

Ties untangled on the web

Podcasting lets amateurs and pros alike offer their advice on relationships.

By SUSAN CARPENTER
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JESSE COHEN isn't a degreed relationship expert. He's a copywriter at a Connecticut ad agency, but when it comes to deciphering late-night phone calls, happy hour eye contact and other subliminal romantic sledgehammers, Cohen has developed quite a following.

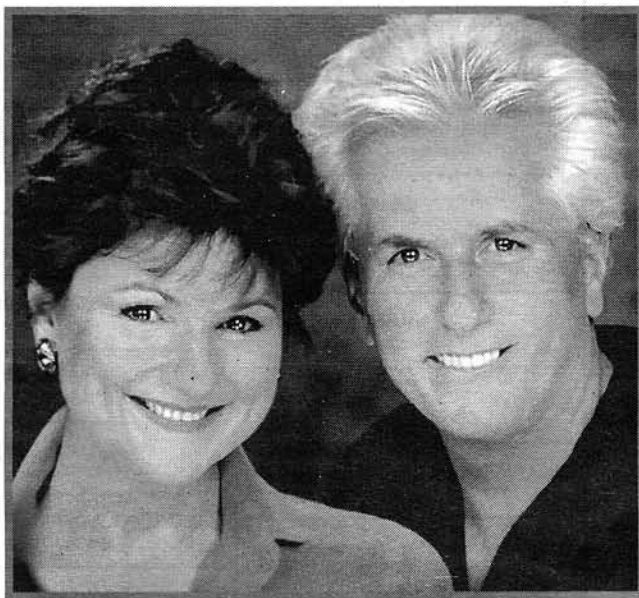
In the two months he's been running "30 Seconds Inside a Guy's Brain," more than 500 viewers have tuned into his series of two-minute video podcasts for "a fortune cookie look" at "what guys are really saying but not saying" with their words and actions.

"When I dated in my 20s, a lot of people asked me for advice in a normal, everyday-person-talking kind of way. Mostly it was female co-workers wanting the locker-room guy's input on things," said Cohen, who is now 35 and married. "I thought, 'Why can't I just do something like that as a podcast?'"

Cohen isn't the first everyday person to offer free relationship advice to the masses with a podcast, and he definitely won't be the last.

In the 16 months since podcasting first entered the lexicon, hundreds of amateurs have switched on their microphones and pressed the record button to make relationship casts such as "Geek Dating 101" (offering advice for techies), "Looking for the Right Girl" (hosted by two Houston bachelors) and "Dating Round the World" (which looks at different dating cultures worldwide).

Of the 20,000-plus podcasts that are currently online and listed in directories such as iTunes, podcast.net and podcastpickle.com, relationships are the third largest category after technology and sports, said Tim Bourquin, who co-hosts the PodcastBrothers podcast — about podcasting. Last year, 4.8 million Americans tuned



VETERANS: Relationship coaches Layne and Paul Cutright of Santa Fe, N.M., launched their semiweekly podcast "RelationshipSavvy" last month.

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JACK HUYNH

POPULAR: San Francisco podcaster Emily Morse's "Sex With Emily" episodes have been downloaded 250,000 times.

into at least one podcast, according to Bridge Ratings, a company that provides audience measurement services for radio.

Podcasts are Web-based feeds of audio or video content distributed automatically by subscription or online via download through websites and podcast portals. They develop followings when people happen upon them through podcast directories or are referred by word of mouth.

Like all podcasts, relationship casts vary wildly

from show to show — in subject matter, presentation, production quality and talent. While some hosts are windbags who take forever to make a point, others are succinct. And where some shows sound like little more than overheard bar talk recorded on a thrift shop tape recorder, others are carefully structured, professionally recorded and offer rational therapeutic advice.

"It's very much like the Internet in 1994, where there were good websites and crummy websites. It's very similar, only it's audio," Bourquin said. "People use that as a way to say that podcasting will never be anything more than CB radio. There's a lot of junk on TV too, but it doesn't mean that people are going to stop watching it. It's going to grow, and the good stuff is going to come to the top."

IN fact, that's already happening. Emily Morse is a 35-year-old San Franciscan who hosts the sex-oriented interview podcast "Sex With Emily."

Since launching in July, the 13 episodes that are online have been downloaded 250,000 times. Among her listeners: a headhunter for commercial talk radio. Two weeks ago, Morse began hosting a Saturday night

call-in show on the Bay Area station 106.9 Free FM.

"I'm trying not to do the lowest-common-denominator, titillating stuff that people hear on morning radio," Morse said of her podcast. "I feel that by listening to other people talk about sex and hearing real people sharing their stories that we can all learn from it."

Each "Sex With Emily" podcast is half an hour long — edited down from one-hour interviews with a single person. Among those she's interviewed: Marc Pincus, founder of the social networking site Tribe.net, and former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown.

Morse estimates she gets about 20 e-mails a day from people pitching themselves as podcast subjects. Earlier this week, one of the e-mails was from a 75-year-old "retired cleric with an active sex life with my wife."

"It's not about my sex life," said the documentary filmmaker and part-time model. "It's about people sharing their stories and inspiring people and saying what they're doing is OK."

For years, the romantically troubled have sought sex, dating and marital advice from friends, books, and TV and radio talk shows, but a shift seems to be afoot. Many are now turning to virtual strangers — whether it's Florida housewives, Canadian college kids or married couples in New Mexico.

Santa Fe relationship coaches Paul Cutright, 59, and his wife Layne, 54, have been married 30 years. Twenty of those years were spent traveling the world for seminars and workshops, but in 1997 they stopped moving around and went into business online, selling their advice through downloadable books and audio files. Last month, they launched the free, semiweekly podcast "RelationshipSavvy."

Listing their podcast on just a handful of podcasting directories, they already have an average audience of 105 listeners tuning in to their 20-minute conversations on "deep listening," "how to get what you want in a relationship" and other subjects.

Paul Cutright is amazed. "I think that's pretty good for being up just hardly a month," he said. "I haven't even promoted it."