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3D Audio Soundscapes Seen As Next Frontier For Advertisers.

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New recording technology branded as iHeart 3D Audio is making the leap from content to advertising. iHeartMedia has opened the door to marketers to begin working with their creative teams to use binaural audio to develop life-like soundscapes in commercials.

"We're excited to go out to the ad community and find some of the most creative minds," said Executive VP/Chief Marketing Officer Gayle Troberman. "There's more opportunity here for every brand to break through and punch above their weight class creatively with the simple power of making their ads in 3D. I think they're going to be the most memorable and you are going to get better results," she told marketers during a launch webinar last week.

To date iHeart has worked with Activision, Audible, Warner Brothers and other companies in the film and video game industries on several beta-campaigns. "Everybody who has jumped into this first just gets sound – and they get the power of sound to tell stories," said Troberman. When creating 3D Audio ads, she said the goal is to set a stage to bring the consumer into a moment to then tell a story or make them feel something, which in turn drives higher brand recall.

"Great audio creative works in two ways – either do the least-produced, most humanly authentic thing you can, like the host-read ad. That works super well in radio and podcasts," said Troberman. "But then there's the whole other side of creative that is taking me to that place where your brand message resonates most... When creatives in advertising wrap their ears around the possibilities of 3D Audio, we're going to see award-winning creative like we have never seen before in audio."

When working on the ads for their launch campaigns, Rahul Sabnis, Chief Creative Officer at iHeartMedia, said his team needed to rethink how to approach audio. "We had to think more spatially and experientially," he explained. "The storytelling usually goes in a very contained space but suddenly you're out here and you have to learn things about the way audio works."

Binaural audio simulates the way humans naturally hear, with detailed soundscapes that have a sense of distance and position relative to the listener, providing a virtual reality experience in audio. It's described as making a listener feel as though they are actually in the landscape audio engineers create, with elements that give a sense of movement and location. It can even trigger other senses. The result is content or advertising become more immersive as they reproduce real-life experiences.

"Podcasting was a seismic shift in the way we think about long-format and theater of mind," said Sabnis. "This is now that next level. We now have more tools to use in more ways."

Podcasts Lead 3D Audio Rollout

The first test of 3D Audio came last fall when iHeartMedia and Blumhouse Television aligned with producer Aaron Mahnke to release the 13 Days of Halloween podcast starring actor-producer Keegan-Michael Key. The series had more than 2.8 million downloads, and the companies have now committed to producing a seasonally focused "13 Days" franchise of podcasts correlating with various major holidays.

The company is also looking at ways to deploy the technology across a variety of content. The list includes some new podcasts on the drawing board as well as existing shows, ranging from the historical show Ephemeral, which will release its next season in 3D Audio, to the Will Ferrell-hosted comedy series The Ron Burgundy Podcast.

"We are always pushing and pulling new cool ways to tell a story," said iHeartMedia Digital Audio Group CEO Conal Byrne. He said the technology has been embraced by show producers who are eager to see how they can make 3D Audio work for them.

Byrne said 3D Audio could be especially powerful as iHeart looks to grow its portfolio of travel podcasts. The segment is of special focus since, after being locked down for more than a year, travel content is expected to be in high demand.

"Where 3D Audio really gets interesting is collecting audio from around the world to really put you there," said Byrne. "We'll launch a whole new genre of content that will really immerse you like only podcasts can. It's a perfect genre for this kind of stuff." He said they plan to test 3D Audio across a variety of genres to see what works.