

Really **S**imple
Syndication (**RSS**)
B o r i n g name
Brilliant i d e a .

Dick Stroud is a marketing consultant and a specialist in the use of interactive media.
He can be contacted at dick@internet-strategies.co.uk

The BBC and Amazon are using a communications channel called 'Really Simple Syndication' (RSS). What do they know about RSS that we don't? What is RSS? Why could it replace e-mail marketing? Why it is something you should understand?

Back in 1997, Microsoft launched a new way of using the Web called 'push channels'. It seemed a brilliant marketing idea. Rather than rely on people to visit your web site, you encouraged them to 'subscribe' to your 'push channel'. You could then send (Push) content to their desktop for them to view using their browser. They received the content of their choice, you received a willing audience for your marketing messages. What a great idea and what a pity it failed. It was difficult and expensive to create the 'push channels'. Users found the technology complicated to use. It took ages to download the channel content. Need I say more?

E-mail has now become the preferred form of 'push marketing'. It delivers targeted messages, is inexpensive and leverages the content of the web site. Unfortunately in recent years things have become a lot harder for the e-mail marketer. The problems are simple to define - SPAM, viruses and 'e-mail overkill' - solving them is a much harder task.

I want to describe a radically different way of communicating with your market that combines the simplicity of e-mail with sophistication of ‘push channels’.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were a simple, cheap and easy way of delivering relevant content to the desktop of customers, prospects, suppliers, employees etc? Think of the marketing opportunities, if you could syndicate your web site content, enabling it to be displayed on other organisation's web sites. RSS and the new products it is spawning may help achieve both of these goals.

So what is RSS?

This explanation could 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.’*

RSS can provide an effective way of communicating with customers and syndicating web site content.

If you want a detailed explanation of RSS technology there are references at the end of the article.

What is meant by the term ‘content’ and who is using RSS? The following list shows the diversity of organisations using RSS and the range of applications.

- ❖ News headlines (BBC, CNN and The New York Times)
- ❖ Product details (Amazon)
- ❖ Technology and news updates (IBM and Microsoft)
- ❖ Recruitment vacancies (Skillsearch)
- ❖ Press releases (IDC)
- ❖ University announcements (Kings College London)
- ❖ Government debates (Canadian House of Commons)

It is easiest to explain how to use RSS with some specific examples. Like any company, IBM wants to tell people about new products, technologies and news stories. It will publish this information on its web site and use e-mail to keep individuals informed. As well as these channels IBM also provides this information through an RSS channel.

If you looked [at IBM's RSS channel](#) in a web browser you would see a screen full of text and symbols, not unlike a programming language. A similar format appears with the Amazon and BBC channels. You might well ask why we talking about a technology that appears so user-unfriendly. Stick with it for a few more paragraphs and all will be revealed!

Until recently, if I wanted to view IBM's RSS channels, it required a software program called an aggregator, sometimes called a newsreader. This software enabled

me 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 its main competitors. While this is useful I think it would have only been used by the techno-geek community if it had not been for a company called Newsgator.

Other than a Web browser the software that people spend a frightening amount of their life gazing at is Microsoft Outlook. Newsgator had the brilliant idea of enabling Outlook to receive and view information from RSS channels. Now I can use Outlook, in its conventional way, plus view a stream of RSS channels that I can select and *can stop* at the click of a mouse. Just think, no more unsubscribing from e-mail mailing lists.

The only way you can understand the power of RSS is to get stuck in and use it. The starting point is to download an aggregator (newsreader) program and I would suggest NewsGator is the place to start

How marketing can use RSS

Let's start by dispelling some of the false assumptions that marketers have about RSS.

It is only for large companies with high marketing budgets. In fact it has been smaller organisations who have been the early adopters of the technology. Only now is it being used by large companies and multinationals. For example, I publish a daily web log about [marketing to the over-50s](#). At a minimal cost I made this content available as an [RSS channel](#).

You need a lot of technical knowledge. Not true. Installing and using a news aggregator is much easier than most of the office software we regularly use. If you want to make the content on your web site available as an RSS channel it will require a level of technical support that is well within the scope of a good web site developer.

It's only relevant to technology companies. Many of the early adopters of RSS were IT businesses. This is rapidly changing as other industries understand its potential. If an organisation produces regularly changing information, and wants to deliver this to different market audiences, then RSS is a potential solution.

I think there are four main marketing applications of RSS. No doubt the readers of this article will be able to identify another dozen uses.

Displaying your content on other Web sites. The following [link](#) shows this application in action with a web site displaying the latest BBC UK news. A couple of applications immediately suggest themselves. It is now a simple task to display your news and announcements directly on the Web sites of your subsidiaries and

distributors. Alternatively you can segment your product catalogue and divide it into multiple RSS channels that could then be displayed on relevant web sites. Remember you are not 'giving away' your content you are increasing its audience size.

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 get your marketing messages viewed by your target audiences.

Providing your content as an RSS channel is another way of being heard that needs only a small investment. Today it is still a novelty for companies to provide RSS channels but during the next 12-24 months it could become a facility that customers expect.

RSS has already achieved a critical mass of users to ensure its survival. The critical question is will it become adopted by *your* target audience.

Publishing to news feeds. There are a growing number of web sites, with an industry or technology focus, that act as RSS portals (*ie enable all the relevant RSS channels to be viewed in one location*). The [O'Reilly Network](#) is a good example of such a portal that focuses on emerging technologies. If an RSS portal exists for your industry then it is an opportunity to be heard by a relevant audience.

Providing content for customers' intranets. Getting information (*e.g. new products, support issues, news, special deals etc*) delivered to the desktops of customers via their intranets can be difficult and expensive. RSS provides a way for smaller companies to provide a service that had only been possible for the large, technically sophisticated companies.

Creating customised channels. Of all the applications this is the one that excites me the most. Customising content can be a costly and difficult business. RSS allows individuals to customise the data they receive. 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. [Try it for yourself](#) and see how fast and easy it is to setup.

Will RSS succeed?

It is unlikely that RSS is going to follow the same fate as Microsoft's 'push channels' and disappear into oblivion. The technology has already achieved a critical number of users to ensure that it has a long-term future. The critical question is will RSS become adopted by *my organisation's* target audiences?

What needs to happen if RSS is going to achieve a mass audience? Firstly, it must be seen as a powerful marketing channel rather than a 'technological' innovation. Secondly, the large companies who are using RSS must actively promote its benefits. Finally, it will need more products like Newsgator that reduce the technical hurdle for users to start using the technology.

What to do next?

I hope this article has explained the basics of RSS and started you thinking about how it could benefit your organisation. So what do you do next?

If you are a senior marketing manager then you should ensure you discuss this agenda item when you next meet your marketing managers and technical staff – 'what is our policy to adopting RSS'. The technology may be inappropriate for your business but this decision must be based on research rather than ignorance.

If you are a marketing manager, begin to think how you will answer the 'what is our policy to adopting RSS' question. Start by getting your hands dirty and using the technology.

If you are a junior marketer, then spend a few hours installing an RSS reader and visit the sites mentioned in this article. Then think of the marketing applications within your organisation.

Useful Links

These links have been mentioned in this article and some others that will help your understanding of RSS.

Search guide for RSS channels www.syndic8.com/

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

An even more detailed guide to RSS www.mnot.net/rss/tutorial

Products that let you view RSS channels:

- ❖ AmphetaDesk www.disobey.com/amphetadesk
- ❖ Newzcrawler www.newzcrawler.com/
- ❖ Awasu www.awasu.com/
- ❖ NewsGator www.newsgator.com/

Add a RSS feed to your Web site <http://news.utah.gov/subscribe/subscribe.php>

Skillsearch. Recruitment RSS channel www.skillsearch.com/rssfeeds/index.cfm

IDC Press Releases <http://makeashorterlink.com/?N39A26CE5>

The RSS channels:

- ❖ IBM www.ibm.com/news/uk/en/index.rss
- ❖ Amazon www.lockergnome.com/amazon/rss.php
- ❖ BBC <http://makeashorterlink.com/?K225211B1>

Blog site for marketing to the over-50s www.50plus.blogspot.com

Customising an Amazon RSS channel <http://makeashorterlink.com/?V2BA31CE5>

The O'Reilly Network, RSS portal <http://makeashorterlink.com/?L2CA51CE5>

Web site displaying the BBC News <http://makeashorterlink.com/?R11E25FE5>