

## How to Make a Podcast

By Marieke Van Damme and Dan Yaeger

**P**odcasting is a wonderful way of engaging your audience, extending your mission, and raising awareness of your institution. Current technology allows us to take advantage of what radio has done since its inception: share personal stories in an intimate way.

Unlike radio broadcasting, though, podcasting is something everyone can do with minimal investment. But is it right for you? Sit back and listen in as the hosts of the *Museum People* podcast share their experience making a podcast from scratch.

Photos NEMA



Marieke Van Damme and Dan Yaeger, co-hosts of *Museum People*, at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC



*Museum People* co-hosts Marieke Van Damme and Dan Yaeger in the “studio” at the Cambridge Historical Society

### Welcome to the World of Podcasting

[THEME MUSIC UP]

**Announcer:** This is *Museum People*, a podcast that celebrates individuals connected with the museum field by highlighting their work, passions, opinions, and personalities. In each episode, you’ll hear stories and viewpoints from a variety of museum people, unsung workers to executive directors, volunteers to trustees, as they help change the world one visitor at a time. And now, the hosts of *Museum People*, Dan Yaeger and Marieke Van Damme.”

**Dan Yaeger:** Marieke! AASLH has asked us to write a Technical Leaflet on how to do a podcast. What do you think?

**Marieke Van Damme:** Dan, I’m excited for two reasons. One, it’s an honor to be asked, and, two, because podcasts have such incredible potential for history organizations. History is filled with untold stories, and podcasts are perfect vehicles for storytelling.

**DY:** Should we start out with a little background on our own podcast, *Museum People*?

**MVD:** Sure! *Museum People* was born at a ballgame, an Atlanta Braves game to be exact, during the 2015 AAM conference. As we were sitting in the stands eating hotdogs, you mentioned you were thinking

of starting a podcast for NEMA. I thought this was a great idea because I love podcasts and I love museums. One thing led to another and here we are—one season of *Museum People* behind us and another one underway.

**DY:** You make it sound so simple. We have put in a lot of work.

**MVD:** It’s true. We had to think through the format, develop our strategy, buy the equipment, plan out episodes, do the taping and editing, learn how to publish and market it ... [VOICE TRAILS OFF]

**DY:** But it also was simple too. Whenever you do something you love, it really is simple, no matter how much work you put in, right? And I think that is maybe the first secret of podcasting: you have to find something you love to talk about and be willing to share it with your audiences in the wider world. That makes it all worthwhile.

**MVD:** Right. So let’s share some of what we’ve learned with our friends at AASLH, shall we?

**DY:** Let’s do it.

### Why Make a Podcast?

**MVD:** Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, maybe we should make sure everyone knows what a podcast is. Technically, a podcast is a digital audio file that can be downloaded from a website to your

smartphone or other media player. The term “podcast” originated with Apple’s iPod as a way to listen to content hosted online.

**DY:** But in a broader sense, a podcast also refers to a series of episodes, usually with a theme of some kind, right?

**MVD:** Yes. So why would anyone want to make a podcast? Or a series of podcasts?

**DY:** I know in my case I was interested in finding a way of deepening NEMA’s engagement with the audience of museum professionals in New England and beyond. As we developed the strategy for *Museum People*, we came up with seven reasons to do it:

- Engage with museum professionals (as I said).
- Provide an additional channel for NEMA branding.
- Serve NEMA’s mission of inspiring and connecting museum professionals.
- Give NEMA a platform for thought leadership.
- Encourage interest in museum careers by highlighting interesting museum people.
- Attract potential sponsorship revenue (something we’re still working on...).
- Build awareness of NEMA programming and events.

Those were my reasons, Marieke. Why did you do it?

**MVD:** A few reasons. First, I love museums, and the people I’ve met along the way, and I’m committed to the success of the field. I also care about NEMA and believe in the organization’s ability to help my fellow workers across the region/country. I see *Museum People* as a way to share my love and maybe make the profession a little more joyful. Also, I never actually agreed to be a co-host. You just went ahead and put my name in the intro. [LAUGHTER]

**DY:** [LAUGHTER] Alright, let’s say someone is excited to start a podcast. Now what?

**MVD:** I’d say it’s putting in the time and brain energy to figure out what outcomes they expect. If those outcomes outweigh the costs and time of creating a podcast, then you’ve passed the first hurdle.

**DY:** I agree. The biggest challenge is to find the focus of the podcast. There’s lots of competition out there, so you need to define your strengths, what you’ll communicate, to whom you’ll communicate it, and be relentless in maintaining that focus. If you allow the podcast to drift, it won’t be successful.

**MVD:** You also have to be committed to the podcast and make sure you are consistent with your schedule. Your listeners should know that you will be reliably releasing weekly, monthly, or whatever. So you need to be honest with yourself about whether you have the bandwidth to do it along with all your day-to-day tasks.

**DY:** Which means you have to have the blessing of your organization if you’re going to be doing it during office hours.



**Dan Yaeger hears from Museum Hack’s Ethan Angelica of New York City at the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting**

**MVD:** Right. And as you’re pitching the idea to your boss, make sure you spell out whether this is an official museum project or a personal side project. If it’s a side project, you still have to recognize that what you say in the podcast might reflect on your employers, so it’s a good idea to keep them in the loop so they can be supportive.

### Stuff You Need

**MVD:** Dan, you did most of the grocery shopping for *Museum People*. What was on your list?

**DY:** It’s pretty incredible how inexpensive it is to put together a fairly high-quality podcast. If you Google “How to do a podcast,” you’ll find many helpful suggestions, but here’s the equipment we bought to start *Museum People*:

- Digital recorder: Zoom H4N, \$150 online (make sure you buy a ton of AA batteries, because you’ll go through them; a power cord is extra).
- Microphones: Sennheiser e835 cardioid mike, \$100 online (I bought two).

- Microphone cables: XLR connection, 15 feet long, about \$35 online (I bought two, obviously).
- Microphone stands: QuikLok A-188 desktop stand for studio recording, \$15-\$25 online (again, I obviously bought two).
- Headphones: Plantronics .Audio 376 DSP headset, \$50 online (this has a USB connection so you can edit your podcast on your PC; they're not the best quality, but they work).

I spent about \$500 all told for the hardware. Not a bad investment.

**MVD:** *Museum People* is centered around interviews, so most of our content is recorded in the field. But we still need a studio to record introductions and commentary that surround the interviews. First we tried your office at NEMA for this, but we noticed there was a weird hum in the background, which was probably from the HVAC system.

**DY:** Since then we've been using the conference room at the Cambridge Historical Society, which has its

plusses and minuses. It's nice and quiet and filled with nineteenth-century charm, so we're pretty inspired there, but the big wooden conference tables tend to create an echo that we notice on playback. So we got smart and started covering them with blankets to muffle the echo. It seems to work pretty well.

**MVD:** Radio people have told me that the ideal make-shift studio when you're on the road is in a closet or under the covers. Lots of carpeting helps too.

**DY:** Right. The idea is to find a space that's private and not filled with hard surfaces—or noisy HVAC systems. You might not notice while you're recording, but you'll definitely notice when you put on headphones later.

### Podcast Format

**MVD:** Let's talk format for a minute, Dan.

**DY:** Let's!

**MVD:** Choose your podcast format carefully, because you want to be consistent. History-oriented podcasts have several options:

- It can be a gab fest with two or more hosts and/or visitors talking about issues and events.
- It can be interview-based, like ours is, with the host or hosts providing commentary or reporting back in-between interviews.
- Or it can be a more-produced piece focused on storytelling, maybe featuring oral histories or interviews with people connected with historic events. You can even have the host researching and telling interesting historical stories connected with your area or institution.

When you think about format, also think about the length of each episode and try to keep that consistent too. Do some research on other types of history-related podcasts. Most podcasts seem to be between thirty minutes to an hour, but you definitely need to have some really interesting content to keep people listening for an hour. The first season of *Museum People* tended to be twenty-minute episodes, which people have told us is great for listening while doing dishes or driving home. Season Two episodes are a little longer so far. We're watching our download numbers and what our listeners are saying in their feedback to us to see if we need to make adjustments.

**DY:** What you said about content is so true. If you have great content and can keep people's interest, the format and length fades in importance. Good content will also help listeners forgive your lack of technical polish, like those echoes and weird hums we had in some of our episodes.

On a related note, I want to say that if you decide you need a partner for your podcast, choose wisely.

**MVD:** I agree! [LAUGHTER]

**DY:** My advice is to choose your podcast co-host like

Dan Yaeger speaking with Dan Danzig of Pasadena, California, at the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting





**Dan Yaeger catches an interview with Christine Miller Betts of Augusta, Georgia at the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting**

you would choose a companion for a coast-to-coast road trip. You'll be spending plenty of time together.

**MVD:** Indeed. Which reminds me, make sure you bring big energy on your podcasting days. Dan says content is important. I say energy is important. Let your listeners know you're having fun talking with them and they'll have fun as well. I'd also like to mention that interviewing people is hard. The ability to edit afterwards is very comforting, but don't get stuck staring at your subject. Prep beforehand with some research and always have a question or two in your back pocket if you lose your train of thought.

### *Editing/Publishing*

**DY:** One of the biggest surprises I've had during our *Museum People* experience is how important it is to edit your podcast. My original plan was to simply bring the recording equipment with me whenever I visited with museum folks, which I do plenty. I thought I'd get away with chatting with them like I always do, only from now on I'd push a mike in their face and publish the raw interview, no editing required. Now I realize how boring that would have been.

**MVD:** You wouldn't have had me to banter with, for starters.

**DY:** You're right. The banter adds much to the energy of *Museum People*, so we've been told. We stitch together the interviews with highly-thoughtful analysis...

**MVD:** And some humor...

**DY:** And some humor, in a way that sheds light and context on our interview subjects. We also add little musical bridges between interviews too, sort of like NPR does.

**MVD:** Where do you get the music? I like the funky stuff.

**DY:** Believe it or not there is a great deal of rights-free music online that's really good for the most part. I always go to [www.ccmixer.org](http://www.ccmixer.org), where I search by genre and mood. Downloads are free. You just have to give attribution in your web listing for each episode.

**MVD:** How do you edit the episodes?

**DY:** It's not as hard as I thought it would be. First, I had to get audio editing software. The best I've found is Audacity, remarkably powerful software that's free. It took some time figuring it out (professionals use it alongside amateurs like me), but there's a helpful user community online that has tutorials, FAQs, and help aids that made me relatively adept. I'm the first to admit I don't know how to use even half of the features, but it's enough to get the job done. Maybe someday I'll get around to learning the other half. One thing I've gotten to be pretty skillful at is making us all sound good. Marieke, do you know how often you click your tongue before you speak? No one hears it but me. I edit it out.

**MVD:** And all of your "ums" and "you knows"?

**DY:** Gone.

**MVD:** How do you publish the episodes then? Like the grocery shopping, that's your end of things.

**DY:** When you're done editing, you create an MP3 audio file and upload it to a podcast hosting service. There are many services out there, but we use something called Podbean, which costs us \$96 per year for unlimited podcasts. Once you upload it to Podbean, they take care of distributing your podcast to places like iTunes, Google Play, and a zillion other sites where people can subscribe and get each episode automatically when we release it. We also upload each episode to our own website, [www.nemanet.org](http://www.nemanet.org), so our NEMA audience can download it there as well. You could publish your podcast on your own website without a hosting service, but in addition to distributing your episodes far and wide, the podcast host tracks how many people are actually listening, which is probably your most important measure of success.

### Marketing Your Podcast

**MVD:** Once you publish your podcast, how do people find out about it, Dan?

**DY:** Marketing?

**MVD:** Marketing. Podcasts and social media were made for each other, so anticipate your social media campaign at the very beginning of your planning process. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are solid avenues for releasing news of your podcast and expanding your audience through "likes" and "retweets." Podcasts are generally popular with younger audiences, so mirror successful marketing efforts towards Gen X and Millennials with those

that you've used in the past. The best way to get new listeners is to have another podcast promote your podcast. (Imagine if *Serial* or *This American Life* were to mention *Museum People*.) This may be hard to do at first, but keep it in mind for the future.

**DY:** When we launched *Museum People* we employed social media to send out teasers a few days before the official launch, which seemed to work pretty well. We also use email along with social media to announce the release of each episode. And as I said, we've designed a *Museum People* page on our website where people can browse episodes or binge listen, sort of the home base for the podcast.

**MVD:** Can I talk a second about naming your podcast?

**DY:** Of course.

**MVD:** The name of your podcast is probably the most important step in marketing it. My advice is to be very literal and clear so people can make an easy decision to listen. You don't want to confuse people.

**DY:** I recall your working title for our podcast was *Humans of Museums*, inspired by the *Humans of New York* photo blog, right?

**MVD:** Right. I still like it, but I understand why I got outvoted. *Museum People* communicates our focus very clearly. When you decide on a name, make sure to Google it so you're certain it isn't already taken or comes close to impinging on some else's brand. If you're in doubt about that, make sure your lawyer gets to provide an opinion. You don't want to change the name (or even worse, be sued!) after you've launched the podcast.



Dan Yaeger interviewing Paul Bowers of Melbourne, Australia, at the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting

## Evaluation

**DY:** By the end of Season One, we had pretty much determined that there would be a Season Two of *Museum People*.

**MVD:** Right. Before we launched, I don't think either one of us knew what to expect in terms of listenership, but after eight episodes, the end of Season One, we had more than 7,000 listens from a nationwide audience. That seemed to be pretty significant.

**DY:** I agree. As I said earlier, our overall goal with the podcast was to provide an avenue of engagement with museum professionals. And while we don't know for sure that everyone listening is a museum professional (my kids listened once or twice, I hope), it appears we met our goal.

**MVD:** Another sign of engagement is the feedback we received. In each episode we encourage listeners to provide input via an email link on the NEMA website and we had a number of people contributing encouragement and ideas for future interviews.

**DY:** And the "likes" and "retweets" and Facebook mentions were also signs that we were doing something right. Is this what it's like to have a fan club?

**MVD:** Don't let it go to your head, Dan. We should probably do a survey after Season Two to give listeners an opportunity to provide anonymous feedback.

**DY:** The only goal we didn't budge was getting sponsors. But that was because we didn't try. Too busy getting podcasts released.

**MVD:** It might be too early for sponsorships. Even though 7,000 listens is a great number, my understanding is that sponsors often want to see thousands of downloads per episode before they give you money. Of course, if a sponsor believes your audience and theirs are truly intertwined, they might find it attractive, especially when it's new and different and there's a buzz in your community about it. I'm glad you didn't make sponsorship your top goal.

**DY:** Me too. In any event, the NEMA board was pleased with the results of Season One and was very encouraging about moving on to Season Two. For a nonprofit, I suppose board buy-in is the most important metric for a podcast.

Marieke, we're heading into the home stretch. I think we've covered a lot of ground in this Technical Leaflet, so I'd like each of us to leave our audience with our top three memorable takeaways for how to create a history podcast. You first.



**Marieke Van Damme on location at the Massachusetts State House for the *Museum People* podcast.**

**MVD:** My takeaways are:

**1. Do it for the right reasons.** Your podcast should augment the great work your museum is already doing to change the world. We aren't in a podcast bubble, so there's no hurry to jump on the trend. Slow down and do it right from the beginning.

**2. Have measurements of success** so evaluation is fair and straightforward.

**3. Give it time to succeed, and be kind to yourselves.**

**DY:** All terrific. I'd have to say these are my top three:

**1. No winging it.** Have a plan, for each episode and for the overall podcast series.

**2. Don't cut corners.** Invest in the best equipment you can afford and seek professional standards, even though you're an amateur.

**3. Put in the time.** *Museum People* is a fairly major time commitment, from interviewing to editing, but for me it's a creative outlet, so the overtime is well worth it.

**4. Have fun.** It's a blast to talk with so many interesting and passionate people, giving their voice a wider audience through a podcast.

**MVD:** Hey, you said three, so I get one more. **With great power comes great responsibility.** Put the right voice in charge of your podcast brand.

**DY:** That does it for this issue of the AASLH Technical Leaflet. Thanks so much for being with us! Go out and change the world, museum people!

**MVD:** We love you, museum people!

[THEME MUSIC UP]

**Announcer:** *Museum People* is a production of the New England Museum Association, which connects, inspires, and empowers cultural institutions to provide their communities with deep and authentic experiences. Have an idea or comment for *Museum People*? Go to [www.nemanet.org/museumpeople](http://www.nemanet.org/museumpeople) to provide feedback, get information about episodes, and learn how to subscribe. Thanks for listening!



Marieke Van Damme and Dan Yaeger, co-hosts of *Museum People*, at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC



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Readers can access the *Museum People* podcast at [www.nemanet.org/museumpeople](http://www.nemanet.org/museumpeople).

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### Resources

Jeff Large, "The Absolute Beginner's Guide to Podcasting: Preparation," [www.ostraining.com/blog/podcasting/preparation](http://www.ostraining.com/blog/podcasting/preparation).

New England Association of Museums, *Museum People*, [www.nemanet.org/museumpeople](http://www.nemanet.org/museumpeople).

*Sounds Like and Earful*, "Show, Don't Tell (in Podcasting)," [go.aaslh.org/PodcastShow](http://go.aaslh.org/PodcastShow).

Heather Teysko, "The Little Podcast That Could: What I've Learned in Seven Years of Podcasting Renaissance English History," [go.aaslh.org/LittlePodcast](http://go.aaslh.org/LittlePodcast).

Adrian Try, "The Complete List of Audio Gear You'll Need for Your Podcast," [go.aaslh.org/PodcastGear](http://go.aaslh.org/PodcastGear).