

RSS Becomes a Viable and Vibrant Channel for Customer Communications

**RSS: It's Here!**

Exactly half-way into what proponents and early-adopters had been calling "the year of RSS adoption," Microsoft announced that its next updates to *Internet Explorer* and *Windows* would both feature "deep integration with RSS."

Microsoft made its RSS announcement in June 2005 at the annual Gnomedex conference, where many attendees had already been enjoying the fruits of deep OS-and-browser RSS integration thanks to Apple's *Tiger* operating system and *Safari* browser – both of which were rolled out to consumers in the first quarter of 2005.

With "native" RSS support built into the present Apple and forthcoming Microsoft computing and Web browsing platforms (not to mention the robust RSS capabilities in *Firefox*), the question that looms for online marketers, eRetailers, and anyone who publishes content online is no longer "if," but "how" - how best to leverage RSS as a customer communications channel and media delivery platform.

Hidden RSS Usage?

When the Pew Center and Forrester Research came out with conflicting measurements of the current RSS user-base (reportedly 2-5% of US adults who go online), Forrester Research's Charlene Li noted an important caveat: what's under-reported or not being measured at all in both surveys are those folks who are in fact "using" RSS but who don't know they're doing so. For example, the customize-able "start pages" at Yahoo!, MSN and Google are all built on RSS, but have been implemented in ways that make it unnecessary for the end user to know or care about RSS.

Not Just for Newsreaders

At the time when RSS first became popular among Blog enthusiasts and news junkies back in 2002, it was cast as an alternative to or even a replacement for browser-based experiences. As a result, dedicated "newsreader" applications for displaying and searching within the largely text-based feed content proliferated. Today's seamless integration of RSS feeds into all kinds of desktop and Web-based applications will likely make such "standalone" applications for RSS obsolete.

**RSS as Storyteller, DJ, even Delivery Guy**

From its humble beginnings as a 1.0 technology oriented around text-only summaries of Web site content updates, RSS is now a 2.0 technology with multimedia capabilities, including the ability to associate and deliver a "payload" with each item or story in a given feed. When this "payload" consists of an mp3 file, the RSS feed is called a "podcast." And while the focus of this paper is not a discussion of the current podcasting craze, it's worth noting that as with MyYahoo!, RSS plays an important role in podcasting without the end-user needing to know or care about that role. The podcasting example also highlights two core capabilities that make RSS unique among existing content delivery and customer communications channels:

- **Alerting:** RSS provides a framework for alerting the end-user (or RSS-integrated application) to the availability of new or changed content.
- **No Hassle Opt-in/Opt-out:** "Subscribing" to an RSS feed is typically a one-to-three click activity, and the act of unsubscribing often requires just one click. All of the opt-in and opt-out is done on the "client side" by the user.



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RSS vs. E-mail Newsletters

Plagues of highly irrelevant spam have provoked defensive measures on the part of users and ISPs, to such a degree that it's now difficult for legitimate e-mail messages to reach their intended recipients. With open rates for most "house list" e-mail campaigns often averaging in the low 20% range, RSS is being explored as an alternative customer communications and marketing channel. Presently, the kinds of campaign measurement and reporting tools that marketing communications professionals have come to rely on for administration of their e-mail efforts do not exist in the RSS space. However, a \$100 million venture capital fund in place as of July 2005 for development of RSS-based applications and the impending RSS-ification of many mainstream computer users via *Windows* and *Internet Explorer 7.0* portend something like a head-to-head ROI showdown between e-mail marketing and RSS marketing in the not-too-distant future.

RSS Personalization & Segmentation

As described in the retail "scenario" sidebar, RSS feed content can be personalized to whatever level of granularity the customer may require. On the part of the site owner, personalization simply requires the capacity to create unique URLs for each personalized feed. In some cases, segmentation of RSS feeds is preferable to personalization. Extending the manufacturing scenario in the sidebar, a manufacturer might segment its product information feeds into public and private versions, supplying price-sheets and competitor comparison data in a password-protected version but withholding those items from the customer-facing version of the feed.

RSS for SEO

The content strategy around RSS varies widely from publisher to publisher. Some will put "full text" and image content into feeds, while others will only serve text headlines and short summaries. In nearly every case, RSS feeds will point users to Web pages for related, expanded or additional content. As search engines begin to include RSS feeds in their indices, and recognizing that once syndicated, these backlink-rich RSS feeds can re-appear on hundreds of syndication partner sites which are in turn spidered by search engines, these multiplier effects have been shown to significantly affect page rank and organic search performance for the pages that are linked from RSS feeds.

RSS as *Lingua Franca*

The widespread adoption and enthusiastic embrace of RSS we're now observing—from small-time bloggers to big-time software developers—owes much to the Web Standards movement, where developer-activists have demonstrated that conforming to non-proprietary "open" standards and W3C specifications (HTML, XHTML, CSS, RSS) enables creative and almost limitless re-use, re-distribution, and re-purposing of the data and content we're "exposing" for use on the Web and by Web-enabled applications.

RSS Scenarios for E-Retailers and Manufacturers

Retail Scenario: a customer is browsing an apparel site and refines the "pants" category listing to display only Calvin Klein brand, size 36. The retailer could present an RSS link-button during each step of refinement which allows the customer to receive notification and see product details and images whenever a new item matching his last refinement ("Calvin Klein" and "size 36") is added to the site.

Manufacturer Scenario: a customer purchases an "open box" item from a local discount retailer and suspects that some of the documentation and owners manuals may be missing. Upon visiting the manufacturer's website, the customer discovers that each product described on the site has its own RSS feed, where each piece of original product documentation (as well as updates to those documents and related material) is available as a PDF "enclosure" and distributed via RSS. By subscribing to the feed, the customer ensures that she's got all of the product documentation. When similar or upgraded products become available, the customer is alerted instantly, and can read and/or download more information.

