

How to profit by using RSS, the newest marketing tool

Small Business Trends LLC
www.smbtrends.com

Contact:
Anita Campbell, CEO
anita@anitacampbell.com
AIM: smallbiztrends
330.242.1893

Corporations, small businesses, independent professionals, consultants, researchers, media outlets, analysts and entrepreneurs are discovering the power of RSS. RSS usage is currently in its infancy, but it is growing. Now is the time to get in on the ground floor of this new Internet phenomenon.

The following is an FAQ for newbies to RSS.

If RSS seems confusing at first, stick with it. Surf around to some of the websites referenced below, and before you know it, you'll get the hang of it. Pretty soon you will be an RSS expert.

RSS: What is it?

It's...

- Cutting edge...one of the hottest new ways to get information via the Internet
- An outstanding online marketing and PR tool
- A tool for Web surfers, to make their lives more convenient

The usual definitions of RSS are *Rich Site Summary* or *Really Simple Syndication*. But that doesn't help you understand what RSS is, does it?

Here's a better definition: RSS is a new way of delivering and retrieving Web content.

To understand it, you have to look at it from two different sides of the same coin, as a (1) **content publisher** and (2) **content consumer**.

CONTENT PUBLISHERS

If you are a content publisher (you create websites, press releases, product announcements, newsletters, blog posts, or any kind of online content), RSS lets you:

- Distribute that content to people's desktops without email (bypassing spam filters and crowded inboxes).
- Easily distribute your content for display on other websites ... a fabulous marketing tool.
- Increase the number of incoming links to your website, and be found in more places more easily on the Web.

And the beauty is that once you have an RSS format set up, as you add new content the updates are automatically distributed out, too.

Also, some of the RSS directories and tools available today let corporations monitor what others are saying about them – enabling proactive public relations and fast crisis communication responses, if necessary. With RSS you find out about news much more quickly than through Google (www.google.com) or other search engines.

CONTENT CONSUMERS

If you are a content consumer (someone who visits websites, subscribes to newsletters, gets press releases, reads company announcements), RSS lets you:

- Read content conveniently from a single location, without having to visit each website that the content was published on.
- Bypass crowded email boxes – you choose exactly what you want to access.
- Use RSS directories to stay current on topics of interest to you, follow news about a particular company or product, see who is talking about you online, etc.

How is that possible? Magic?

Nope. It uses a technical format for the content called XML (extensible markup language). Without getting too technical in our description, XML simply formats the content so that it can be transferred and delivered to software programs and other websites.

RSS today takes a little special knowledge to work with it, but the good news is that it is getting easier with each passing month. That's because new tools are being developed literally every month. The pace of new developments in RSS is rapid right now.

How do I create RSS feeds for my Web content, newsletters, press releases?

1. **Blogs.** Start a blog. This is the easiest way from a technical standpoint. All the major blogging software packages automatically generate RSS feeds for blog posts. You don't have to do anything once the blog is set up. Just publish your blog posts, and your RSS feed is automatically created and updated. Here are some of the major blogging packages, from easiest to hardest to use:

- Blogger – www.blogger.com (the easiest for a newbie)
- TypePad – www.typepad.com
- Word Press – www.wordpress.org
- Movable Type – www.movabletype.org

2. **RSS Software.** Purchase an RSS feed creation software package. Two are new on the market just in the past 6 months, and other ones will be out in no time:
 - One is an extension to Dreamweaver: MX RSS Reader-Writer www.interaktonline.com/Products/Dreamweaver-Extensions/MXRSSReader-Writer/Overview
 - The other is a separate package: Feed For All – www.feedforall.com
3. **Hosted services.** Use a hosted service that provides simplified RSS creation tools: Nooked (www.nooked.com) is the one that I use. It is easy to use. You simply create an account with Nooked and follow the steps for the online RSS feed creation tool. There are also some free tools out there. RapidFeeds is one: www.rapidfeeds.com
4. **From scratch.** For those who like to roll up their sleeves, check out this article: "How to Create an RSS Feed with Notepad, a Web Server and a Beer." <http://www.downes.ca/cgi-bin/website/view.cgi?dbs=Article&key=1059503386>

How do I publicize my RSS feeds?

Having a feed doesn't do much good unless people know about it, right? You want people to find your feed and subscribe to it. Here are some basic and mostly free ways to publicize your RSS feed to the world:

1. **Links and Chiclets.** Place links to your RSS feed on your website, blog, newsletter or press release page. You can use a simple text link that says "RSS feed" or "Atom feed." (Atom is simply a particular type of technology used to create the feed.)

Or you can use one of these little chiclet graphics – they're becoming widely recognizable. Insert them on your website with a link to your RSS feed (if you don't know how to do this, your Web designer will). Mostly they are orange and white, or orange and black, although you will sometimes see them in other colors.



You can also set up special links that will automatically subscribe people to your RSS feed in one of the RSS reader services or programs. Here are some other chiclets which subscribe the reader to your feed at a particular online service or program:



2. **RSS autodiscovery.** Use RSS autodiscovery tags in your HTML of your web pages that have RSS feeds. (If you are not sure what autodiscovery tags are, your Web designer should know.) The tags look something like this:

```
<!-- RSS Autodiscovery -->  
<link rel="alternate" type="application/rss+xml" title="RSS"  
href="http://www.anitacampbell.com/blog/feed.rss"/>
```

When you use autodiscovery tags, many of the search engines, RSS directories and desktop newsreader programs will automatically detect your feed. Yahoo (www.yahoo.com), for instance, lists RSS feed links next to page links on its search engine results.

3. **RSS directories.** Submit your RSS feeds to RSS directory sites and online feed-reader services. Many of the directories are blog related, but quite a number accept RSS feeds from any kind of web page (press release page, newsletter page, corporate news page, and so on).
 - Nooked offers a directory exclusively for corporate/business RSS feeds, and perfect for press releases and other business communications: <http://dir.nooked.com>.
 - Go here for a list of 55 RSS and Blog directory sites (scroll down – it's a looong page): <http://www.masternewmedia.org/rss/top55>
4. **Ping.** Make sure you ping the major directories each time you update the content on the pages where your RSS generates from. A ping tells the directory that your content has been updated.

So, how do you ping?

- Some of the blogging softwares do this automatically.
- Some of the directories offer special pages where Web publishers can insert their feed URL to send a ping or learn how to ping. For instance, Feedster offers an entire page of instructions on pingging: <http://developers.feedster.com/index.php/FeedsterPingServer>
- But the easiest thing if you do not know how to ping, is to use the handy Ping-o-Matic pingging service. Every time your feed is updated, you go to this page and click the button. Currently it pings 18 different directories or services: <http://pingomatic.com>

How do I read RSS feeds from other sites?

Raw RSS feeds are ugly and non-user-friendly. They look like this



```
<rdf:RDF xmlns:rdf="http://www.w3.org/1999/02/
xmlns:dc="http://purl.org/dc/elements/1.1/" xr
xmlns:admin="http://webns.net/mvcb/" xmlns:cc
xmlns="http://purl.org/rss/1.0/">
- <channel rdf:about="http://www.smallbusinessb
<title>Small Business Brief</title>
<link>http://www.smallbusinessbrief.com/</li
<description>Small business news delivered da
need to succeed.</description>
<dc:language>en-us</dc:language>
<dc:creator />
<dc:date>2005-03-09T18:14:10-06:00</dc:dat
<admin:generatorAgent rdf:resource="http://ww
- <items>
+ <rdf:Seq>
</items>
</channel>
- <item rdf:about="http://www.smallbusinessbrief
<title>Lending Programs Offer More Small-Busi
```

To turn the feeds into something you want to read, you will need an RSS-aware software program called a feedreader application.

There are two main categories of feedreader applications: (a) Web-based services, and (b) software programs that you install on your computer.

1. **Web-based newsreader services.** These are services that you sign up for online. Once you create an account you can add feeds to your account. Then you simply go back to that website to read all the feeds you have subscribed to. Most of these services are currently free.

Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) is my personal favorite.

Feedster (www.feedster.com) is another good one.

Also: FeedBurner (www.feedburner.com) and RocketInfo (www.rocketinfo.com).

CNET just released Newsburst (www.newsburst.com), its own reader service.

Then there is My Yahoo (www.my.yahoo.com), which allows you to read feeds in your My Yahoo account. The same goes for My MSN (www.my.msn.com).

Many of these services also operate as directories and/or specialized search engines. Therefore, as a user you can search them with keywords in order to find RSS feeds that cover topics you want to know about. That's an added advantage.

2. **Feedreader software programs.** With the software programs, you have to install them on your computer. Some of these programs are stand-alone applications and some are plug-ins for other applications such as Microsoft Outlook or Internet Explorer. Newsgator (www.newsgator.com) and FeedDemon (www.feeddemon.com) are two well-know programs. Then there is NetNewsWire for Mac OS X (<http://ranchero.com/netnewswire>).

For more information, check out CNET's detailed tutorial on how to choose a feedreader, including product reviews of different reader programs:
http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-10088_7-5143656.html?tag=nav

What if I want to display my content on third party websites?

This is one of the most exciting and high-potential uses for RSS feeds. Placing your content on another website is a powerful marketing tool (since it will be branded with your company name and/or logo, with back-links to your own website). Think of it as free advertising when you place your content on another site.

To display content, you can use javascript or even iframe to create short bit of code that will display a block of 5 or 10 headlines on another site.

There are several ways to create headlines and content blocks to display on other sites:

- **Software programs.** If the third party site's webmaster has MX RSS Reader-Writer (referenced above), they can import your content into their website using your RSS feed. Feed For All also offers a similar feature. There are probably other software programs on the market, or soon will be.
- **Open source/shareware javascript generators.** Numerous open source and freeware programs will generate blocks of headlines that can be placed on another website.
 - One such program is here: <http://p3k.org/rss/?setup=true>.
 - Another one is RapidFeeds: www.rapidfeeds.com

For marketing purposes, I have created a simple block of 10 headlines from my own site, Small Business Trends. I freely encourage other webmasters to use those headlines on their site. I do not charge for the content – I give it away. But it has been an excellent low-cost marketing tool. I liken it to pay-per-click advertising online. To see the headline block for my site go here: www.smallbiztrends.com/javascriptheadlines.htm.

There are other good reasons for displaying content from one site on another. For instance, a company might wish to display headlines from its newsletter on the home page of its website. Not only is it fresh content for the home page, but it would also serve as an enticement to get people to subscribe to the newsletter.

(Now, if you *really* knew what you are doing, you could embed the entire feed content into another website. But that's beyond the scope of this FAQ. To see an example where a third party site has embedded the full text of my site's most recent content into their website, go to this page and scroll down: www.small-business-forum.com/articles.)

How do I track how many are reading my RSS content?

This is another exciting and fast-developing area.

Traffic tracking and analytic tools are being developed. These are similar to the tools used to track website traffic and email marketing statistics such as open rates, click-throughs, etc.

The RSS analytic tools track important facts marketers and business communicators want to know, such as:

- How many people are subscribing to your RSS feeds
- How many actually view your feed content and when they view it
- Which feed items they click through to visit your site

FeedBurner (www.feedburner.com) offers tracking features. However, it only tracks those using the FeedBurner format of feed.

Bloglines also tracks subscriber numbers, but does not give detailed statistics about their usage.

I use a new service called SyndicateIQ (www.syndicateIQ.com), which provides detailed metrics. I can find out how many are subscribing each day, what type of day they view my content, which articles they click through, and similar details. It does not, however, tell me exactly who is reading my feeds or provide email addresses.

FeedBurner and SyndicateIQ are technically still in beta testing. But it is exciting to see this area develop before our eyes. Look for this area of RSS tracking and metrics to develop quickly during 2005.

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So what are you waiting for? There's no time like today to get started with RSS.