by Jen Sharp, jensharp.com

# Feed your 'Need To Read' – an explanation of RSS

There exists a useful informational tool so powerful that the government of China has completely banned its use since 2007. Yet many people have not even heard about it, despite its juxtaposition in front of our attention during our experiences on the web. Recently I was visiting with my dad, who is well-informed and somewhat technically savvy. I asked him if he had ever heard of RSS feeds. He hadn't, so when I pointed out the ever-present orange "chicklet," he remarked, "Oh! I thought that was the logo for Home Depot!"

Very simply, RSS feeds are akin to picking up your favorite newspaper and scanning the headlines for a story you are interested in. Items are displayed with a synopsis and links to the full page of information. You actively subscribe to the topics and/or web sites from which you desire news or current updates. Most readers – or aggregates as they are called – are free, and you never have to submit any personal information to subscribe to these services.

RSS, which originally stood for "really simple syndication," actually originated in 1999 as a creation of Netscape. Yet even before this, there were ideas in the works to provide a syndicated service that would provide targeted news and information directed towards subscribers. Since its inception, RSS language and structure have undergone improvements and advances in sophistication. However, like most technology, a split in philosophy occurred conflicting in what direction the tool should take. Currently there are two main offshoots of the original RSS concept: RSS 2.0 and Atom 1.0. Even further, there are currently seven different RSS formats! Fortunately for non-techies, most RSS readers can process and display any format. In general the umbrella term '"RSS" refers to all formats.

## Using RSS

For some water systems or government agencies, creating an RSS feed on your web site could provide great benefit to constituents and ease the flow of information to increase visibility. The first step in RSS creation is to understand feeds from a user's viewpoint. The best way to start is to find a web site you are interested in that provides feeds. For example, USA Today has separate feeds in its different sections. You know that a page has the capabilities for RSS subscriptions by looking for the orange chicklet in the toolbar of your browser. Clicking on the logo will start you in the process of seeing what the feed for that page looks like. Then you can choose how to subscribe. Choosing a reader can seem overwhelming, as there are thousands of readers available, most of them for free. To start, decide how you what to view the information. RSS feeds can be displayed in many ways, including:

- sent to your email inbox
- as a personal browser start page like igoogle.com or my.yahoo.com
- integrated with your browser or Outlook
- sent to your handheld device

Choose one that fits your routine. For example, if you do most of your organizing in Outlook or by email, you might prefer that way. Or, if you have your homepage set to my.yahoo.com, choose that reader. If you travel frequently and rely heavily on your blackberry, find a reader that fits well with this device. Once you chose the method, you can search for a reader that fits your preference. (Side table 1 on next page lists some common readers found in the Google directory, based on popularity, sorted by display mode.)

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## Creating RSS

Once you understand how RSS works from the user side, you can explore creating RSS feeds for your viewers on your own site. To start, decide what benefits you would most like to take advantage of. Are you compelled most by the ability of feeds to disseminate information, create traffic and get feedback about your users? This will help you design appropriate content targeted for your goals.

### Disseminate information

Create several recurring articles and links. Organize content by category based on your audience. If you have a large amount of content that is updated frequently, you can

create more than one feed and funnel information more specifically. If you already have a printed newsletter, consider adding a page to your site that features these updates. Find feeds from other web sites that offer related outside content to your viewers and display their feeds on your site. Ask staff or high profile individuals in your field to contribute articles. Have a well-liked individual in your organization start a blog. If your organization already creates videos for events, consider a podcast, which displays videos available for download or streaming on your site. If you employ a content management system, such as Dot Net Nuke or Joomla, there are core modules and downloadable modules available to automatically generate RSS feeds from the content every time you update. Check into what your CMS already features and take advantage of built-in options.

Fresh content is often an overlooked benefit to web sites, so take your time here designing what works best for your situation and is easy to upkeep.

## Create traffic

RSS is a brother of search engine placement, as a feed reminds your users to check your site. Hence, it's no wonder search engine giant Google is quickly attempting to become a huge leader in the RSS feed market. Recently Google acquired Feedburner.com, the web's leading feed resource. Google's SEO tool "adsense" is an automated tool for web site owners to make money simply by displaying advertising feeds on related sites. In fact, Google's own new RSS format structure called GData is quickly becoming a popular format for feed creation.

How can your RSS feeds provide more traffic? Make sure you feature keywords and content that focus on what your web site truly offers. Use words that appear often in your site and are appropriate for your focus. Write and include articles for your feed that provide fresh content that is current and newsworthy.

To help users subscribe to your feed, provide a link to a page that describes what RSS is and how it can benefit them. Then, show them the steps to be able subscribe.

By creating feeds that are simple to subscribe to and are compatible with popular search engines, you get a jumpstart on generating more traffic.

## Feedback about users

There are several solutions for non-technical web site managers who wish to add RSS features to their sites.

Now specifically and technically, how do you create an RSS feed? If you are comfortable with editing some html and like to dig into your own site, you can easily create a feed and edit the xml file manually when you make updates to your site. (See side table 2.) For those who do not wish to take on any technical task, there are other tools. Doing a search for "RSS publishing" or "RSS creation" or "generate RSS" will lead to many possible solutions for you to explore.

*Available RSS Readers Source: google.com directory*

### Email based

Feed2Mail - http://www.feed2mail.org
A service that converts an RSS feed into a mailing list that people can subscribe to.

Email RSS Aggregator - http://era.indecorous.com/
Service offering updates delivered direct to an e-mail inbox.

Newspipe - http://newspipe.sourceforge.net/
An RSS/Atom aggregator allowing the user to keep track of feeds through e-mail.

RSSknip - http://www.rss-clipping.com/
A subscription service that tracks user selected keywords over a range of feeds.

Feed2Imap - http://home.gna.org/feed2imap/
A feed aggregator that can download feeds then uploads them to a specified folder of an IMAP mail server.

### Browser integrated

Wizz RSS News Reader - http://www.wizzrss.com/
A simple RSS and Atom (Supports Podcasts) news reading extension.

Feedview - https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/445
Shows newsfeeds/blogs in a more stylish way, instead of showing plain XML.

Sage RSS Reader - http://sage.mozdev.org
Sage RSS reader sidebar Handles RSS 1.0 and 2.0 feeds along with Atom feeds.

Live Bookmarks - *www.mozilla.com/firefox/**livebookmarks**.html*
Firefox's Live Bookmarks feature automatically keeps track of these updates for you, so you always know when new content has been added to your favorite

### Web based:

Bloglines - http://www.bloglines.com/
A web-based personal news aggregator used in place of a desktop client.

My Yahoo - http://my.yahoo.com
My Yahoo is a customizable web page with news, stock quotes, weather, and other features.

Netvibes - http://www.netvibes.com/
Personal news aggregator with RSS and Atom support. Comes with a set of predefined news feeds.

Shortwire.com - http://www.shortwire.com/
View, alert, create, publish and host RSS feeds and blogs with ease.

Feedroll - http://www.feedroll.com/rssviewer/
Web-based reader generates a JavaScript code for syndicating feeds on Web page.

Daily Rotation - http://www.dailyrotation.com/
A web-based RSS reader that provides headlines from 300+ tech sites.

Free RSS Feed Reader - http://rssfeedreader.com/
RSS reader designed to be used via a third party web site.

RSS News Reader - http://soapclient.com/rss/rss.html
This web-based RSS reader allows you to read news using a browser.

LiteFeeds - http://www.litefeeds.com/
Web-based RSS reader and also a custom mobile RSS reader for any Java Phone/SmartPhone, Blackberry, Palm or PocketPC.

Gritwire - http://my.gritwire.com/
A flash-based feed reader that can organize feeds into folders, read and save content, or rate feeds and feed items.

RSSinclude - http://www.rss-info.com/en_rssinclude.html
Tool integrates any RSS feed into a web site using a small piece of HTML.

Genecast News Service - http://www.genecast.com
A server based RSS news and weblog aggregator converting them to Usenet News.

FeedOnSite - http://www.feedonsite.com/index_en.php
Helps web sites publish headlines from RSS feeds as normal HTML on their web site.

SYFACiL virtual desktop - http://www.syfacil.com
RSS reader along with file manager, bookmark manager, web content catcher.

***Side table 1***

DogWalker - http://rawfish7.tripod.com/
An extension to Adam Simpson's RawDog (web based aggregator python script). DogWalker is a script that periodically runs RawDog on webmaster's home PC and ftps the result to the site.

YourLiveWire - http://www.yourlivewire.net/
An AJAX RSS reader that displays RSS deeds in draggable auto-arranging windows which updates as feeds are updated.

FeedFeeds - http://www.feedfeeds.com/
A customizable feed reader service.

Urchin RSS Aggregator - http://urchin.sourceforge.net/
Perl, web based, customizable, RSS aggregator and filter that consumes RSS, Atom and screen-scraped HTML and produces RSS or XSLT-transformed output.

FeedAgg.com - http://www.feedagg.com/
Free RSS/XML web based feed aggregator, feed rating, and social feed tagging site.

BusterNews.com - http://busternews.no-ip.org:8095/
A free web-based RSS aggregator. [Requires Internet Explorer]

Aggregato - http://www.aggregato.com/
A web-based RSS feed aggregator organized with tags.

MetaRSS - http://metarss.com/
Online reader with a directory and tools for creating feeds.

Lightstreamer Push RSS Reader - http://app.lightstreamer.com/RSSDemo/
An HTML RSS Reader, based on Lightstreamer technology, that does not require to download applets or application.

The Daily Read - http://www.thedailyread.com/
RSS Reader with nearly 500 predefined RSS feeds in 23 categories.

Findory - http://findory.com/
Personalized news and weblog reader. Learns from reading patterns and discovers similar RSS feeds.

Web RSS Reader - http://rss.plech.net/
Free web-based RSS reader with multiple skins.

X Hollywood News Feed - http://www.xhollywood.com/dir/
Entertainment related news directory and aggregator.

Newsmonkey - http://www.nuwance.com/newsmonkey/
Flash based RSS aggregator.

wURLdBook Research - http://www.wurldbook.com/
A web-based personal news aggregator that can be used in place of a desktop client and information aggregator.

NewsBox - http://news.ohardt.com/
Offers access to multiple news sources in German and English.

News Scrollers - http://www.webpasties.com/prod_news_scrollers.html
Service that scrolls data from any RSS feed on a webpage.

RSS2GIF - http://www.navi-gez.de/rss2gif/
A service that will convert any RSS Feed into an automatically updated GIF image.

News is Free - http://www.newsisfree.com/
Directory of feeds also allows for personalized news pages.

Gregarius - http://gregarius.net/
RSS/RDF/Atom feed aggregator, designed to run on a web server, allowing access to feeds from a web browser.

KickRSS - http://www.kickrss.com/
A service that takes multiple RSS or Atom feeds, combines them, and displays them as a single RSS feed or a webpage at an easy to remember URL.

Newsburst - http://www.newsburst.com/
Web-based RSS reader from CNET News.com. Supports all versions; RSS and Atom.

Google Reader - http://www.google.com/reader/
Free feed reader stores manual or imported reading lists.

***Side table 1continued.***

In general, however, these tools come in three categories: *(please note, examples are only one of many available solutions and are not specifically an endorsement for that service or product.)*

1. Desktop feed generators – these allow you to quickly and inexpensively create feeds, but do not always have advanced features such as stats or content targeting e.g. www.feedforall.com
2. Hosted publishing – some online solutions will host and generate RSS feeds for you automatically. Many of them also feature stats and reports that help focus your future goals as well as tailor content to your users. e.g. www.myrsscreator.com
3. Advanced solutions – if you have a greater need to see immediate results but no time to maintain or learn about RSS, you can find services to help with this. Some are free, such as Dot Net Nuke's RSS core module or moveabletype.com, but you must already have a content management system in place. Other services—such as database builders, autoresponders, content targeting – can be expensive, but if they deliver the results you need easily, you might want to weigh those options. e.g. nooked.com, simplefeed.com, myst-technology.com, rssautopublisher.com

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## Creating an RSS feed manually

Source: jensharp.com

1 – In the <head> of the page where you wish to display the RSS chicklet, add the following line of code: *(you would edit the words in CAPS to fit your file-names)* <link rel="alternate" type="application/rss+xml" title="INSERT YOUR TITLE HERE" href="http://www.YOURSITE.com/FOLDER-NAME/RSSFILENAME.xml" />

2 – Use the following sample RSS 2.0 compatible file and save it to the folder and filename specified in the code in #1.

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="utf-8"?>
<rss version="2.0">
<!– If you only see xml code you need to upgrade your browser –>
<channel>
<title>INSERT YOUR TITLE HERE</title>
<description>INSERT YOUR DESCRIPTION</description>
<language>en-us</language>
<pubDate>EDIT TODAYS DATE</pubDate>
<link>http://www.YOURWEBSITE.com/</link>
<managingEditor>EDITOR@YOURWEBSITE.com</
 managingEditor>
<webMaster>WEBMASTER@YOURWEBSITE.com
 </webMaster>
<item>
<title>TITLE OF YOUR ARTICLE</title>
<link>http://www.YOURWEBSITE.com/PAGE.html</link>
<description>INSERT ARTICLE DESCRIPTION HERE
      – CAN CONTAIN HTML</description>
</item>
…continue with more items as above …
</channel>
</rss>
```

3 – Make sure and update the xml file whenever you add fresh content to your site.

***Side table 2***

## win-win-win

The benefit of the RSS concept extends beyond what its creators could have imagined. For users, no longer are Internet surfers required to submit their email address to be informed of news from their favorite web sources. For web site administrators, effectively targeting an audience who desires their information can lead to less cost, greater search engine placement, more visits, and good feedback. For advertisers, a campaign can more precisely reach potential customers who might use their services or products. No doubt with RSS, www stands for win-win-win.

I'm pleased to be providing a Preconference session on Tuesday, March 24 at the KRWA conference. We will be discussing web site formats. The session will offer advice and practice to those who need to build a site from scratch or want to rework an existing site into a CMS. Topics to include: where to secure a domain name and hosting that supports CMS; structuring content and navigation; and, focusing on solid content that gets you noticed and your site frequented. This session will be an excellent opportunity for persons new and experienced in setting up or maintaining a web site.

*Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions. Her work has earned National and International awards: krwa.net won Best Web site in 2002 from the National Rural Water Association.*

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