

Finding Podcasts in All the Wrong Places

Essay

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Podcasts are a lot like the trials, triumphs and tribulations of blind dating.

In the beginning, they can be an anticipated thrill. What will I get? Will it be fascinating and hold my interest? Will it touch my emotions and leave me wanting more? Or will it send me in search of the nearest off switch much like the panic I feel at a restaurant looking for the exit door or bathroom window big enough to fit through?

Like the people on match dating sites, podcasts look quite attractive and sleek. Their allure is in the packaging. The come hither of their titles draws you in as quickly as the well-placed graphics and clever taglines beneath the title.

You had me at “Death, Sex & Money.”

Yes, I too, am looking for “Modern Love” and a “Brave New Planet!”

I find what I swear will be the podcast of my dreams. My heart skips a beat as I download the first episode, certain I have chosen “the one” that will forever stay on my iPhone playlist. It will be, I tell myself, as wonderful as the first tender but imagined kiss from the boy I secretly loved from afar in seventh grade.

No one warned me podcasts can turn painfully mundane by the third outing. So far I haven’t gone steady with any of them. Some I’ve dumped by the second commercial installment of the first episode. I am, I discover, a harsh mistress when it comes to keeping podcasts on my love radar.

“Conan O’Brien,” I whisper, “I know you are in need of a friend and I was hoping to be she but you mentioned your angst in detail in the first, second and third episodes. Enough about your fear, buddy. Apparently it is the very thing that prevents you from having a friend.”

“Alan Alda, loved loved LOVED you in MASH. Your voice is still so soothing even at 80 years of age! Marvelous to hear. What isn’t so dandy are your topics: too much science and psychology and physics. If I wanted to learn more about those things, I’d return to my high school and endure a lesson from Sister Mary Philomena. Her voice was pretty cool, too, but even she could not keep me awake for 50 minutes.”

“No one does a better creepy/intriguing voice than you, Keith Morrison, and the Dateline podcasts are to die for. That’s the problem. When I am out walking alone in a park and you describe a woman getting kidnap on a Sunday stroll through the forest, I am more than freaked out. One Dateline is enough, thank you.”

“Oprah, you are an amazing testament to womanhood in charge. And you always land such big names for your show. The trouble is, O – can I call you O? – you get someone like George Clooney to show up and then you talk about yourself! You and Conan need to work on the leave-the-ego-at-the-show-door thing some more.”

“No one was more impressed that you took time in your uber-busy schedule, Bill Gates, than I. Now imagine my crest falling when I heard your whiny, tinny voice coming through on your podcast. I have old albums with less scratchy sounds than your voice. By the way, when your voice cracks I have to wonder if puberty ever visited you. You may want to get your thyroid checked.”

Tips for Finding Love with a Podcast

- Make sure the subscription is free. You don’t want to throw away sixty bucks a year on a lousy pcast. (Hip people call them pcasts. Not really, I just made that up because I was too lazy to spell it out. I won’t do it again, promise.) There are hundreds of podcasts so start with the freebies and see if one of them is for you.

- Remember, they're all blind dates at first and you owe them no loyalty so don't feel bad when you excuse yourself to use the toilet and never come back. Podcasts don't care; there's another bored soul ready to swipe right and take them in.
- Don't start at the beginning unless you are listening to a serialized story. If the podcast hosts are interviewing interesting people, start with the subjects that appeal most to you. One podcaster talks about famous people who have died. I am not really interested in Kirk Cobain but I do love a good story about Audrey Hepburn. So, I skip to episode five and begin my indulgence. "Good story, Mo Rocca. Too bad your voice is almost as annoying as Bill G's. If only Audrey could have been interviewed live. Now there's a melodic voice."
- Don't be so sure that a talented interviewer on television is the same on podcasts. Remember what I said about Conan and O? Talk show hosts chat with their TV guests for about seven minutes and that includes the introduction, the walk to the couch or chair, the bowing to the crowd before the guest sits down, and the leaning in to say something off mic when the guest is done being a guest. In reality, there is about four and a half minutes of actual talking. If a film clip is added there is even less talking time. Any charm or revelation that comes out of those few minutes is not spontaneous so please don't believe the interviewer is a pro at getting people to talk.
- On podcasts that same interviewer has a lot more time to talk and ask questions. Sometimes this is a good thing, especially if the guests are chatty and actually make good points. It is not so good if the interviewer and the guest are sharing too many inside jokes, too many moments of hilarity from the past without a decent background story leading up to it, and too much time falling all over one another. I was listening to

a podcast the other day and I knew the bloom was off the rose with the fifth episode. I started losing interest by the fourth episode and was no longer laughing aloud at the interviewer's ramblings about the sponsors. During the fifth episode, I realized keeping podcasts fresh is hard work. Finding the right guest is also hard work. When the work is hard and it's obvious even to the listener, it's time to find another podcast.

- Skip the crass podcasts. They don't work for anyone over the age of 50. I can take a few moments of lewd curses but when 51 minutes of the show is centered on it, I am gone. It may have played well on the host's late-night show but hearing about it...eh...not so much. Late night TV interviews entertain by allowing the viewers to see the reactions of the host and live audience. Just hearing how they rolled their eyes or looked shocked the first time they heard the guest say something crass doesn't translate well.
- Confusion Alert: If, on a rare occasion, a voice off mic can be heard making a quip, it can be funny and promote a certain intimacy between listener and production team. If this technique is overused, well hell, it's not any different than eavesdropping on a boring conversation between drunks at Waffle House at 2 in the morning or trying to listen to a teen's call home with 12 of his closest buddies yelling in the background. It gets confusing and distracting. It's a solid reason to bail.

Certain podcasts have been around longer than others. That's good and bad. Good because they are produced by people who know yelling in the background is stupid. Bad because they run out of ideas that hold my interest as they wade into territories designed to attract the younger listener. Listen, if you think I am too old to hear your show then you are not worthy of my monthly donation! You used to talk about fascinating topics. Now I start to hear about sexual

oddities. If you asked me, I would tell you the group of people who deeply appreciated your podcast on trees talking to one another is not the same group that is fascinated to know safe words to get out of bondage in the bedroom were created by sado-masochists. We're not the same group. You probably know that and decided the tree talkers are too old. But did you consider that the tree talkers were the ones ponying up each month to keep your damn podcast going? Do you know how much leather costs these days? Those folks are not going to send in monthly donations. You can whip me with 40 lashes of a wet noodle if I am wrong.

Personally, there is still some major tweaking that needs to happen before podcasts become a "must have" on my devices. What will keep me listening to podcasts is what I want out of any medium— print, radio, film, or television — to make a point and do it with some professionalism and flourish when appropriate. I want to come away from an episode of a podcast feeling satisfied that I not only walked 3.4 miles but I walked the extra .4 just to finish listening. Now, that's good podcasting!

If I find that perfect podcast that makes me walk longer (and possibly taller!) I will be all over it like a new lover. "Come here, you beautiful thing. I could listen to you all day."