

Audio brings web sites to life

What do you do with your intranet or internet site once you've added words and pictures? Well, you can start to add video as described by BP in last month's *communicators*. It's not cheap and it isn't easy so how about adding audio instead?

Jerry O'Regan, of Edinburgh's Word of Mouth, is a great fan of audio for corporate communications. "It's friendly, it's direct and ideally suited to getting complex messages across in a short space of time," he says. Word of Mouth has been producing audio CDs and cassettes for major clients like Standard Life for years but it is now getting easier to add audio to the net too, thanks to increasing bandwidths and innovative new ways of compressing data.

The problem has been that CD-quality audio has traditionally been the preserve of users equipped with ISDN and ADSL. Basically, there has been too much data to fit down the pipe.

But, borrowing on the same techniques that are used to compress digital photographic images, it is now possible to compress sound to make it fit down a standard dial-up 56KBps modem line.

The trick is to compress the audio in a way that doesn't sound offensive to the ear, but can still pass along the line at about three kilobytes per second, given that a dial-up modem downloads at about four kilobytes per second.

The next trick is to use streaming technology that can start to play the audio while it is still downloading. As long as it downloads fast enough, you don't get annoying stops and starts. You should also end up with a "buffer". In many cases, the whole audio file will have downloaded long before the user has finished listening.

The volume of online streaming audio grew by 118 per cent last year, according to US-based market researchers AccuStream iMedia Research and the top ten internet radio stations received an average of 137.5 million tuning hours in the same period, up from 63 million in 2003.

Typical audio formats are Real's Radio Player (as

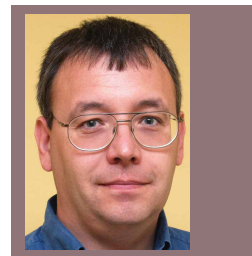
chosen by the BBC), the ubiquitous MP3 (as featured on thousands of youngsters' personal hi-fis) and Macromedia Flash.

The latter is the way I chose to go with InfoTech SoundStream as 98 per cent of computers already have the Flash plug-in and the rest can easily download it. Flash takes the MP3 file, combines it with an audio controller button and streams it for you off any server, which means low-cost and ease of use.

So once you have the technology in place, what can you record? The answer is anything. Adding audio to an intranet lets you record a weekly message from the CEO or a sales message. Or why not have a weekly news round-up?

The audio can either be recorded straight into your PC via a microphone and soundcard, or recorded on a minidisc recorder and then digitised into the computer. Once there, you can add music, voiceovers, cuts and fades with a program like Adobe Audition or Sony Soundforge. Music can be bought online for just a few pounds and you can even use free audio editing programmes, like Audacity.

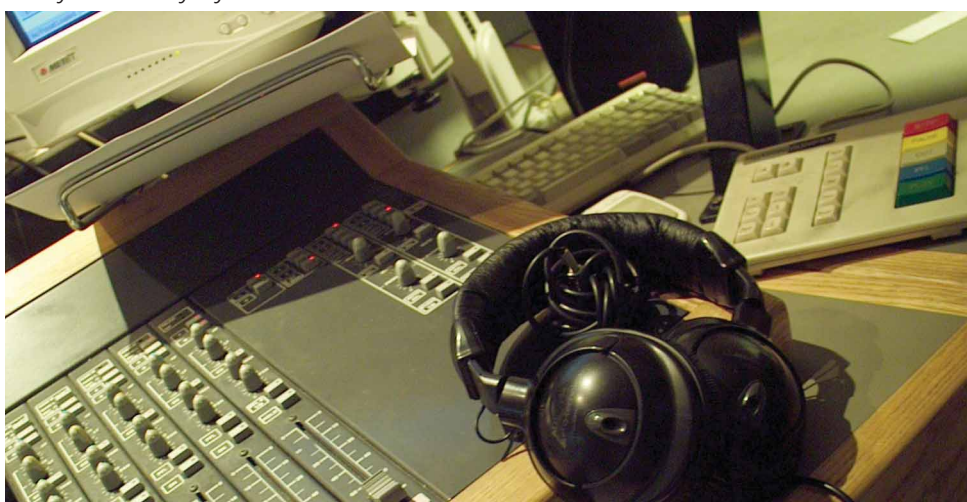
What was once the preserve of the BBC and other high-end radio studios is now available on a computer near you – but only if you have the skills to match.



Steve Nichols is a journalist and consultant who runs InfoTech Communications in Norwich

www.infotechcomms.co.uk

Photos: istockphoto.com



Q. What is streaming audio?

A. It is audio delivered to your computer that can be listened to while it is still downloading.

Q. What's the advantage over other audio formats?

A. You don't get an annoying delay while the whole file downloads.

Q. What do listeners need to have on their computer?

A. A soundcard and speaker(s) or headphones, their normal browser software and a so-called plug-in – a small piece of software that converts the data into sound.

Q. This all sounds expensive – is it?

A. Not really. You can get free programs to record your sound, a computer microphone costs less than a tenner and there are free audio editing programs available on the net. You then need to

convert the audio file to a streaming format, but there is an increasing amount of software available to do that too. You also need to think about a MiniDisc recorder as these have superseded cassette tape for most applications. Royalty-free background and intro music

is available on CD and via the web for a small fee.

Q. What is the quality like?

A. Judge for yourself – visit www.cib.uk.com and click on the button on the right to listen to an interview with CIB chairman Ken Runicles or go to www.infotechcomms.co.uk/info10.htm and listen to demonstration programmes I made for MG Rover and Lotus Cars. The trick is to get the quality as high as you can, but still make it playable on an average modem-equipped home computer. Once everyone has broadband it will be CD-quality for all.

Q. What is the secret to producing good programmes?

A. Training and experience probably. The BBC offers online training at its web site at www.bbctraining.com and there are other courses available around the country.

