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Beyond Blogs

UNDERSTANDING EMERGING SYNDICATED TECHNOLOGIES

by **Ethelbert A. Williams & Ian Carswell**

IN ADDITION TO THE BLOGOSPHERE, several other technologies are becoming important tools for marketers to reach consumers. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is one such example. This technology can be leveraged to enhance consumer experiences and generate revenue. It allows traditional publishers and individuals alike to reach a much broader audience.

It's hard to anticipate the ever-growing number of touchpoints this syndication technology will hold in our daily lives. A few concrete examples include:

- Sign-up to have your flight departure time and gate updates sent directly to your mobile phone.
- Sync your favorite NPR talk show broadcast from yesterday to your portable MP3 player.
- Get the latest local sports update sent directly to your desktop computer at work.
- Be the first to know tonight's local restaurant and bar specials, pull them onto myYahoo!, Gritwire, my MSN, or another RSS-powered homepage.

RSS also allows increased exposure to your brand, providing inexpensive opportunities to expand basic brand equity.

Specific business uses RSS for:

- BTI Communications, a VoIP company, used RSS to achieve the number one search engine positions for their most important keywords in a highly saturated market.
- Amazon.com uses RSS to announce their bestsellers and to help their customers keep track of releases in which they are most interested.
- FindSavings.com uses RSS to deliver savings coupons and related information.
- Many Internet publishers, such as Surfing the Net with Kids (surfnetkids.com), are using RSS to deliver newsletters.

Some cautions for marketers:

Once it's released, it can't be taken back

- RSS spreads quickly across the Internet, and does not check for changes to its original source. As always, treat every post as a final release that cannot be retracted.

You don't know where it will be published

- Besides desktop Web aggregators, RSS information is received on PDAs, cell phones, and TVs, and will continue to spread. Work to maintain relevance for all possible points of reception, or provide different feeds for different purposes.

You have no control over visual presentation

- Dozens of desktop and Web-based aggregators have appeared over the last year alone. Some are text only, some pay attention to HTML tagging, and some don't...basically you can't count on anything.

Beware the user's power to unsubscribe

- A user subscribed to your RSS feed is very valuable, so be sure to treat them well. If you post too frequently or on topics that lose their interest (or worse yet offend them), you are only one click away from oblivion. Regaining a subscriber is very challenging—treat your subscribers well.

It may be fast, but it's not live

- Marketing messages distributed in RSS should include the time frame of offers, if relevant.

Now, consider the upside:

Search ratings

- RSS has been called a backdoor to the search engines. This makes sense because search rankings are based on pointed quality content from sources that keep their information current. This is precisely what RSS does for your content.

Inexpensive

- Design is not as important—RSS allows the marketer to focus on the message.

Buzz and conversation

- The RSS community, while expanding, is built on a core group of very conversational individuals. Hosting an RSS feed is a big step toward tapping into this viral marketing machine.

Not SPAM

- The CAN-SPAM act and other e-mail laws do not apply. RSS can only be received by a subscriber to your feed.

You don't know where it will be published

- With the minimal effort of posting to your RSS feed, your information may be displayed in more places than you can dream.

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Syndicated Technology Definitions

Blog: Web logs, or blogs, are Web sites consisting of periodic postings or articles. Blogs are generally arranged with the postings in reverse chronological order, and the latest headlines in a blog are often made available on the blog site in RSS format.

Moblog: From "mobile blogging," a moblog is a blog with entries posted from a mobile device such as a cell phone or PDA.

Podcasting: A podcast is an RSS feed that includes links to music files. Software is available that allows you to listen to streaming versions of the music or automatically download the files as new music is posted.

RSS: Really Simple Syndication. A group of standards for distribution and republication of Web-based information, most typically associated with news sites and blogs. RSS is made available via an RSS "feed"—a URL with information posted in RSS format. Other syndication standards: Atom (supported by Google) and RDF (Resource Description Framework).

XML: eXtensible Markup Language. A structured format for transmitting text-based data that includes "tags" for describing the data being transmitted. RSS is a specific XML format.

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