

## Forget spam

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Tired of trawling through endless websites for the stuff you're interested in? Google returning a zillion results for your search term? Your latest company email marketing campaign not having the desired response? One of the biggest problems with the Internet for both consumer and business is getting your message across in an already overcrowded marketplace.

However, there is one innovation – one that was almost moved to the IT industry waste basket some years ago – which allows web users to see exactly what they want to see, at their convenience, without having to do anything more time-consuming than start up the computer.

This innovation is the 'RSS feed'. Although, as with many 'innovations', there is some dispute about its origins, the earliest RSS feeds were cooked up by Netscape and subsequently several other US software companies about ten years ago. While many people have never heard of this technology, or understand how it can be used, there are many benefits for both regular Internet users and the 'content provider' – be that business, organisation or individual.

Essentially, for the individual user, it can reduce 'surfing' time by collecting information that they're interested in, rather than having to visit many different websites; for the content provider, it offers an effective way to target users who they know are genuinely interested in what they have to say. The 'blog' community has popularised RSS over the last few years, but the wider benefits of this technology as a marketing tool are only just being explored.

RSS stands for 'Really Simple Syndication' or 'Rich Site Summary' and is in fact a family of similar technologies. The idea behind RSS is to provide a page – or pages - of information in a short summary, usually in the form of a headline and a one sentence description.

To subscribe to a feed you need a piece of software called a News Reader. Usually free, you install the News Reader on your computer. The latest version of Internet Explorer 7.0 has a

built-in news reader so if you have this version you're already running an RSS reader - maybe without even knowing it! Although there is no standard way to access RSS feeds, pages that have available RSS feeds display an icon (usually orange) with the words RSS. By clicking on this icon you can subscribe to feeds. Once you have subscribed to a feed, the News Reader will periodically check to see if there is any new content on the page you subscribe to. If there is, it will add it to your feed and mark it as 'new'.

RSS feed pages often have little or no graphic content but can link to 'standard' web pages or other files such as: photos; videos; music files; PDFs or Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. You get to these web pages or other files by clicking on a link in the RSS feed, usually the headline itself. A recent phenomenon powered by RSS is the 'Podcast' whereby a user downloads an audio file via an RSS feed. A typical entry on an RSS news feed might be:

Apple's iPhone hits US stores

30 June 2007, 07:10:49

Apple's much-hyped iPhone has gone on sale in the US, with hundreds of people queuing to buy one.

Your RSS feeds can also be categorised in much the same way as bookmarks within your browser or email folders, and if you are familiar with email then you will find RSS very easy to use. The key to the effectiveness of RSS lies with the user being in control of the content. People are getting tired of deleting unwanted marketing mail, and statistics show that Internet users are much less likely to subscribe to email newsletters than they were five years ago, partly due to concerns over privacy and partly because of the unknown volume and frequency of mail that will be received.

It's not possible to 'spam' within RSS because the user has to subscribe to the feed. If the quality of the feed falls below the user's expectations or the subject area changes over time, they can unsubscribe from the feed very quickly. So, for a business to publish a successful feed, it has to be customised to a niche market. While RSS has obvious uses – in its simplest form it can be used to publish news - businesses or organisations which harness the marketing power of RSS in unusual ways, can find themselves with increased website traffic, more 'clickthroughs', better search engine rankings and even increased sales.

There is no limit to the amount of separate feeds a website can provide – and there is no limit to the way in which RSS can be used. Some examples of RSS helping businesses currently in use:

- An online music shop offers a list of feeds by genre – Classical, Hip Hop, Dance etc - each feed containing links to special offers, bestsellers and new releases by artists within that genre. Taking this a step further, some retailers now allow users to create their own feeds based on keywords or phrases.

- An estate agent updates house hunters with the latest properties to come on the market, categorised by price, geographical area or house type.
- Software resellers are now using RSS to inform customers about updates and patching. Instead of having to navigate to the website and find the appropriate product page, users can simply click on a link to start the download.
- Employment agencies publishing the latest vacancies by career sector
- Delivery companies can use RSS to provide Parcel Tracking updates as items pass through various depots.
- Bid watching on online auction sites
- Receive updates on weather or traffic warnings in your area

In the future, RSS looks likely to become a much more integrated and familiar part of our world wide web experience, especially as it allows other organisations to syndicate (republish) content. Latest figures suggest that around 75% of the world's emails end up in junk folders without ever reaching the recipient. Whether RSS will replace email marketing entirely, only time will tell, but one thing is certain: it can provide clear, cost-effective benefits to both businesses and web users.