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RSS 101 For Marketers

by Charlene Li

TRENDS

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This is the first document in the "Marketing And RSS" series.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Forrester's February 2005 Marketer Online Survey, 57% of marketers said that they were interested in using Really Simple Syndication (RSS) as a marketing channel. Why the interest when just 2% of North American online adults use RSS? The combination of reduced email marketing effectiveness and growing consumer advertising backlash drives marketers to test RSS — from creating their own feeds to putting ads into RSS feeds themselves. This report introduces who uses RSS in North America and the implications of RSS adoption. The second report in the series looks at best practices for marketers using RSS.

NOTES & RESOURCES

Forrester interviewed 30 vendor and user companies, including: Bloglines, CNET Networks, FeedBurner, Google, Microsoft, NewsGator Technologies, New York Times Digital, and Yahoo!.

Related Research Documents

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RSS 101

Pity the poor marketers in 2005. They can't simply push information to consumers anymore. Why? Consumers use more forms of media, are more distracted, and have email inboxes so full they can't find even opt-in emails. Nor can marketers risk waiting for even their most loyal customers to remember to come and visit their Web sites. What's more, consumers like the increased sense of power and control that they have. So what do savvy marketing execs do to reconnect with their customers, or connect to new ones? They'll look at RSS.[1] RSS is a powerful tool — albeit, for the technologically advanced today — that marketers should test and deploy to proactively maintain relationships with their customers.

Remember PointCast?[2] RSS is similar in that content, in the form of news headlines, product promotions, and even multimedia files, is pushed to end users, which makes it easy for users to consume information.[3] RSS is composed of two major components: 1) the content feed pushed from various Web sites; and 2) the aggregators that gather those feeds into one central place for the user. The important details marketers need to know about RSS is that it:

- **Uses a flexible language that makes data-sharing easy.** RSS is based on extensible markup language (XML) that facilitates data sharing. XML's flexibility is what makes it possible to break up content into discrete "chunks" that populate each RSS feed. These chunks contain information that describe the content, such as a "title," "author," and "description," which make it easy for programs to interpret and display the feed (see Figure 1-1).[4]

- **Can include almost anything a marketer wants to share.** Marketers should view RSS as a "build your own burger." At its simplest — just the burger patty — are text headlines. But just as you can customize a burger with all sorts of extras, marketers can jazz up their RSS feeds with other elements, including rich content like audio and video files — even software applications.[5]

- **Collects feeds and makes them readable via aggregators.** Just as a browser renders HTML useful, the RSS aggregator "reads" the raw RSS feed. The aggregator pulls together all of the feeds selected by the user, checks the feeds for updates, and keeps track of what has been read, all in one central place (see Figure 1-2). Thanks to its XML foundation, RSS runs on multiple platforms — currently, there are at least 70 RSS aggregators available.[6] These range from standalone desktop applications, to Web-based applications, to Outlook plug-ins, to integrated browser features — even mobile device applications (see Figure 1-3).

Users Benefit From Better Information Control And Efficiency

OK, let's get one thing straight: RSS doesn't replace Web sites and email. Instead it offers a compelling alternative that augments these channels by addressing their inherent delivery problems (see Figure 2). With RSS, consumers are no longer passive participants in their relationship with marketers — in fact, RSS is the embodiment of this power shift. RSS benefits users by:

- **Making content more efficient to read in RSS feeds than on multiple Web sites.** With all of the content in one place, it's easy for RSS users to scan through each feed's items and see which deserve further reading. Before marketers panic at the thought of declining Web site page views due to increased RSS usage, they should also consider the possibility that RSS could lead users to consume more content because they can do so more efficiently. RSS could also encourage users to return to sites more frequently as each new feed item links back to the publisher's site.

- **Providing an alternative to email.** There's no doubt about it: People have a love/hate relationship with email.[7] One of the problems is inbox clutter, as an email newsletter may be skipped over in favor of something more interesting or urgent. RSS moves non-urgent content and notifications like product updates to a different space, more focused on "nice to know" rather than "need to do." RSS has the additional benefit of guaranteeing 100% deliverability of messages, a benefit to both marketers and the 20% of North American online consumers who say they worry that spam filters are blocking messages they *want* to receive.

- **Giving users 100% control over feed management — and greater control over their information.** RSS allows users to exert greater control over their online experience, because they have to actively add a feed to their aggregator, so only the requested feeds are present.[8] This means no spam, no pop-up ads, no unwanted Flash animations. If a user tires of the feed, just a few clicks are needed to remove it. In essence, RSS users control the feed URLs, instead of marketers controlling the users' information. For the most part, feeds are anonymous. Unlike email newsletter subscriptions, RSS users don't have to be concerned about what happens to personally identifiable information when they subscribe to RSS feeds.

- **Requiring low commitment from users.** Managing an email inbox can feel like a full-time job, and few Internet users would welcome the idea of another — albeit different — inbox to manage. But RSS feeds are far less demanding than email. For one thing, they're self-organizing. How so? RSS feeds come neatly organized in their own folders, or "channels." Also, feed items are generally saved on the publisher's Web site, so users can delete freely without a second thought.

- **Putting the content anywhere the user chooses.** The content in the RSS feed can move easily between channels — for example, a user may read a content feed using NewsGator's Outlook client at work, NewsGator Online at home on a personal computer, and through NewsGator's mobile phone reader while on a business trip.

RSS Users: Today, The Young, Male Technological Elite

Forrester's Consumer Technographics® 2005 Benchmark study of 68,664 North American households shows that just 2% of North American adults (age 18 and older) in online households use RSS (see Figure 3).[9] Although young online consumers — those age 12 to 21 — are much more

likely to use RSS, still only 6% do so. Why should marketers care about what is an admittedly niche application used by such a small group of online consumers? Because they are, literally, tomorrow's customers. Current RSS users are:

- **Perpetually wired.** No surprise here: RSS users are early technology adopters, and technology touches more of their lives. Two-thirds have broadband and, among young consumers, 75% use wireless data services — and just as many engage in text messaging. Reflecting typical technology adoption, RSS users skew male and, among adult users, significantly younger. The Net forms a bigger part of RSS users' lives: Adult RSS users spend almost twice as much time online as their non-RSS using counterparts.

- **Information junkies and online shoppers.** Adult RSS users are three times as likely to visit national newspaper sites at least once a week, and five times as likely to use comparison shopping sites regularly. These adult RSS users also spend on average $465 online in the past three months, compared with $333 for non-RSS users. And there's a link between blog publishing and RSS — a quarter of adult RSS users and a third of young consumer RSS users publish their own blogs.

- **More likely to visit Google and Yahoo!.** Given the technological bent of RSS users, they are more likely to be regular users of Google and Yahoo!. But they are not necessarily less likely to use AOL and MSN. In fact, usage of those portals by RSS users mirrors the general population.

New Developments Will Soon Broaden The Market

RSS adoption remains low, partly because it's new. And despite "simple" being the middle word in RSS, the application is not yet all that simple — it's hard today for online consumers to understand, find, and use RSS feeds. But Forrester believes that recent industry activity and announcements point to greater consumer adoption of RSS, especially as RSS functionality is integrated into users' every day online experience. Forrester asserts that two key developments will spur the adoption of RSS:

- **Integrated aggregators will make it easier to set up, discover, and find feeds.** Integration is key to changing behavior — if the feeds are easily available in existing applications, they stand a fighting chance of being used. All of the major Web browser firms are working to integrate "one button add" RSS functionality intro their applications. For example, Apple's Safari browser integrates feeds into bookmarks, and Microsoft will integrate RSS aggregation into its new Internet Explorer release.[10] RSS will also be available from within email programs like Outlook and instant messaging clients, and Apple's iTunes will seek out and handle podcasts.[11] It will also be easier to find feeds — for example, the Firefox browser uses autodiscovery to show when a feed is available on a particular page, and MyYahoo!'s service makes it easy to search, find, and add feeds.

- **Commercial content will help save time and money.** When the Web first debuted in 1993, it was a way to get news and information. It was only in the late '90s that it became a stable commercial channel. Forrester anticipates that RSS will follow a similar path: As content broadens to include commercial information, more businesses will find a compelling reason to try out this medium. Forrester believes that information-intensive activities, such as finding an apartment or getting a home mortgage, are pain points that RSS can address by delivering criteria-based results to the user.

Figure 1 The Components Of RSS

1-1   RSS feed code

Content is converted Into a feed

Types of content

- Headlines
- Press releases
- Job openings
- Earnings calls (MP3)
- product tutorials

```
<title>Forrester Research: Forrester Whole View</title>          ← Title of the feed
<link>http://www.forrester.com/find?N=105&feed=Forrester+Whole+
      View&rssTitle=Forrester+Whole+View</link>
<description>Forrester is an independent technology research company
      that provides pragmatic and forward-thinking advice about
      technology's impact on business.</description>
<language>en-us</language>
<image><title>Forrester Research</title>                          ⎤ Graphic associated
<url>http://www.forrester.com/imagesV2/affiliates/logos/forrester.gif  ⎦ with the feed
</url><link>http://www.forrester.com/</link></image>
<item>
<title>Europe's Mobile Consumer</title>                          ● Title of the item
<link>http://www.forrester.com/go?docid=36954&src=RSS_2</link>
<description>This Data Overview is a graphical analysis of Forrester's
      Consumer Technographics Q4 2004 European Study. We focus on
      mobile phone users' behavior, mobile ownership, mobile features,
      and mobile services. We also uncovered the following insights: Mobile   Description
      penetration has reached a high level of saturation; basic phone features
      are common; SMS text messaging remains the most used mobile service;
      and users aren't yet ready to adopt advanced mobile services, such as
      the mobile Internet and video messaging.</description>
<category>Forrester Whole View</category>
<author>Christof Herzog, Ph.D.</author>                          ← Author
```

1-2   Aggregators turn the raw feed into a readable format

Subscribed feeds

Feed being read

Number of new items

Title of the feed

Link to the full article

Author

Description

Source: Bloglines

1-3   Aggregators can gather feeds from different sources — and on different platforms — into one place

Platform/device	Aggregator examples
Desktop application	Awasu, FeedDemon, NetNewswire, NewsCrawler
Web-based service	Bloglines, Google, MyAOL, MyMSN, MyYahoo!
Outlook	NewsGator, YouSubscribe
Browser	Firefox, Internet Explorer, Pluck, Safari
Mobile	FeedBeep, FreeNews, NewsGator
Instant messaging	Guru, Miranda

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 RSS Represents A New Way To Distribute Content

	Web sites and email	**RSS**
Task	Visit a site, click on a story, wait for the page to refresh. Repeat for the next story.	Scan quickly through the headlines and summaries and click on a link to the site.
User control	Concerns about email list privacy and difficulty of unsubscribing keeps users from signing up in the first place.	RSS is 100% opt-in, but feeds can be easily deleted if they aren't relevant and used
Tracking	Measurements include open rates and click-through rates; clear standards are in place.	Standards and technology to track subscriptions, circulation, and items viewed are still under development.
Deliverability	Spam filters sometimes catch emails, even requested ones.	RSS has100% deliverability.
Adoption and ease of use	Used by almost everyone	Very low adoption, mostly by techies. Still difficult to understand, find, and use feeds.
Mindset	Uncluttered email inbox serves as a "to do" list.	RSS keeps "to know" information out of the inbox.

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 3 Profile Of RSS Users

3-1   **RSS users are young, male, and the technological elite**

	Adults that use RSS	Non-RSS-using adults	Young consumers that use RSS (12 - 21)[†]	Non-RSS-using young consumers (12 - 21)[†]
Percent of population	2%	98%	5%	95%
Male	66%	48%	65%	46%
Average age	38.9	45.0	15.0	14.7
Average household income*	$65,509	$66,207	$54,467	$50,012
College education	46%	37%	n/a	n/a
Avg. hours per week spent reading newspapers or magazines	5.3	6.1	n/a	n/a
Avg. hours per week spent using the Internet	15.6	8.4	16.5	12.5
Avg. online tenure (years)	6.5	5.7	6.3	5.5
Have broadband	64%	44%	62%	50%
Tech optimists	78%	58%	79%	68%
Use wireless data services	35%	14%	75%	59%

3-2   **RSS users are also information and online shopping junkies**

Percentage that do the following at least once a week:	Adults that use RSS	Non-RSS-using adults	Young consumers that use RSS (12 - 21)[†]	Non-RSS-using young consumers (12 - 21)[†]
Use national news sites	43%	14%	37%	16%
Use sports sites	27%	10%	28%	15%
Research products for purchase	40%	18%	n/a	n/a
Use comparison shopping sites	21%	4%	23%	8%
Research free products or coupons	19%	6%	27%	13%
Publish or maintain a blog	25%	1%	33%	7%
Read blogs	27%	1%	n/a	n/a
Look up classifieds	19%	4%	22%	13%

3-3   **RSS users gravitate to Google and Yahoo!**
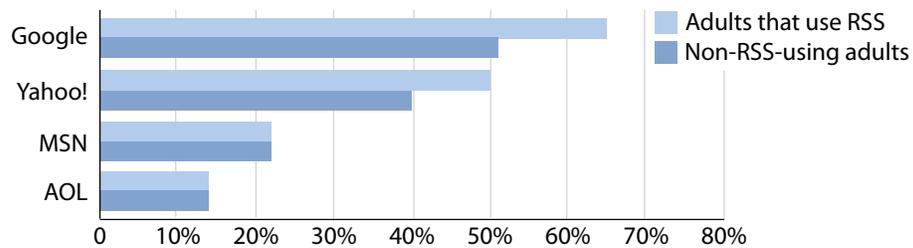
Base: North American online households
*Base: US online households
†Base: North American online youth (ages 12 - 21)

Source: Forrester's Consumer Technographics® 2005 North American Benchmark Study
†Source: Forrester's Consumer Technographics Q1 2005 North American Youth Devices & Access
        And Finance Online Study

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

RSS MOVES BEYOND SYNDICATING CONTENT TO BECOME A PLATFORM FOR APPLICATIONS

Today, RSS is all about making it easier for consumers to get content to the place they want it. As they proliferate, RSS feeds — and the advent of RSS extensions that create structure around the feed — will spur:

- **Users creating filters and metafeeds to overcome feed "burn out."** As with other new online applications, the initial euphoria about RSS will likely give way to frustration as new users add more feeds than they can ever hope to read. Aggregator-based filtering that employs user profiles, collaborative filtering, and "folksonomy" tags will all help users scale and handle complexity.[12] Metafeeds — master feeds on top of all incoming feeds — are another approach. Metafeeds can index content, find related items and eliminate duplicates (for example, wire stories from Reuters).[13] Users today already rely on human metafeeds creators — bloggers like Robert Scoble who scan over 1,400 feeds — to filter information for them. Feed search engines like Feedster, PubSub, and Technorati will automate the process, creating metafeeds based not only on the metadata and tags of content coming into their indexes but also taking into account the items a user clicks on to help determine relevance.

- **Consumers creating and sharing specialized feed applications.** The addition of tags and metadata structure to feeds will initially allow developers to create lightweight applications on top of data feeds — for example, Amazon's Wish List.[14] But why should developers have all of the fun? In the spirit of giving consumers control over the content, developers will create platforms similar to Yahoo!'s Konfabulator or Apple's Dashboard that allow end users to modify the applications with their own feeds.[15] So a parent might combine weather reports, school lunch menus, and family calendars to create a daily "to do" list to get out of the door in the mornings. But rather than keep the apps to themselves, consumers will share the applications — enabling other users to modify and improve the products and services. The result: a proliferation of applications that will encourage even more marketers and publishers to provide product, service, and information feeds that can be used within these applications.

- **The "browser" shifting from lead actor to bit player.** The original intent of the Web browser was to peruse sites. But the advent of search and now feed subscription means that the browser moves into the role of being primarily a way to view the information found through a search or linked to from a feed. As feed aggregators are built directly into applications and devices like Outlook, iTunes, TiVo, and mobile phones, the need for and use of a browser will further diminish, to the point where mini-content viewers will be embedded with the aggregators. The standalone browser will still be around, but will find its purpose shifted to supporting these new applications.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Methodology

The consumer data used in this report came from two surveys conducted by Forrester. Forrester's Consumer Technographics 2005 North American Benchmark Study was a mail survey of 68,661 US and Canadian households that are adult members of NFO's mail panel. NFO weighted the data by age, sex, income, education, household size, and region to demographically represent the adult North American population. NFO fielded the survey from January to February 2005 and motivated respondents by entering them in a drawing. Forrester's Consumer Technographics Q1 2005 North American Youth Devices & Access And Finance Online Study was a Web-based survey of 5,216 US and Canadian individuals, aged 12 to 21, who are members of Survey Sampling's email panel. Forrester Research fielded the survey in April 2005 and motivated respondents by entering them in a drawing.

Additional Online Resources

There are several excellent online explanations of RSS, at different levels of expertise:

Basic. CNET editor Rafe Needleman's RSS video tutorial at http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-10088_7-5143656.html. Also available at CNET is "How to" on RSS at http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-10088_7-5143460.html?tag=rss. Also helpful: Microsoft's Alex Barnett an excellent screencast RSS tutorial, located at http://www.extremepodcasting.com/screencasts/usingrss101.htm, and his sequel about using Technorati tags at http://www.extremepodcasting.com/screencasts/technorati.html.

Advanced. Mark Pilgrim's "What is RSS?" article on XML.com at http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2002/12/18/dive-into-xml.html.

Expert. O'Reilly's "Developing Feeds with RSS and Atom" by Ben Hammersley, published April 2005. More information is available at http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/deveoprssatom/index.html.

Companies Interviewed For This Document

Bloglines	NewsGator Technologies
CNET Networks	New York Times Digital
CooperKatz	Nooked
craigslist	Pheedo
FeedBurner	PubSub Concepts
Feedster	SimpleFeed
FreeRange Communications	Syndicate IQ
Google	Technorati
imc²	Topix.net
Kanoodle	The Wall Street Journal Online
Microsoft	Yahoo!
MyST Technology Partners	You Software

ENDNOTES

1 There are alternative explanations for the acronym RSS, including Rich Site Summary and Rich Data Feed Summary. RSS is also sometimes referred to as "XML" and "Atom" feeds as well. For the purposes of this research piece, the RSS acronym encompasses all of these standards unless explicitly called out.

Of the 58 marketers asked, "How interested are you in advertising in these emerging interactive channels?" 57% said they were "somewhat" or "very interested" in RSS, and 64% said they were interested in blogs. See the May 2, 2005, Trends "US Online Marketing Forecast: 2005 To 2010."

2 Launched in 1996, PointCast was a service that "pushed" personalized information and content to the desktop using proprietary software. PointCast's demise came from the inability to scale its proprietary technology, as well as the emergence and growth of Web-based portals like Yahoo! and Excite. Source: "PointCast: The Rise and Fall of an Internet Star," *Business Week,* April 26, 1999 (http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_17/b3626167.htm).

3 RSS differs from PointCast in two major ways. First, RSS is an open standard that can be used by any company, whereas PointCast was a centralized service that content publishers needed to go through to publish their data. Second, PointCast relied on those centralized servers to "push" the content to clients residing on the desktop, causing a huge bottleneck on corporate servers. To the user, RSS looks like "push," but in actuality it operates more like "pull" in that the user's aggregator (whether it is a client on the desktop or an online service) goes to the publisher and requests updates to the content feed.

⁴ One of the major differences between two of the major RSS standards — RSS 2.0 and Atom — is the way that this information, the "metadata," is expressed and organized. A debate has raged among hardcore RSS developers about which format to use and promote for the syndication of Web pages. The early 0.9x versions of RSS forked into RSS 1.0 and RSS 2.0, so that RSS 2.0 is not a subsequent version of RSS 1.0, but a completely different standard. A completely new standard called Atom is due to be released shortly in its 1.0 version.

⁵ The New York Times Online provides headlines with links back to the individual stories (http://www. nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/). More recently, podcasting — using RSS to download audio programs that can be played on a portable player like an iPod — has been used by organizations ranging from NASA (http://science.nasa.gov/podcast.xml) to Russ Limbaugh (http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/Rush247. guest.html). And while companies like Apple provide text feeds for software updates (http://www.apple. com/rss), the feeds still require users to go back to the site for the actual download. There are a few examples of how RSS can be used to automatically download software updates. Here are two "appcasting" examples, for an application called FlickrExport (http://speirs.org/flickrexport/) and the game Freecell (http://randomoracle.com/freecell/).

⁶ Source: Gnomedex (http://channels.lockergnome.com/rss/resources/).

⁷ Among North American online households, 58% say that they usually just delete emails they no longer want rather than unsubscribe — an indication that they don't think it's easy to get off of email lists. Forty-five percent say they wish it were easier to unregister from email offers. Source: Forrester's Consumer Technographics December 2004 North American Study.

⁸ Aggregators often come preloaded with feeds, or with a list of recommended feeds, which the user can add or delete during setup.

⁹ The survey question asks how often the respondent "Uses RSS (Really Simple Syndication)" with options of "More than once a week," "Less than once a week," or "Never." This does not capture respondents who may be using RSS-enabled content, for example, on MyYahoo! and does not realize it. As such, this statistic underreports the actual number of RSS users. Yahoo! estimates that between 3 million and 5 million users have some type of RSS-delivered content on MyYahoo!.

¹⁰ Microsoft also announced that there will be greater support of RSS within its new operating system, which is anticipated in 2006. Source: IEBlog (http://blogs.msdn.com/ie/archive/2005/06/24/432390.aspx).

¹¹ Outlook RSS integration currently requires a plug-in like NewsGator. RSS aggregation is available within instant messaging clients like Gush (http://www.2entwine.com). Apple's latest version of iTunes allows users to discover and subscribe to podcasts — audio files that are attached or "enclosed" within the RSS feed. Once in iTunes, these audio files can be automatically synched with iPods.

¹² "Tags" are used by content creators and item readers to categorize individual items. For example, this research document might be given the following tags: "marketing," "rss," and "tutorial." The term "folksonomy" is a derivative of taxonomy, but instead of a small group of people deciding on the proper taxonomy to be followed, a folksonomy is instead created by any one who wants to participate. This

leads to a richness and diversity of tagging, as well as greater participation. But a major disadvantage of a folkosonomy is the lack of standardization. For example, someone else might tag this document "rss marketing" and "rss tutorial." CNET recently began allowing users to add tags to articles, while search engine Ask Jeeves and Yahoo! allow users to add tags to saved search results.

[13] Bill Burnham blogs about how tags and metafeeds would work. Source: Burnham's Beat (http://billburnham. blogs.com/burnhamsbeat/2005/01/saving_rss_why_.html).

[14] Metafeeds differ from metadata in that the metafeeds aggregate the metadata from multiple feeds. These specialized feed applications will build on the RSS extensions proposed by companies like Microsoft (and Yahoo! for media RSS feeds) and use the metadata from both regular and metafeeds. At Gnomedex, Microsoft used Amazon's Wish Lists as an example of how RSS feeds can contain enough metadata information on which to build an application, such as notifying friends when an item under the price of $50 is added to a person's wish list.

[15] Dashboard puts mini-applications called "widgets" on the Apple desktop — one example is Fat Fingers that finds items with misspellings or typos on eBay so that they can be bid on and bought for a lower price. Most of the widgets are dedicated to a single site, publisher, or marketer, but widgets could be created to use inputs from multiple RSS feeds. Source: Apple (http://www.apple.com/downloads/dashboard/) and Yahoo! Widgets (http://widgets.yahoo.com).

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