

A Volunteer's Report

After a year and a half volunteering with PIP, I am delighted to report on the experience.

Workshops

In my capacity as a workshop instructor, I have seen a few patterns in the attendees of our workshops which may be of note:

1. Demographics

- a. Attendees from a wide variety of economic, age, and ethnic backgrounds
- b. A tendency towards female attendees

2. Attendance

- a. We often have a number of attendees back out at the last minute, and once in a while someone shows up who we weren't expecting
- b. We may benefit from a shotgun approach to advertising, or an automated process for aligning up to attend workshops that doesn't involve buying a ticket
 - i. On that last note, Lester Alphonso has recommended we try using free tickets on a ticketing website just to track potential attendees

3. Duration and Completion

- a. A good workshop usually runs for 3 hours
 - i. I prefer to break workshops into 2-3 distinct parts, with a summary at the end
- b. We have occasionally tried to fit too much into a workshop, and have had to offer a second workshop date at no cost to attendees
 - i. Specifically, this is why we now offer 3-hour workshops on:
 - 1. Basics:
 - What is a podcast? How do I record and edit a podcast? How do I publish a podcast?

2. Storytelling:

What is a good story? How do I compose a good story? How do I collect audio resources for a story? How does story composition work with audio editing?

4. Accessibility

- a. We offer most of our workshops on a pay-what-you-can model
- b. We do not offer our workshops from accessible spaces, and in future this might be something we put a bigger emphasis on
- c. We accommodate potential attendees and members however we can in terms of flexible scheduling
- d. We are currently working out a cool workshop arrangement for at-risk youth

5. Lead Generation

- a. I don't have the numbers on this, but there is a strong trend of attendees becoming members
- b. Through their staff attending our workshops, EC3 and Public Energy have reached out to us for organizational contracts

6. Organization Workshops

- a. Due to interest from various organizations, we have developed a model for working with organizations to help their staff develop podcasting skills
- b. We can customize the offer a bit, but generally it's 6 hours of training and follow-up for up to 4 staff, and a website membership
- c. It may be worth writing a multi-year contract into this arrangement rather than hoping on good faith that the organizations will renew their membership each year

7. Community Partnerships for Workshops

- a. We have held 2 workshops out of ArtSpace, a community partner who has offered us free use of their space for this purpose
- b. We have had... four? I think? community members host workshops: James Kerr, Dave Hawkins, Rob Hailman, and Mauricio

Interiano. We hope to continue tapping local talent for workshops in the future. These are not volunteers either, we offer what we hope is reasonable compensation for their time and expertise

The Website

I do a ton of stuff in the backend of our site, but I am not an expert at web systems, so I definitely mess things up sometimes. A couple of times in the past year, I've had to freeze the website temporarily while we sort things out. And there was a scare that the website broke after a WordPress update. It was fine, but it was pretty scary.

While I've done a bunch of arcane stuff to plugins and such, the core content of the site – the podcasts, the blogs, etc. – is all pretty safe.

Our Host

We use GreenGeeks as a host. They use green energy or something? I dunno, they're Canadian and we wanted to have a Canadian host. There's something of an oligopoly style of pricing in the hosting market, so we're getting as good a deal with them as with anyone.

We are on their least expensive shared hosting option. This basically means we share a single computer with a bunch of other users at the same time, so there are some restrictions on how the website is used. We're not allowed to stream media, but hosting audio files seems to occupy a weird grey area and we haven't had any trouble with it so far. A long-term, zero risk solution would be to host just the audio files on another, dedicated server that is specifically designed to handle big content. There is definitely a way to do this through WordPress such that our members don't notice a difference in their workflow, but until we have the funds available to purchase a dedicated server, it's probably best to just leave things as they are.

Our host does backups of our website, but we do have to act quickly if something fails catastrophically because they only have backups as far back as 48 hours. I have not yet devised an effective means of backing up our website locally. They have expressly forbidden automated backups via WordPress plugins, and methodically remove such backups when I have tried to create them on the server. There is the option to make backups using FTP, but I haven't got the know-how or the disk space to do that myself, so we would welcome a volunteer willing to help with designing a fool-proof system for making local backups via FTP.

Our host has recently upgraded their services which is nice. Everything should be a bit faster now.

A recurring weirdness with Facebook: sometimes Facebook just straight up can't see the image of a WordPress post/podcast episode when it crawls a link. It affects other websites as well, so it's not us, but it is ugly. We can't find a reliable solution at the moment, but again, we would welcome a volunteer who has the know-how to look into it.

Hands-Off

We take a hands-off approach to troubleshooting. Which is to say, we will occasionally dig around in a user's backend to troubleshoot a solution, and then we will undo anything we changed while there and give them instructions to duplicate the solution.

This approach allows us to educate members, and reduces our workload.

Almanac

An abandoned but worthwhile project of mine was to create an almanac for the website, complete with videos and step-by-step guides for the most common tasks performed by our members such as uploading episodes and changing themes.

It would be wonderful to have a volunteer willing to take up this project again.

Smart Podcast Player

This has been a super handy plugin to have on the website. It's a playlist for your podcast. Sometimes when it updates it stops working, and sometimes when Firefox or Chrome update it stops working on those browsers, but it is by far the easiest and most reliable solution we have for allowing our podcasters to share their work on their website without redirecting their listeners to a podcasting app.

Podcasting Apps

I personally use Podcast Addict. Many of our users use iTunes. Both are sweet, but our website works with any player so that's cool.

Looking at the stats, there's a pretty even spread between iTunes listeners and 'Other' listeners, which would include apps like Podcast Addict as well as Smart Podcast player on the website. If there's a desire for it, I could look into differentiating the 'Other' category a bit.

That Aesthetic Though

So one of the greatest challenges I've faced in being a podcaster on our network is picking a cool theme and then making it look nice. It's fun for me, but it's time consuming and not always successful.

It may be worth reaching out to a graphic designer who is willing to offer workshops on best practices with WordPress design, or who would

be eager to sell their services to our members – or to PIP on an annual contract so we can add 'initial website and branding design' to the many benefits of a membership with PIP.