness of tourism researchers and practitioners about the potential use of podcasting in tourism marketing and destination promotion by examining the

use of podcasting by the Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVBs), a destination marketing organization (DMO) organizational concept that originated in the US (Morrison & Anderson, 1997). CVBs have spread worldwide and have been effective in increasing the emphasis on the marketing of cities and other local communities as tourist destinations (Gretzel, Yuan & Fesenmaier, 2000). Most CVB websites not only provide official information on local travel and tourism, but also present a window of opportunity for visitors to gain virtual experiences of a place through photographs and videos (Yuan, Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003). Podcasting could fit naturally within the mix of destination information services offered by CVBs and other DMOs. Some 200 websites of CVBs in US were chosen and examined from March 2005 to December 2006 using a systematic sampling technique. There are three levels of CVBs in US: regional, county, and city. The focus of this research was on level of city CVBs. The selected cities were categorized based upon their population, their annual tourist arrivals, and the number of tourist attractions that they listed on their website. At the beginning of the research, keywords were entered into major internet search engines to locate the websites of CVBs. The web pages were reviewed to thematically organize their information. The search was updated biweekly to determine if new podcasts may have appeared on CVB websites during the data collection period. The specific objectives of this research were threefold: (1) examine the current state of podcasting as a marketing tool on the official CVB websites, and where podcasting was being used (2) examine the accessibility and usability of the podcasts (e.g., prominence, subscription information, download time) and (3) examine the content of the podcasts. Qualitative information was assessed by identifying heuristic categories (Timothy & Groves, 2001). Measurements included the types of data sources, range of coverage, time interlude, and quality of coverage.

## **Results**

### *Podcasting Characteristics*

The findings revealed that only five CVB websites were using podcasting as a supplementary tool for tourism marketing during the study period:

- Knoxville, Tennessee ([www.knoxville.org](http://www.knoxville.org), with the podcast's official website being at [www.RockyTopPodcast.com](http://www.RockyTopPodcast.com));
- Galveston, Texas ([www.galveston.com](http://www.galveston.com));
- Indianapolis, Indiana ([www.indy.org](http://www.indy.org));
- Louisville, Kentucky ([gotolouisville.com/TOC\\_Podcast.aspx](http://gotolouisville.com/TOC_Podcast.aspx)); and
- Orlando, Florida ([www.orlandoinfo.com/podcast](http://www.orlandoinfo.com/podcast)).

Knoxville is the third-largest city in Tennessee with a population of 173,000. Galveston is a Gulf Coast island city with a population of 57,000. It has become a major base port for cruise tourism due to its location in the greater Houston region of southeast Texas. Indianapolis is the capital city of Indiana with a metropolitan population of 1.5 million. Louisville is situated on the Kentucky and Indiana border and is best known for the Kentucky Derby horse race. Orlando has a population of 1.6 million and is known as the home of Walt Disney World and other major theme park attractions.

Four of the podcasts use the MP3 file format, which can be downloaded and played almost any computer or portable music player. The video podcast in Louisville uses the Adobe Flash Player which can also be downloaded for use on any computer, but not on a portable player. In terms of accessibility, in all instances the podcasts were relatively difficult to find on the CVB website.

The Orlando CVB was the one exception to this, as it has a clearly obvious link to “Orland

Travel Podcasts” near the top of its site. The Galveston CVB’s website requires that you first go to the Media Center, then to iPod Services (despite the fact that no iPod is normally needed to listen to a podcast). In addition, the main web page of the Galveston site is so cluttered that it was difficult to find the link among all of the other links. The Indianapolis and Louisville CVB podcasts were also the most difficult to locate. The former was located under a section titled “visitors,” while the latter was located on a separate website that was not linked at all to the main CVB web page. The Knoxville, Tennessee website only links to the Rocky Top podcast through a press release (Knoxville.org, 2006). There may have been a more direct link to the podcast from the main web page in the past, but during the study period there were no links at all to the Rocky Top podcast from anywhere else on the website.

Once the podcasts were found, downloading the MP3 file or opening the Flash video was relative easy and user-friendly. The Orlando podcast website was the most user-friendly for a novice podcast listener. It provided the most information about podcasting in general and instructions on how to listen to the files. The Orlando podcast also provided a text transcript of the audio. The Galveston CVB has both an audio podcast and a video podcast, which are handled differently on the website. The audio podcast (MP3 file) simply started playing the podcast as soon as the link was accessed on the CVB homepage. However, it was very difficult to find out how to subscribe to this podcast from the audio player. The video podcast was easier to subscribe to, though its contents are very different from the audio podcast (discussed more below). Louisville only provided video podcasts about the city’s major attractions. The quality of video for both Galveston and Louisville podcasts were very low with grainy images and unclear text, probably to make them more accessible to viewers with slow internet connections. Indianapolis provided an audio podcast of their show titled “Doing Indy.” Its website also

provided very clear instructions about how to subscribe to their podcast. However, because the file format is in M4V (MPEG version 4), which is limited to either being viewed online or on a limited number of video players that can play this format. The Knoxville Rocky Top podcast provided no information on how to download or to subscribe to its services. Of the five, the Knoxville website assumed considerable familiarity with podcasting on the part the visitors and seems to be aimed primarily at an audience that finds and listens to podcasts through a podcast directory web site, such as iTunes.com and PodcastPickle.com.

### *Content and topics*

In terms of content, the Orlando CVB's show is titled the Orlando Family Vacations podcast ([www.orlandoinfo.com/podcast](http://www.orlandoinfo.com/podcast)). It features experts on trip planning and various experiences to help families prepare for a "perfect" Orlando vacation. The podcasts are mini-documentaries that will probably last quite a long time before they will require updating. As such, they are not produced on a regular basis. In fact, only three podcasts were posted between November 2005 and December 2006. The Orlando website also included video files, which were simply repurposed television commercials. These are not really podcasts, since they cannot be subscribed to using RSS, and they are not posted in the podcast section of the Orland CVB web site. In the long run, the website states that the Orlando CVB will provide "a series of entertaining and informative podcasts for your enjoyment making your next Orlando Vacation memorable."

In contrast, the Galveston CVB's podcast ([www.galveston.com](http://www.galveston.com)) does not have the interviews, but instead focuses on the city's major tourist attractions and weekly events. Its audio podcast boasts being the first podcast for tourism in the US. Though it may be the first CVB tourism

podcast, there are many amateur podcasts that are probably at least a few months older. The audio podcast is updated every week by emphasizing different attractions and covering new, upcoming events. The podcast also provides detailed information on transportation and road conditions in the Galveston area. More recently, Galveston has started a video podcast as well. The video podcasts describe the city and its major attractions, and are not time-sensitive, as are the audio podcasts. This reflects the fact that video podcasts require much more production effort, time and cost than do audio podcasts. Furthermore, both the video and audio podcasts for Galveston are professionally produced, resembling broadcast television and radio programs. Both podcasts emphasize Galveston's distinctiveness as an island city in the southern US and encourages visitors to Houston, Texas to visit Galveston. They also encourage listeners to get more detailed information by browsing the official website and sending requests through the podcast website.

The Indianapolis CVB presents a variety of topics in its video podcast, ranging from the city's museums to its local culinary experiences. It features Seth Hancock, a local personality and commentator who records his visits, along with interviews with people, to places such as the state fair, historical sites, and a local beer festival. The program is casual and friendly, involving a lot of conversations with local residents who are involved in these sites and events.

The Louisville CVB has a video podcast with a marketing slogan "Do Something Original." It includes short video clips emphasizing the pleasures of visiting Louisville. Horse racing is clearly the major attraction, centered on Kentucky Derby. Others video clips feature Bourbon, bluegrass music, and sporting events. The videos do not include interviews or any interaction with tourists. Rather, they give potential tourists a "peek" of the attractions, encouraging them to see more in person.

The Knoxville CVB sponsors the “Rocky Top” podcast, which includes interview segments that are re-packaged from one of the more popular podcasts today, “5 Minutes with Wichita” ([www.5minuteswithwichita.com](http://www.5minuteswithwichita.com)). Both the 5 Minutes with Wichita podcast and the Rocky Top podcasts are hosted by Wichita Rutherford, who brings his distinctive Eastern Tennessee accent, accompanied by bluegrass music from Appalachia playing in the background. Rocky Top is the official Tennessee State song, and Wichita is also the name of a city in Tennessee. The Knoxville program runs from 5 to 7 minutes and includes interviews with political figures, country singers, sports stars and other celebrities from the Knoxville area who talk about the folklore of the regions and its unique cultural representation as an enticement for tourists.

According to the President of Knoxville CVB:

...the podcast will be added to the great list of ways Knoxville area visitors can learn more about what our community can offer them. Through the podcast, we will be able to not only reach our regional community, but also those in the international audience (Knoxville.org, 2006).

While the content of the podcasts from five CVB websites reviewed here varies in interesting ways, there were several topics that were covered regularly, though not necessarily in every podcast (see Table 1). These were:

- (1) Special events (e.g., local community events and location);
- (2) Specific site attractions (e.g., Knoxville’s sports teams, Galveston’s “Strand”, Indianapolis motor speedway, Louisville Kentucky Derby, Orlando’s Disney World);
- (3) Dining (the local restaurants and the specialties);
- (4) Accommodations (from motels to hotels);
- (5) Shopping (the local malls and the souvenir stores); and

(6) Nightlife (bars, theaters and entertainment).

< ***INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE*** >

### **August 2007 Update**

A summary review of new activities between December 2006 and August 2007 found that the number of CVBs in the US that had started podcasting and videocasting had more than tripled since the initial project was undertaken. New additions included:

- Lake County CVB, Hammond, Indiana ([www.lakecountycvb.com/podcasts/](http://www.lakecountycvb.com/podcasts/)) - audio and videocasts about events and attractions
- Visit Pittsburgh - Greater Pittsburgh CVB ([www.visitpittsburgh.com/](http://www.visitpittsburgh.com/)) – podcast link goes to MoGoes Mobile Tours ([www.mogoes.com/getmo/pittsburgh.php](http://www.mogoes.com/getmo/pittsburgh.php)) - walking tours
- Lehigh Valley CVB, Allentown, Pennsylvania ([www.lehighvalleypa.org/visitors/about/podcasts](http://www.lehighvalleypa.org/visitors/about/podcasts)) - audio about events and attractions
- Scottsdale CVB, Arizona ([www.scottsdalecvb.com/static/index.cfm?contentID=671](http://www.scottsdalecvb.com/static/index.cfm?contentID=671)) - driving tour audio files
- Santa Barbara CVB, California ([www.santabarbaraca.com/podcasts/](http://www.santabarbaraca.com/podcasts/)) - single walking tour audio or video file, no RSS subscription
- Sacramento CVB, California ([www.discovergold.org/AboutSacramento/video.cfm](http://www.discovergold.org/AboutSacramento/video.cfm)) - single video introduction to Sacramento, no RSS subscription
- Lake Havasu City CVB, Arizona ([www.golakehasu.com/podcasts/podblog.html](http://www.golakehasu.com/podcasts/podblog.html)) - audio podcasts and blog about events and attractions

- North Platte/Lincoln County CVB, Nebraska ([www.visitnorthplatte.com/podcasts.htm](http://www.visitnorthplatte.com/podcasts.htm)) - audio podcasts about events and attractions
- Monterey County CVB, California ([montereyinfo.org/page/monterey\\_county\\_videos/](http://montereyinfo.org/page/monterey_county_videos/)) - professionally produced video tours of places and events
- Door County CVB, Wisconsin ([www.doorcounty.com/podcast/](http://www.doorcounty.com/podcast/)) - video podcasts on things to do in Door County, Wisconsin
- Greater Woodfield (Northwest Chicago) CVB ([www.chicagonorthwest.com/](http://www.chicagonorthwest.com/)) – website links to: (<http://www.discoverwoodfield.com/>) - attractions and events

The new set of CVB podcasting sites share many similarities with the initial research set, including a focus on attractions and events, and a lack of RSS subscriptions on some of the websites – which some would argue is a sign that it is not a true podcast. Like the Knoxville CVB, some of the newer CVB podcasts are outsourced specialists in the technology. The use of podcasting to provide downloadable walking and driving tours that tourists can listen to while visiting the destination is the one new application that emerges from these newer CVB efforts (Pettersen, 2007).

### **Research Implications**

This research note introduces podcasting as an emerging tool for destination tourism marketing, and as a worthy topic for research. As of December 2006, there were only five official CVB websites in the US that were using podcasting, and each used it in a very distinctive way. This number increased to at least 16 by August 2007, indicating a rapid recent adoption rate for this new technology. However, the way that podcasting is being used by CVB varies considerably.

For the Orlando CVB, podcasts were mini-documentaries about how to get the most out of a family vacation in Orlando. The Galveston CVB's audio podcast was a continually updated attractions and event hotline for visitors and local residents, while their video podcast provided less time-sensitive information on the city and its major attractions. In the Indianapolis, the CVB podcast was a series of interviews with local residents at featured city attractions. The Louisville CVB showcased the city's major attractions on a video podcast. The Knoxville podcast provided a way for the city to leverage one of its premiere personalities (at least in the podcasting world) to promote tourism through interviews with celebrities and other interesting people in the Knoxville area. Similar outsource of podcasts and the provision of downloadable audio tours were found in the newer CVB podcasts that have been started in 2007.

The relatively small number of CVBs that are using podcasts, and the challenge of finding them on most CVB websites, reflects the nascent stage of the technology, and a hesitance, if not reluctance by many, to adopt it. Podcasting has been largely relegated to the realm of geeks and first adopters. The absence of podcasting in the major metropolitan CVBs, such as New York City or Los Angeles, further suggests unfamiliarity with the technology and a lack of confidence in its potential as a marketing tool.

However, podcasting is also a moving target. When this research study was first begun in summer 2006, there were only three CVBs using podcasts (Orland, Galveston and Louisville), and all were only doing audio podcasts. The fact that a year later there are now at least 16 CVBs using podcasting, and with a growth in video podcasts, indicates a growing recognition of the potentially valuable of the technology as a marketing and communication tool.

Commercial applications of podcasting have not been fully tested and evaluated for any industry, let alone for tourism promotion. On the other hand, CVBs have been very aware of the growth

of amateur travel podcasts in their cities. These “unofficial” civic boosters may have greater credibility with potential visitors than CVB hired professionals. One of the attractions of podcasting is that it is often being done by real people, not professionals, which give podcasting a greater sense of authenticity and trust over traditional media outlets. This can result in viral (word-of-mouth) marketing that can be more effective than anything a CVB could do. It is even argued by some that podcasts made by media corporations are not “true” podcasts, which may explain why Knoxville has taken the relatively hands-off approach to its CVB sponsored podcast. Thus, it may be in the interests of CVBs to contract with and otherwise support the amateurs, but not compete with them. Alternatively, CVBs can use their larger budgets to provide audio and video podcasts that complement, rather than compete with unofficial podcasts. To fully understand the role and effectiveness of destination podcasts requires a greater examination of the broad range of both professional and amateur destination podcasts. While many podcasts focus on cities and regions in one way or another, they do not all overtly promote places as visitor destinations. Because of these shared characteristics, it may be possible to develop a standardized assessment model for destination podcasts. In addition, there is a need to study the profiles of destination and travel podcast listeners. There are limited data on podcast listeners (Google Answers, 2006), however, the travel industry could benefit greatly from more detailed market segmentation. Finally, CVB-style DMOs are present throughout the world (cf. Destination Marketing Association International, [www.destinationmarketing.org](http://www.destinationmarketing.org)), and a comparative study of the adoption and usage of podcasting and other social media on a global scale could generate informative results.

As both a mobile, take-it-with-you technology and a form of internet-based television and radio, podcasting may well become the best way to market important segments of the travel and

tourism industry to the growing number of niche market consumers who are increasingly using forms of new media for their entertainment and information.

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**Table 1: Features of CVB Podcasts**

<b>CVBs</b>	<b>Title/Topic</b>	<b>Podcast Format</b>	<b>Accessibility</b>	<b>Subscription (RSS)</b>	<b>Content</b>
Galveston, TX	Weekly Events (audio), Destination Information (video)	MP3 audio, Adobe Flash video	Difficult	Difficult (audio), Easy (video)	Special events, cultural attractions, Galveston “Strand” and accommodation (audio); City description, major attractions (video)
Indianapolis, IN	“Doing Indy” attraction visits and interviews	M4v audio	Most difficult	Easy	Motor speedway, culinary attractions, and nightlife
Knoxville, TN	“Rocky Top” celebrity interviews	MP3 audio	Difficult	Difficult	Sports team, vernacular tourism, and special events
Louisville, KY	“Do Something Original” attraction videos	Adobe Flash video	Most difficult	Not available	Kentucky Derby museum, old Louisville Ghost tour, culinary attractions
Orlando, FL	“Orlando Family Vacation” travel tips	MP3 audio, text transcripts	Easy	Easy	Mini-documentaries, Special events, Disney World, local dining and tips for family fun