The Pritzker Podcast: A novel way to communicate with medical school applicants

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Abstract

iPod and mp3 player use has grown substantially over the past several years, and as a result podcasting has emerged as a form of mobile media and dissemination of educational, news, and other materials across broad-ranging topics. This medium has increasingly been utilized by scientific and medical publishers and institutions to communicate information to readers, patients, fellow scientists and clinicians, and anyone else who has an interest in their materials. In light of these trends, we began the Pritzker Podcast in an effort to communicate more effectively with applicants to the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. By posting brief, focused episodes publicly on the internet, we aim to provide supplementary information about our institution and admissions process to which applicants would not necessarily otherwise have access using traditional educational materials. To date, there have been over 23,000 total downloads of the Pritzker Podcast, and our data indicate that listeners find this medium to be more helpful than traditional resources. With visibility on our own website, the Pritzker School of Medicine homepage, iTunes, Twitter, Facebook, FriendFeed, and numerous podcast directory sites, we feel that this is a convenient and inexpensive method of medical school–applicant interaction that could be adopted with time by other medical schools to improve or supplement the ways in which they inform their own prospective medical students on school-specific issues and aspects of their application processes.

Rise of Mobile Media in Education

- >50% of college students own iPods (or similar);[1] 30% listen to or produce podcasts[2]
- ~80% of podcast listeners have college degrees or have completed some college[3]
- 37.6M podcast downloads/month expected by 2013 (17% of internet users)[4]
- American podcast consumers have doubled since 2006, estimated as high as 45-75 million listeners by 2010[5]
- Journals (*Science*, *Nature*, *Lancet*, *Cell*, *NEJM*, etc.) and universities (Yale, Stanford, Cornell, Alabama, etc.) are using podcasts as complementary educational resources
- *Anyone* with an internet-capable computer and basic recording device can produce podcasts for little or no cost

The Pritzker Podcast

- Provides a supplementary resource alongside typical website- and prospectus-based information disseminated by most medical schools
- Focus on one particular topic for a single episode and discuss its every facet; able to provide more detailed answers to applicants' questions, often straight from admissions directors, deans, and faculty
- Topics often generated by applicants, allowing us to tailor the content of the discussion to questions that exist in the real world without having to blindly construct a list of frequently-asked questions that might not successfully cover the gamut of applicants' uncertainties
- Successful with respect to the dissemination of information, with over 23,000 total downloads to date
- Listeners find it more helpful than traditional resources (Figure 4); incoming Pritzker students responded that their number one reason for listening was to learn about Pritzker's features (Table 1)
- *The Pritzker Podcast is a shapeshifting, virtual brochure that responds to and answers frequently-asked and infrequently-asked questions alike in depth*; we have strived to keep the content of this medium *as frank and transparent as possible*

Screenshots

Figure 1. The Pritzker Podcast home page (**http://pritzkerpodcast.com**). The home page features download links to every episode to date, an option to filter by episode topic or month of publication (to aid in finding information of interest based on point of application cycle), and links to our Twitter, Facebook, and FriendFeed pages, our RSS feed, the Pritzker home page, and the Pritzker Podcast page in iTunes (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Pritzker Podcast iTunes page (**http://bit.ly/pritzkerpodcast**). Our iTunes page features downloads of every episode to date in .m4a (enhanced, with chapter markers and album art) and .mp3-only audio formats and a basic description of the podcast. iTunes also provides links to similar podcasts based on listener behavior. Finally, listeners are able to provide comments and rate our podcast through the iTunes interface.

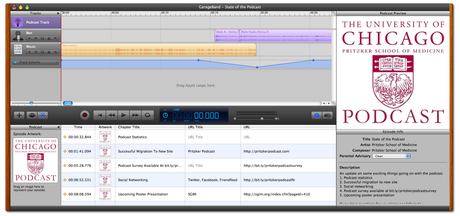

Figure 3. The recording and editing interface. Apple GarageBand is recording software that comes free with every Macintosh computer and features convenient podcasting features and an easy-to-use interface. Audacity is a free alternative on the Windows platform.

Survey Data

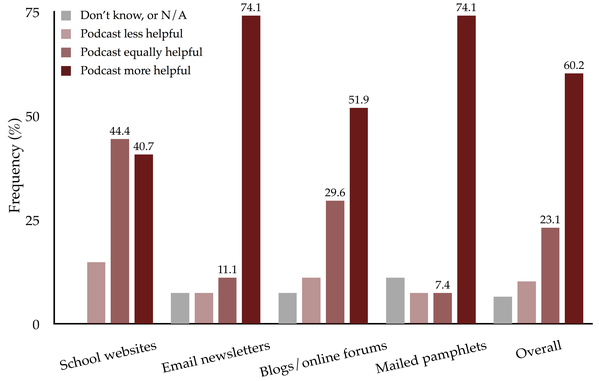

Figure 4. Relative helpfulness of the Pritzker Podcast versus other informational resources commonly used by premedical students in preparation for applying to medical school. Data points indicate frequency of responses in percent. The survey was administered to the first-year Pritzker class (84% overall survey response rate; 31% item response rate; 88 students surveyed).

Reason for listening	Frequency
It helped to inform me about the features of Pritzker.	92.9%
It helped to inform me about the application process at Pritzker.	78.6%
It helped me to understand what Pritzker students are like or what it would be like to attend Pritzker.	67.9%
In incorporated a broader set of topics than could a medical school's brochure or website.	53.6%
It helped to inform me about the application process in general.	50.0%
I liked that it addressed specific applicant questions that had been submitted by others.	46.4%
It was a more convenient method of disseminating information to me than other types of resources could offer.	25.0%
Other	3.6%

Table 1. Reported reasons for listening to the Pritzker Podcast among first-year Pritzker students in the process of applying to and preparing for medical school. Respondents could choose multiple options or submit write-in responses. The survey was administered to the first-year Pritzker class (84% overall survey response rate; 32% item response rate; 88 students surveyed).

"Would it have been helpful if the full text of each episode were available and searchable on our website?"	Frequency
Yes	77.8%
No	22.2%

Table 2. Potential interest and usefulness for episode transcriptions. The survey was administered to the first-year Pritzker class (84% overall survey response rate; 31% item response rate; 88 students surveyed).

Technical Aspects

- Produced using Apple Garageband and Skype software with desktop USB microphones or USB headsets
- Organized as a double-ender:[6] two hosts converse over Skype, concurrently record locally using Garageband, and later combine files to assemble, edit, and mix final product in Garageband
- Guest recordings made using Audio Hijack Pro and Soundflower software
- Available in both mp3-only and enhanced versions (m4a format), the latter of which allow for chapter designations, chapter titles, and embedded images
- Audio files hosted on Bluehost (**http://bluehost.com**) and managed with Wordpress (**http://wordpress.org**) using podPress, a plugin dedicated to syndicating podcast files to iTunes and other media sites
- Questions and suggestions for show topics fielded from listeners using email, word-of-mouth, and public and private messages on the Student Doctor Network premedical forum (**http://forums.studentdoctor.net/forumdisplay.php?f=10**)
- Use a Twitter account (**http://twitter.com/pritzkerpodcast**; over 160 followers), a Facebook page (**http://bit.ly/pritzkerpodcastfb**), and a FriendFeed page (**http://friendfeed.com/pritzkerpodcast**) to announce new show postings, solicit show suggestions and questions from followers, and communicate various other information about the progress of the show
- Every episode to date can be downloaded at **http://pritzkerpodcast.com**, and listeners can subscribe by inputting its RSS feed, **http://pritzkerpodcast.com/feed**, into a podcatcher or RSS reader
- To subscribe directly in iTunes, listeners can direct their browsers to **http://bit.ly/pritzkerpodcast** (opening this link in a browser will launch the Pritzker Podcast page in iTunes if it is installed) or subscribe manually using the above RSS feed

Summary

- Easy and inexpensive to produce
- Myriad advantages over websites, weblogs, and brochures
- Highly visible; keeps applicants informed, interested, and connected
- Available for subscription in iTunes (or another podcatcher) or as web downloads from our site and many other podcast syndication sites
- Consistent with rapidly growing use of social media and internet-based resources within higher education and medical education specifically
- Over 23,000 total downloads to date, or nearly 1,000 downloads per episode; new episodes are posted every 34 days on average
- Searchable episode transcriptions are being rolled out in response to survey data (Table 2)
- ***To our knowledge, this is the first use of podcasting in medical school admissions***

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