

MEDIA & MARKETING

Marvel Strikes Podcast Deal With SiriusXM

Superhero podcast series, talk shows to be released exclusively via satellite radio and Pandora



The multiyear deal will kick off in 2020 with four new scripted series based on the Wolverine, Hawkeye, Black Widow and Star-Lord characters. PHOTO: MARVEL

By Anne Steele

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Coming soon to a podcast near you: superhero stories.

Walt Disney Co.'s Marvel Entertainment will create exclusive podcasts for Sirius XM Holdings Inc.'s satellite radio and streaming services, including Pandora, under a new agreement between the companies.

The partnership, which comes as more large media companies are joining the podcast fray, will include scripted and unscripted podcasts, live events and regular talk shows. Terms weren't disclosed.

Beyond releasing a crush of superhero movies for the big screen in recent years, Disney has also expanded its Marvel universe beyond theaters with new programs for broadcast TV and its coming Disney+ streaming service.

"We believe audio is the next natural step to bring the Marvel Universe to fans around the world," said Marvel Entertainment President Dan Buckley in a statement. The company's "Avengers: Endgame" is the highest-grossing film of all time.

The deal marks SiriusXM's first major foray into creating podcasts and signals a bet that exclusive content will bring more listeners to its subscription service, which costs \$8 to \$21 a month, and the free, ad-supported Pandora.

The multiyear deal will kick off in 2020 with four new scripted series based on the Wolverine, Hawkeye, Black Widow and Star-Lord characters, and a fifth series in which all four team up. The companies also plan to develop unscripted podcasts examining Marvel history and regular talk shows, including an interview segment featuring celebrity guests.

Any shows created under the agreement will begin as exclusive to SiriusXM and Pandora services.

Scott Greenstein, SiriusXM's content chief, says Marvel appeals to a broad range of consumers and pointed to its success across media, from comics and theatrical releases to its partnership creating original series for Netflix Inc.

"When they go into an area deep, they generally do make a difference," he said.

Music-streaming services have been turning to podcasts to better compete with radio for share of listening time and to improve margins. Spotify Technology SA acquired three podcast companies this year and struck a deal with the entertainment-production company started by Barack and Michelle Obama to develop and produce podcasts exclusive to the streaming service. Radio companies, too, including iHeartMedia Inc., Entercom Communications Corp. and PRX have been expanding their podcast efforts as well.

Earlier this year, SiriusXM made available clips from some of its most popular talk shows to Pandora as podcasts to increase nonmusic audio content on the music-streaming service. SiriusXM has waded into the medium with a similar approach to its satellite radio service, focusing on big brands and talent. Examples include joining with LeBron James and Maverick Carter's company Uninterrupted to produce "17 Weeks," a weekly football podcast that is distributed widely, and with the 90s rap group Wu-Tang Clan to produce a podcast that accompanied Hulu original series "Wu-Tang: An American Saga."

The company's approach has also meant being selective. Unlike other services like Apple Inc.'s Podcasts, iHeart and Spotify that have built up vast libraries with tens or hundreds of thousands of podcasts, Pandora—with around 5,000 podcasts—has attempted a more curated approach with a focus on recommendations.

U.S. ad revenue from podcasts climbed 53% to \$479 million last year, according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau and PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. It is expected to rise to \$678.7 million this

year and to top \$1 billion by 2021. Among the U.S. population over 12 years old, the share of people who have ever listened to a podcast topped 50% last year, according to Edison Research, while an estimated 90 million—or 32% of the population—are monthly podcast listeners.

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What would you like to hear from a Disney Marvel podcast? Join the conversation below.

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