

RSS – The basics

Everything you need to know about RSS

Content

1	RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication.	3
2	What goes in the web feed?	3
3	What can a web feed do for you?	4
4	For a website publisher/company:.....	4
5	How are feeds different from e-mail?	5
6	How do people read feeds?	5
7	How do you find the feeds you want to subscribe to?	5
8	How RSS helps Search Engine Visibility	6
9	Who is reading feeds?	6
10	Putting your Web Content into a feed	6
11	For a static HTML website:	6
12	For a website with a content management system.....	7
13	Where are web feeds headed?	7

1 RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication.

Also called web feeds, RSS is a content delivery vehicle. It is the format used when you want to syndicate news and other web content. When it distributes the content it is called a feed. You could think of RSS as your own personal wire service.

One party creates the content and it is published in many places. Examples: A TV show is created by one network (Law and Order) and then it is shown on many other stations. A columnist writes one column and it is published in many newspapers. The benefit of syndication is that you get a much wider audience for your content. On the Web you create content for your website or newsletter and with an RSS feed you can syndicate it to news aggregator websites or other sites that publish similar content.

RSS Feeds are an excellent delivery vehicle for news content. "Even if it is something as simple as putting your press releases in an RSS feed, solicitors will benefit from early exposure to distributing information via RSS feeds." Forrester Research.

However, a web feed can be used for pretty much any content on your website or blog.

- Recent changes on a page of a website
- Tech support updates
- Product news
- Announcements
- New listings for a realtor
- Job vacancies

The list is almost endless. Every business has several types of content they can put in an RSS feed.

2 What goes in the web feed?

You can have a partial feed or a full feed.

A partial feed includes a headline, a short summary of the content and a link back to the place on your website where the content resides. When syndicating your content, use an eye-catching title and interesting description of the full content. This way you encourage your readers to click through and read the full article.

Some readers prefer a full feed - this means that the entire article comes into their news reader and they don't have to go back to the website at all to get your content.

3 What can a web feed do for you?

For the content recipient:

The Internet has provided us with access to information at the touch of a key board. However, it is an overwhelming amount of information.

Feeds make it easy to manage this flow of information. Feeds can keep you updated.

You get all the latest news right away without having to search the web. You set up your preferences once and the content comes to your desktop. Your subscription is anonymous. You don't have to give out your email address. Feeds allow you to read content updates in your reader - not online. In our fast-paced world with tons of information available, feeds are a great time saver. How many websites have you intended to go back to and then forgotten about them? Even those we bookmark don't get visited.

4 For a website publisher/company:

Feeds keep your audience constantly updated. It keeps you in communication with your audience. It is the ultimate permission content delivery vehicle.

News is perfect content for a feed. The Internet is now the number one choice for news in the 18 - 54 year old age group. There are so many sources of news that your visitors, and the journalists who cover your industry, won't come to your site every day. But if you offer an RSS feed of your news it pops right into their reader.

Journalists use the Internet to research stories. Your feeds could get picked up on multiple sites and come to the attention of journalists when they do an initial search. If they are already feed savvy and they use a reader to do their online research, your news feed can be right on their desktop.

Let's say you update your website with product news regularly. If a visitor doesn't come back to your site and see all those updates, she won't know about them. But with a feed she automatically gets the content updates. She may not purchase immediately, but at least she has seen each update. When she does want to buy, she will come to your site.

For a software company, tech articles or support updates get posted on the site. Unless the users remember to visit the site regularly, they could miss important data. Feed it to them and they get it every time.

If the headline catches their attention, chances are they'll click through and read the article.

5 How are feeds different from e-mail?

Email is becoming problematical as a content delivery method. Inboxes are flooded with spam and filters are getting more aggressive. Delivery of email is down to 34%. People no longer want to give out their email addresses as they know they are going to receive more junk mail.

The Ponemon Institute's recent study on trust and credibility in marketing revealed that over 80% of those surveyed do want to hear from companies they have dealt with. However, they only want to receive material that is relevant to them, based on their past purchasing habits and they want it delivered in a way that they can control.

RSS fits all these parameters. It is a secure delivery method. RSS has a 100% delivery rate. Subscriptions are anonymous. There is no spam. If the content no longer appeals to the reader they can unsubscribe with one click - and they are actually unsubscribed!

6 How do people read feeds?

To receive an RSS feed, you need a newsreader - or content aggregator. In the same way that you need a radio receiver to be able to hear radio stations, you need a feed reader to get the feed content.

There are Web-based readers like Bloglines and My Yahoo. There are also downloadable newsreaders you can install on your desktop like our PRESSfeed reader. Others, like NewsGator, have both free and paid services.

Newsreaders offer a variety of special features, including combining several related feeds into a single view, hiding items that the viewer has already seen, and categorising feeds and items.

Once you set up your reader with your preferences, it will collect the feeds you're interested in every time there is an update.

7 How do you find the feeds you want to subscribe to?

Web feeds get picked up and published by other websites. Feeds are gaining the attention of the search engines. Often a feed will come up high in a keyword search, and the person reading it won't even know they are reading feed content.

Feed search engines and blog search engines are springing up all over the Net. More and more web surfers are learning that to find good feed content they can search specific search engines and directories, like Pub Sub, Technorati, Nooked, Rojo and Ice Rocket.

As more people get to know about feeds they look for the little orange and gray icons that indicate the content is available in a feed. These icons usually say RSS or XML or web feed. Now that some of the mainstream sites are incorporating feed readers you will also see this kind of button on sites:

- Add to my Yahoo!
- Add to My MSN

8 How RSS helps Search Engine Visibility

Search engines take note of regularly updated content. A feed brings your site to their attention. Because a feed is machine-readable, the search software doesn't have to figure out which parts of the website are important and which parts are just the navigation and presentation. By registering your feeds with the search engines, news aggregator and feed directories you increase your search visibility.

9 Who is reading feeds?

In the beginning it was only the very tech savvy people who were reading feeds. In November of 2004 the Pew Internet and American Life Project survey showed that only 2% of all Americans had a feed reader and were using web feeds.

However in the last year there have been other indications that feeds are gaining popularity fast. Mainstream media sites are providing feeds and report that these subscriptions are booming. The BBC says their increase is 30% each month.

It's true that the people who are reading feeds are early adopters and influencers. 87% of all influencers using the Internet read RSS feeds. And these are the ones you want to reach.

10 Putting your Web Content into a feed

If you are using blog software it should have feed technology built in. If you want feeds on your website content, and you should, then you need to figure out the best way to add new content and get it into a feed. Some content management systems have RSS built in.

The first action is to decide which content you want in a feed and how you want it presented to the end user. There are many ways you can put a feed on your website. Some are free, some have a small cost.

Feeds are produced in a language called XML - eXtensible Markup Language. XML is not as forgiving as HTML; the formatting is very strict and a little more complicated. In order to read a feed, a user needs to have a feed reader. Without a reader a feed looks like this in XML.

11 For a static HTML website:

Not only do you need a way to get your content into a feed, you also need to add the content to your website. To avoid having to pay a webmaster, or rely on your IT department add the content for you, use a system like PRESSfeed, which combines content management and feed technology. PRESSfeed allows you to add the content to the site instantly and distribute it in a feed. This allows you complete control over your area of content.

12 For a website with a content management system

Since you already have the capability of adding content, you need a way to get that content into a feed. Some content management systems come with feed-generating technology built in. If you don't have that, there are many choices for making a feed.

If you have a very complex website, with firewall's and a security system, adding a feed may take some technical know-how.

Pay attention to how the provider makes the feed, where it will be situated on your site, will be automatically updated each time you add an item, will it be registered with feed search engines and directories, how the feed will display in the various readers and whether or not you have unlimited click throughs to the content

13 Where are web feeds headed?

"The biggest opportunities for RSS are not in the blogosphere but as a corporate communication channel. Even now, businesses that were initially reluctantly evaluating RSS are beginning to realize the power and benefit of the RSS information avenue. The inherent capacity for consumers to select the content they wish to receive will be the driving mechanism for keeping advertisements to a minimum and content quality consistent." FeedForAll

"With thousands of sites now RSS-enabled and more on the way, RSS has become perhaps the most visible XML success story to date. RSS democratizes news distribution by making everyone a potential news provider. It leverages the Web's most valuable asset, content, and makes displaying high-quality relevant news on your site easy. Soon we'll see RSS portals with user-rated channels, cool RSS site of the day, build your own topic-specific portal, and highly relevant search engines." Web Reference

"Even if it's something as simple as putting press releases in an RSS feed marketers will benefit from early exposure to distributing information via RSS - and receive valuable feedback from key constituents on what types of content they would like to have." Forrester Research July 2005

"The most compelling use of RSS is that it lets users read dozens of websites, all on the same page. The sites can be scanned in seconds rather than having to be laboriously loaded individually." BBC Magazine