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Investor's Business Daily

Former Insurance Salesman Turns 'Lost' Obsession Into Online Career

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Pete Barlas

Cliff Ravenscraft worked for 11 years as an insurance agent in Hebron, Ky., before leaving to become a full-time Internet podcaster in September.

Ravenscraft, 35, gave himself a timeline of three months to get his podcast business going. But as the year-end deadline approached, he began to have second thoughts.

ADVERTISEMENT "In December, things were looking pretty grim," he said. "I had one client signed up, I had no sponsors, I had nothing except for a dream. I thought I was going to die of a heart attack every single night getting closer to Jan. 1."

Ravenscraft is one of a growing number of ordinary folks who have jumped on the podcasting bandwagon. The term podcasting draws its name from Apple's (NasdaqGS:[AAPL](#) - [News](#)) iPod, a popular vehicle for the downloadable audio broadcasts.

Amateur podcasters produce "shows" ranging from 20 minutes to 2 hours long. Many of the programs feature one podcaster offering commentary on topics running the gamut from politics to TV shows and sports. Most of the podcasts are audio programs, though a growing number include video.

Going Mainstream

Podcasting has become the new version of blogging, where amateur writers publish largely unedited commentary about hot topics, says analyst Phil Leigh of Inside Digital Media, a research firm.

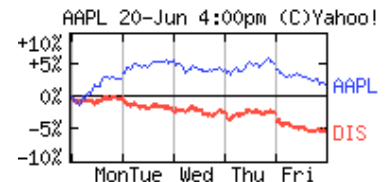
"Podcasting is now at the stage where blogging was three years ago," Leigh said. "People do it as a hobby because they like creating audio or video, or they do it as a way to establish themselves as an expert in a field."

Armed with little more than a microphone and some recording equipment, a virtual nobody can become an Internet celebrity.

Ravenscraft started podcasting as a hobby in December 2005. His first podcast was about ABC's "Lost," a prime-time serial drama. Ravenscraft got the idea after finding only one other podcast about the show.

"It wasn't too long after that that I said I could probably do one of these, so I spent some time learning how to do it and I started it," he said.

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Ravenscraft bought a microphone and a small sound mixer and set up a Web site. In his "Lost" podcast, Ravenscraft discusses things from plot twists to props. No nuance goes unnoticed. A coffee cup held by a character in one episode was purchased at a Target store, he says.

Fans admired his dedication.

"Within a few weeks I had several thousand listeners," he said.

Ravenscraft eventually added his wife, Stephanie, another fan of the show, to the podcast.

But that wasn't enough. Soon after, Ravenscraft launched a second "Lost" podcast, another to discuss faith and family issues, and then another about his life.

"I wanted to start sharing things that were on my mind," he said.

The latter show, "My Crazy Life," has become popular, he says. "It has become everything you ever wanted to know about Cliff Ravenscraft and then some," he said.

From Hobby To Career

Ravenscraft added more shows. It was then that he realized he wanted out of the insurance business.

"I enjoyed and loved my job until I started podcasting as a hobby," he said.

Today, Ravenscraft's company, the Generally Speaking Production Network (GSPN.tv) produces 27 podcast shows. In one, he and his 8-year-old daughter, Meagan, discuss episodes of the Walt Disney (NYSE:[DIS](#) - [News](#)) show "Hannah Montana."

Most of the shows are audio programs that run once a week. Many are for other podcasters. The audience numbers about 35,000 worldwide.

In late December, Ravenscraft decided to keep working rather than worry about finances.

Slowly, the money began to trickle in. Early on, some loyal listeners sent donations to keep him on the "air."

Ravenscraft found other ways to make the business pay.

For \$95 an hour, he rents himself out as a consultant to others looking to become podcasters. For \$3,500, he'll set up a Web site with all the necessities for podcasting.

Ravenscraft also sells podcast equipment online.

Limited Ads

So far, only two of Ravenscraft's self-produced shows have ads.

But Ravenscraft blames his strict requirements about ads rather than the fledgling podcast ad market.

Ravenscraft will allow only one prerecorded ad of up to 8 seconds to run before a show. He and his wife will also talk about an advertiser in the middle of a show. But those spots are completely informal, says Ravenscraft.

"It's unscripted -- the advertiser has no control over what we say," he said. Listeners come first, even before sponsors.

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"Our listeners connect with us, so we have a certain approach on how we cover things," he said.

Ravenscraft is hoping to attract advertisers for his "Lost" and "Montana" shows. But his ad restrictions have hampered the effort.

To make up for the lack of ad revenue, Ravenscraft launched his first subscription service in late March. For \$10 a month, subscribers can get additional podcast material with no ads and also read a daily blog. Paid members can also comment on individual shows.

More than 80 fans signed up in the first two weeks.

Ravenscraft's piecemeal revenue approach isn't surprising, says Inside Digital Media's Leigh.

"I compare (Ravenscraft) to Tom Clancy, who became a popular novelist," Leigh said. "But most podcasters are going to be like bloggers -- they are not going to make a lot of money by relying (solely) on advertising."

For Ravenscraft, who has three young children, things are looking far less bleak than in December.

"March was the first month I kind of broke even with what I was making in the insurance business," he said.

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