

Blog+RSS=

new communications channel

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Blogging and RSS are no longer techie playthings and are set to become a mainstream marketing communications tools, writes Dick Stroud

Have you decided if blogging and RSS can improve your marketing communications? Have you an answer ready for when your MD asks 'do our competitors have an RSS channel'?

When in the same week the BBC's Today programme and 'Woman's Hour' discuss blogging, it's a sign that it has come of age and it's time to get informed.

Blogs, a shortened name for weblogs, started life at the beginning of 1998. They were personal web sites that contained details of an individuals' life, their views, news stories, recently visited web sites, opinions, day-to-day trivia and links to other blogs. Each blog was a hand crafted web site and so not surprising the content tended to be about technical subjects and somewhat 'geeky'.

Blogging may have remained at the outer fringes of the Internet world had it not been for a company called Pyra Labs (now part of Google) who in 1999 launched a free and simple to use service called Blogger. Anybody who was capable of using a Web browser could now create their own blog. Since then over half a million blogs have been created with a 1000 more appearing every day. This number will soar as the Internet heavyweights launch their own services. Yahoo is experimenting with blogs and AOL has already attracted 30,000 users to its blogging service. Blogging is the star attraction on the US's most popular teen web site, Angelfire.Lycos.

During the past 6 months blogging has made the transition from being an on-line personal diary to become a corporate communications tool that has four primary applications.

Providing a 'personal voice' of the company. Blogs are especially relevant to companies that use the knowledge and reputation of their staff as a competitive weapon, for example professional services companies. Besides using a traditional web site, companies can use the blog format for their staff to provide a personal commentary about their specialist areas of knowledge, thus enhancing their reputation and increasing their visibility.

Internal communications. Intranets are good at providing access to information in a formal and hierarchical manner. Unlike the blog, they are not good at enabling individuals, or groups of individuals, to publish their own content. By combing the blog format, with the intranet, enables companies to have a 'personal' as well as a corporate face.

Dialogue with customers. The opinions of a company's customers have a significant influence on the behaviour of prospects. Blogs, containing contributions from both customers and the company, are a powerful promotions tool. Of course there are potential dangers in giving customers a platform to state their opinions. I guess it depends how confident you are about the positive tone of their views and if you retain editorial control of the content!

Extending the scope of e-newsletters. The e-newsletter is a great way to communicate with the market but has two problems. Firstly, collecting and editing the content takes a lot of time and effort. Secondly, it is increasingly difficult to ensure they are read, as the volume of e-mail and SPAM increases. Because blogs are continuously being updated the target audience has many more reasons to view the content, which can be re-packaged and used as the e-newsletter.

Blogs enable the individual, as well as the company, to be heard on the Web. Marketing has a new communications channel whose applications we are just beginning to understand.

To make life really interesting for the marketer, blogs are closely associated with another new communications channel called RSS.

To explain Really Simple Syndication (RSS) can become technical and complicated, so I will do my best to omit all techno-jargon.

The simple definition of RSS is that it is 'a way to format, regularly changing content, enabling it to be shared with individuals and other Web sites.' Because the blog is a collection of regularly changing content it is a perfect application to use RSS.

Many types of information can be communicated using this format as can be seen by these examples and the companies already using the technology.

- ⊕ Publishing news headlines (BBC, CNN and The New York Times)
- ⊕ Publishing details of products (Amazon)
- ⊕ Publishing technology and news updates (IBM and Microsoft)
- ⊕ Keeping candidates aware of new recruitment vacancies (Skillsearch)
- ⊕ Publishing press releases (IDC)
- ⊕ Listing university announcements (Kings College London)

It is easiest to explain the use of RSS with a specific example. IBM communicates details about new products, technologies and news stories using its web site and e-mail. In addition it makes this information available through a 'RSS channel'. If you access this channel using a Web browser you will see a screen full of text and symbols, not unlike a programming language. To view IBM's information needs a software program called an aggregator, sometimes called a newsreader. This software enables you to 'subscribe' to multiple RSS channels and then view the content through a browser like screen. So for instance, I could view the breaking news from the BBC World Service, the latest marketing books being sold by Amazon and product announcements from IBM and Microsoft.

While this is useful, it would have only been used by the techno-geek community if it had not been for a company called Newsgator who has made it possible to view RSS channels using Microsoft Outlook.

As I am writing this article, my Outlook is continually updated with a series of RSS channels. I can see the latest articles from the New York Times, new marketing job vacancies, BBC World News and as many other channels I want. The joy of receiving information in this way is that I can select and can stop the information arriving at the click of a mouse. Just think, no more unsubscribing from e-mail mailing lists.

How can marketing use RSS?

Let's start by dispelling three myths. It is only for large companies with high marketing budgets. Not true. Smaller organisations have been the early adopters of the technology and it is only now being used by large companies. You need a lot of technical knowledge. Not true. Installing and using a news aggregator is much easier than most office software. It's only relevant to technology companies. The early adopters of RSS came from the technology industries. Now it is being used by a wide range of organisations in commerce, government and education.

There are at least four ways that Marketing can use RSS.

Displaying content on other Web sites. It has always been possible to 'feed' information and have it published on other web sites. RSS makes this application far easier and less expensive. It is now a simple task to display your news, announcements and product details directly on the Web sites of your subsidiaries and

distributors. Alternatively you can segment your product catalogue and divide it into multiple RSS channels to display on relevant web sites.

Creating customised channels. Of all the applications this is the one that is most exciting. RSS allows individuals to customise the data they receive from a company. Let's say I only want to receive news from Amazon about books where the title contains certain keywords (e.g. Marketing, CRM, and Web). In under 30 secs I can create my own, customised RSS channel and have the information sent directly to Outlook.

An alternative to e-mail. Because of the relentless increase in the volume of e-mail and the issues of SPAM and viruses it is increasingly difficult to ensure your marketing e-mails are opened. Providing your content as an RSS channel is an inexpensive way of reaching your target audience.

Providing content for customers' intranets. Reaching individual customers, using their own intranets, is a powerful communications channel. It enables information (e.g. new products, support issues, news, special deals etc) to be seen by all of a customer's employees in their own offices. Using RSS as the communications channel makes this application available to the smaller, less technically advanced company.

Blogs and RSS have already achieved a critical mass of users to ensure their survival. Like any marketing tool they are not suitable for all industries and users. The critical question for you is their relevance to your organisation and markets.

[For more information](#)

News and discussion about business weblogs

www.adventive.com/lists/iblog/summary.html

Dick Stroud's Blog www.50plus.blogspot.com

A guide to RSS www.eevl.ac.uk/rss_primer

NewsGator www.newsgator.com

IBM's RSS channels www.ibm.com/news/uk/en/index.rss