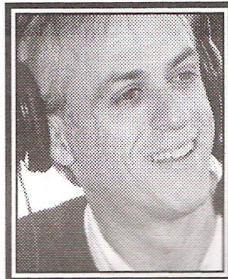


Making VOIP work for your talk remote

By Todd Feinburg

WORLDVIEW BROADCASTING
Talk Show Host

BOSTON — It's Sunday, and I have my nationally syndicated talk show to do this afternoon. Nothing unusual about that — I've been doing the show every weekend for five years. What's different today is that I'm on vacation in Florida, where I've always been forced to



rent an ISDN-equipped studio from a local radio station. Not today, though. Today I'll be doing the program from the Sarasota condo, just a few steps from the pool. That's a first.

How is the live remote from home made possible? I'll take my little Alesis mixer, plug in a mic and some headphones and feed the mixer into my laptop. Then I'll boot a program called Audio Compass (audiocompass.com), and my voice will go over the cable modem to the network in Texas via the Internet. Studio quality.

This will be my fourth show over IP, and I can't overstate the significance of this development. It is now possible to do a general topic talk show from anywhere there's a cable modem or other high-speed connectivity.

Perhaps you're not surprised. You've known about the Comrex Access and other

continued on page 14

Making VOIP work for your talk remote

continued from page 1

professional broadcasting equipment designed to send high-quality audio over the Internet, so what's the big news? That's what I wondered. So I did some research. Those boxes are great for sending the audio in one direction — say for getting your air signal to the transmitter. But their reliability is made possible by a floating delay feature that might need to create a buffer of many seconds to protect against data drop. There's no way to engage in good political debate with callers when their voice doesn't get to you until a couple of seconds after they've spoken! Think of those awkward TV news segments where the overseas reporter smiles stupidly for a couple of seconds before responding to a question from the news anchor at home.

Why is broadcast over IP so important? For me, I made the mistake of moving into a new home last year that was outside of the acceptable range for Verizon to do an installation. Then, a few months ago, the company announced that it planned on dis-

continuing all new ISDN installations, and service on existing lines, during the first half of 2008. Sooner or later, I realized, the old technology would be going away. And it seemed like sooner.

So I called my friend Howard Monroe who owns WTVY in Wheeling, West Virginia. Howard had told me in passing a few months ago that he was doing his remote broadcasts via VOIP using a service called Skype. "It's great," Howard told me. "I just set up my computer, plug into the cable modem, hook up the mixer and I'm on the air!"

"Skype is an Internet phone service," I complained to Howard. "That may be fine for you doing a remote broadcast, but I'm doing a show that's being broadcast by stations — including FMs — that expect me to sound like I'm in studio, not on remote. Skype can't possibly be good enough quality."

So Howard did some Googling and discovered Audio Compass, a new software package created by Sam Bushman, a radio IT consultant and former radio station owner who also hosts three radio talk shows. Howard and I both downloaded the free-trial software and started exploring the possibilities.

Within a few days, Howard was sending his air signal to the transmitter using Audio Compass. A few days later, I was doing my first broadcast of the Todd Feinburg Show over the Internet.

Here's what we've learned: Audio Compass is flexible — you can configure the software to match the broadcast. Unlike ISDN, there are no line charges, as you're using the Internet. You decide how much bandwidth to use, if you want to

build in more delay to assure no data loss, make use of the noise reduction filter, etc. The audio quality is fine — I've had station owners, program directors, and savvy listeners report back to me that they can't tell I'm not on ISDN.

"It is now possible to do a general topic talk show from anywhere there's a cable modem or other high-speed connectivity."

That's the good news. But Audio Compass is also a bit awkward. Doing a three-hour show without a single flicker of data drop, which creates a chop in the sound, is not something I've accomplished yet. This issue is minimized by using one computer for broadcasting only — think of this as your transmitter — and another for regular Internet use. If you're on remote, you can get away with running AIM (instant messenger) on the same computer, but using a browser requires a second PC. Audio Compass is not free, but it costs only \$200 to get the license to use it on two computers. The free 30-day trial is fully functional, and we're talking about software that was designed from the bottom up for radio use by a radio professional.

When I do get data drop, it seems to happen later in the show. Perhaps this is a Windows issue — you know how PCs seem

to collect garbage as they operate. I've started to experiment during long breaks with a reboot of the software late in the show, and even rebooting the computer. Both seem to help.

There are limitations, says Sam Bushman, to the Windows environment. "Windows, as we all know, can slow down and be quite sluggish over time. Weekly maintenance and running a clean system makes all the difference in the world."

And there are, of course, limitations to ISDN. Including the fact that the end of ISDN is approaching.

Audio Compass opens the door to doing your talk show from pretty much anywhere. This is a door I've walked through with zeal, and I'm sure I won't be alone. My show from Florida went well, just a couple of crackles shy of being as good as ISDN. I've learned some new tricks to try in search of the perfect Audio Compass broadcast, which I'll be applying next week.

"Keep in mind," says Bushman, "you're using the very first version of the software. We're working on improvements as we speak."

And I'm still working on my tan, enjoying the flexibility that IP-based broadcasting is just beginning to offer. **■**

Todd Feinburg hosts the "Todd Feinburg Show" Sundays from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm ET. Visit www.radiotodd.com, or contact him at todd@radiotalk.com.