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SPREADING HER WINGS

In just three years, Karen Pearson has gone from bedroom office to boardroom boss in charge of 12... but the podcast guru has no intention of stopping there. **Josh Sims** reports

When Karen Pearson first sat down in the boardroom of brands such as energy drink Red Bull, exhibition company Punch, or fashion e-tailer ASOS, the fact that she was just 28 and a long way from corporate style were among her lesser worries. Nor was the fact that, although her clients didn't know it, she was running her business from her bedroom at the time. Her biggest concern was that few people knew what she was talking about.

"I'm a tech nerd and proud of it. If I was scared of technology I wouldn't be where I am now," she says. "But I spent a lot of time at the beginning explaining just what podcasting was, and how it could work for brands. Companies then and now feel under pressure to do something in the digital realm. But still so many make the mistake of thinking of podcasting as though it was no different to traditional marketing methods."

Pearson's understanding of this new medium, means that now, at the age of 31, she is regarded as the go-to planner, producer and promoter of podcasts for big brands. Moreover, her eponymous company's turnover doubled in each of its first two years of operating and tripled in 2008–2009. Recently relaunched as *Folded Wing*, the company has opened offices in the heart of London's radio production industry and taken on 12 full-time staff.

For those still not in the know, a podcast is an audio (or sometimes video file) that can be listened to online or downloaded to any MP3-playing device. Many companies are finally investigating the potential of what some still regard as a left-field media: Virgin Group has now established a podcasting arm for its broadcasting business; HSBC has used the medium to explain its introduction of new banking charges; while software company Sage is among the sponsors of the likes of *SmallBizPod*, a podcast platform about business aimed at entrepreneurs. "And while the first, dry accountancy firm that employs podcasting might be regarded as pushing boundaries for its industry, others in it will quickly follow," believes Pearson.

"Consumers are increasingly engaging online and companies have to recognise that," she adds. "In fact, what is appealing

to many brands during the recession is that you can see how many people have seen a webcast or downloaded a podcast. They can measure engagement with the consumer in a way you can't with most traditional media."

The recession has also brought a finer appreciation for value. A podcast might cost as much €10,000 to produce, or as little as €1,000, but could reach a minimum of 150,000 listeners, depending on the brand and its established fan base. "That's great reach for the price of a half-page ad in a magazine," says Pearson. "And the perception that podcasting is merely a youth medium is fading too. Internet usage is actually higher among older, professional people."

Pearson at work with the Red Bull Music Academy in Toronto



Which is not to say that brands now creating their own podcasts get it right. Pearson argues that the success of *Folded Wing* lies not only in its industry knowledge – she spent 10 years as BBC Radio 1's then youngest producer, followed by a spell with production outfit *Somethin' Else* – but also its deeper understanding of what makes a successful podcast. "It's very much about finding the right tone, one that creates a 'sound signature' for a brand," she says. "You have to think of a podcast as requiring the same standards as a show produced for mainstream radio. It needs useful or interesting quality content and sound design. And, yes, jingles are still important."

After all, as she points out, podcasting is a "choice medium". A podcast can be easily disseminated through directories such as iTunes, can attract subscriptions and can be easily shared – a good podcast quickly goes viral – but consumers can also always choose to stop listening. Consequently, it needs to be both digestible – Pearson

recommends no more than around 40 minutes – and entertaining in its own right for any brand message to get through.

This is where her broadcast experience counts, such that she has just won a new consultancy contract with BBC Radio 2. Other recent examples she has devised have included podcasts for Red Bull, so successful that the brand syndicated them internationally and has since launched its own internet radio station; a series of podcasts for Nike to celebrate the anniversary of the Air Max training shoe but packaged as documentaries following eight teens across eight cities; and for skincare brand Bioré, in this case an episodic, scripted mini-drama released late last year.

"We wanted to engage a teen audience rather than produce a dry micro site that many possibly wouldn't bother to visit," says James Kirkham, managing director of Holler, the digital agency that commissioned *Folded Wing* for Bioré. "The fact is that we've reached a stage where consumers are incredibly brand-savvy, which is why we're seeing a diminishing return on conventional advertising. Marketing is increasingly about entertaining, through which an association with the brand evolves. Podcasting is proving great for that, as more companies internationally are understanding."

That bodes well for *Folded Wing*. It is going international too, developing podcast projects for the likes of Red Bull Music Academy in Germany, radio station J-Wave in Japan, where the government has only just permitted online streaming, and various companies in the US. It is a necessary move: with podcast awareness growing, so too is the competition for Pearson. "It's why we're positioning ourselves now as offering more a package than production alone," she says. "We not only know how to make podcasts but also how to get them heard – crucially how to seed them in, to get people talking about them and sharing them."

"And then," adds the self-confessed geek, "there is always a competitive edge through technology. We're now onto developing next generation enhanced podcasts, working with video, for example. We started ahead. And we're keeping ahead."