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RSS emerging newspaper tool, but tread slowly

*By Paul Ziek**Special to Newspapers & Technology*

Imagine if you could have a customized news service at your disposal. It would deliver all the news you desired directly to where you want in your computer, updating constantly so that you wouldn't have to search multiple Web sites.

Most Internet users already keep a list of favorite sites they visit frequently to obtain news on different subjects. While this may suit the "specialty" consumer, most users would prefer to have the news they want collected into one designated area.

Enter Real Simple Syndication, or RSS. The eXtensible Markup Language programming format, also known as Rich Site Summary or RFD Site Summary, enables the creation and delivery of an information feed containing hundreds of headlines on a specific topic. Users need only click on the headlines and links to obtain further information.

Although RSS is still in its infancy, 12 percent of online consumers are getting their customized news via the format, according to Jupiter Research.

RSS roots

Technically speaking, RSS is an umbrella term for several different formats - most interoperable, as there is not a single industry wide specification. Created in the late 1990s, RSS can be installed as a standalone program, added to a Web browser, integrated with e-mail or accessed through a Web-based newsreader. Furthermore, RSS files and links can be downloaded to a PDA or cell phone through such services as Santa Cruz Tech's FeedBeep.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the newspaper industry has embraced RSS. And why not? Isn't it intuitive that newspapers would jump on a technology that's aimed at bringing news to individual readers?

The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Denver Post, the Wall Street Journal and USA Today are just a few of 100-plus newspapers sporting RSS channels. And with Gannett Co. Inc., Tribune Co. and Knight Ridder Inc. purchasing a 75 percent stake in news aggregator Topix.net, it appears that RSS has a strong future within the newspaper industry.

But are newspapers selling themselves short by using RSS?

The format's unique selling proposition is its ability to reduce the time users now spend searching and increase the time they spend reading.

Changing focus

It is revolutionizing how news and information is gathered. If used efficiently, as a supplementary service, RSS can be a powerful tool in the battle for Internet readers.

Still, is this a case of presumptuous theory? Some critics question how some newspapers use RSS within their Web sites. They question the frequency in which content is updated, the depth of information available, the reliance on headlines alone and the deficiency of integrated video, picture and sound files.

But these are all roadblocks that are easily overcome. Most anything can be syndicated, which means RSS can also be used to access music, pictures and streaming video among other formats. And as newspapers incorporate more multimedia content within their portals, RSS is the perfect tool for distribution. It's also another benefit newspapers can offer their online users.

In order to remain relevant in today's competitive landscape, newspapers must embrace technologies that will capitalize on their historical presence. RSS is such a technology and is a sure way to increase Web traffic. Now it's up to newspapers to maximize the benefits RSS presents and make their Web sites as attractive as their superior content and news coverage deserves.

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