

# What You Need to Know About Using Audio on Your Web Site

By Kevin Richardson

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[http://www.medrocket.com/tools/articles/article090501\\_01.html](http://www.medrocket.com/tools/articles/article090501_01.html)

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Millions of people are listening to audio on the Web every day. They're not just teens downloading MP3 audio clips of their favorite songs, either.

Maybe you're among them. They're people at home and work listening to on-demand audio on topics running the gamut from financial advice to relationships to technology to entertainment. And yes -- they're even tuning in to health and wellness topics.

With so many health sites on the Web, using audio well can set your site apart from the pack. Audio also can be a powerful way to attract site visitors and keep them coming back. It's considered "sticky," meaning visitors will come to listen to your audio and stay around a while. Audio players are plentiful and best of all they're usually free to download.

The only way to determine if audio works for you and your Web site is to get the creative juices flowing and try it.

Testing 1,2,3 -- How Should We Use Audio?

Your site can feature audio versions of popular health education articles, health seminars, news updates, descriptions of medical procedures, special health product offers, and patient testimonials.

Adding an audio greeting to site visitors lends a personal touch to your site and humanizes the user experience. (For an idea check out the greeting on the MedRocket home page at <http://www.medrocket.com> .)

Audio features are also a good way to make your site more accessible to visually impaired web surfers. The possibilities are almost endless. You can even include the audio links in email messages.

## Delivering the Goods -- Streaming Audio

In the olden days of the Web the quality of audio was pitiful. It was just barely passable AM-radio quality. More recently though, Web visitors can hear very good quality audio even over relatively slow Internet connections (28.8 Kbs).

Audio quality isn't the issue that it once was and the choice of content delivery now comes in two basic flavors -- streaming audio and downloadable audio.

As the name implies, streaming audio sends the audio data from a server to the user's browser in a more or less continual stream. This is good because it lets people listen to the audio as it arrives without waiting for the entire audio file to download.

### Pick Your Favorite Format

In the streaming audio arena, RealPlayer from RealNetworks claims roughly 90% of the market. The other common streaming formats are Windows Media Audio and Shockwave audio. Recently even MP3 files can be streamed, which has excellent quality audio though usually requires higher connection speeds.

Conversely, downloadable audio usually requires the entire MP3 or WAV file to download before it can be played on the user's computer. The up side of this method is that the audio can be much higher quality -- near CD quality, if you will -- than is possible from streaming media over a slower Internet connection. It is possible now to stream MP3 files.

Generally, I recommend using streaming audio for most uses, unless you want to provide your Web visitors with a high-quality audio presentation that they can download to their computer and listen to at their leisure without an Internet connection. MP3 files can also be loaded into portable digital audio players and some PDAs.

## Cue Talent -- Creating Your Audio Content

Once you've decided on the purpose and focus of your audio content, you're ready to begin the process of creating a script, recording, converting to digital format, and delivering the files.

If you decide to create the audio files on your own, here's the basic sequence of events that will take place:

### Scripting --

Prepare a script for narration. Unless you're simply providing a verbatim audio version of an existing text or HTML document, you should write the script in a conversational tone. Remember to write for the ear and not the eye. Some words and phrases look fine on paper but sound muddy (even slurred) when spoken aloud. Read your script aloud before you have it narrated. Make sure it sounds natural.

### Record the Narration --

You can either record right into the computer or record to a high-quality analog or digital recorder and then transfer the recording to the computer. The two crucial elements at this stage are the quality of the narration and the quality of the microphone.

Professional voice talent knows how to control their voice and deliver the script with feeling. You might be able to have an on-air personality at a local radio station record the script for you for a reasonable fee. Otherwise, find someone with a great voice in your organization or track down a professional. As for the microphone, the little one that came with your computer won't sound nearly as good as a studio microphone. Use the best microphone you can find.

#### Digitize the Audio --

Whether you record the narration directly into the computer or onto audiotape first, at some point you'll have to get the audio into the computer. Most late-model computers have the capability to digitize audio. Record the audio at the highest quality possible; 16-bit audio at 44.1 kHz is the common setting.

Recording simple sounds on your computer is fairly simple. However making a good-quality recording suitable for broadcast on the Internet is more challenging. The only way to determine if your equipment and technique are up to the task is to record a test and listen to how it sounds streaming from a server.

#### Adjust Audio Quality --

Once the audio is on your hard drive you should open the file in an audio-editing program like CoolEdit. Check Downloads.com <http://download.cnet.com> for other freeware and shareware packages. Crop the narration to cut extra silence at the start and end. Then adjust the equalization levels (cut 100 Hz and lower and boost between 1 and 4 KHz). Then normalize the audio track, which optimizes the loudness of the recording in relation to the loudest segment. Other adjustments in compression and noise reduction can also be made at this time. Save as a WAV or AIFF audio file.

#### Encode the File --

Decide how you'll be delivering the final audio file. If you are using Real Audio, then you need to use the Real Encoder (<http://www.real.com>) to transform (encode) your WAV audio file to a Real Audio (RA) file. For Windows Media Audio, you'll need to use the Windows Media Encoder (<http://www.windowsmedia.com>) to create a Windows Media Audio (WMA) file.

#### Upload to the Server --

After you've successfully encoded the audio, upload it to your Web server using an FTP program. Depending upon the number of people who might access your audio file at a time, you may need to place your audio files on a special server, such as a Real Audio server. For testing however, a basic Web server should work fine.

#### Create Links --

Add a link to your test audio file on a simple test HTML page. Click on the link and see how it sounds.

Seems like a lot to do, I know. If you don't feel comfortable with digitizing audio, resolution, sampling rates, file format, compression rates, and other nuances of audio production, don't despair. Let's look at a few audio production alternatives.

#### Ready, Roll Tape. -- Your Production Options

There are several ways to add an audio health experience to your health site. You'll need to consider your expertise, available time, and budget to determine the best solution for your situation.

They range from a do-it-yourself approach to total outsourcing to licensing audio health content.

Here's a run-down of some of the possible solutions.

#### D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself):

If you, or someone at your organization, has the necessary skills, you could create, produce, and deliver the content yourself. Most marketing teams don't have the resources available for this route, but it gives you the greatest control. Recording audio on your PC has become so easy that it's worth looking into.

#### Script and Outsource:

You could develop and script the content on your own, and then outsource the narration, recording, audio encoding, and delivery. This allows you to take advantage of the writing skills of your marketing staff and hand off the more technical details to other professionals. Just remember that writing for the ear is different than writing for the eye.

#### Outsource Everything:

If you're used to working with advertising and public relations-type agencies, then you'd probably be comfortable with outsourcing to an audio house for scripting and creating professionally produced audio content. Just be sure your project management expertise and budget are up to the task.

#### License Audio Content:

You can also license free or fee-based audio health content for use on your site. In many cases the licensing also allows you to link to the files on the content provider's site, which saves you from dealing with most of the technology issues and allows you to get up and running quickly.

#### How Are Your Ratings?

Now let's say you've included a few audio tests on your Web site for a month or longer. What kind of feedback have you received? What do your server logs tell you about the number of hits your audio features have received? Are more people bookmarking your site?

If Web visitors liked what they heard, and your content is fresh and interesting, they probably bookmarked your site and will return for another listen -- sort of like setting their car radio presets to a favorite station.

You CAN use audio to improve your "ratings" and keep Web visitors coming back. The longer they are at your site, the greater the chance you have of communicating key messages, selling products, raising awareness, and pursuing other important marketing and public relations objectives. Done well and used creatively, audio could be another secret weapon in your online marketing toolbox.

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Kevin Richardson is a healthcare marketing consultant, executive coach, and writer who provides fresh perspectives and expertise about online healthcare marketing. Sign up for his FREE "MedRocket Ezine" newsletter and discover how to profitably attract and serve healthcare consumers online. Subscribe at <http://www.medrocket.com> .

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