



IMN on RSS

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Expect to hear a lot more about RSS.

By David Berkowitz

RSS may be one of those tech acronyms that you'll have to get used to. The acronym stands for rich site summary, and it's basically a way of formatting online content that can be distributed or syndicated to Web users.

A publisher can tag a certain bit of content (such as, say, a news headline and summary) as RSS, and then the end-user can view it in three ways: on that publisher's site, through a content aggregator such as [NewsIsFree](#) that collects RSS feeds, or with software such as [FeedDemon](#) (still in beta) that acts as a special Web browser where you can select your favorite feeds and they're automatically updated.

Bloggers are fueling the growth of RSS, as most weblogs (familiarily called "blogs") are published with tools that create RSS. Perseus Development Corporation estimates there are 5 million blogs out there this year, and that will double in 2004. The RSS readers and aggregators make it easy to skim and search all this content.

Growth of Hosted Blogs, 2000-2004

2000	135,731
2001	958,182 (606%)
2002	2,163,636 (126%)
2003	5,007,272 (131%)
2004	10,283,687 (105%)

Source: Perseus Development Corporation, October 2003

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IMN, Inc. is on the forefront of RSS publishing. After eMarketer spoke with [IMN Chairman Tom Simons](#) to discuss the company's latest developments, we called Chief Technology Officer Peter Mesnik for an exclusive scoop on its plans for RSS.

eMarketer: What is IMN's involvement with RSS?

Peter Mesnik: The interesting thing is that RSS is a perfect fit for the architecture of what we've come up with and our business strategy. The whole idea of informative marketing is something that we've trademarked, and it's really an important concept to how marketers should be communicating online with their constituents. The key is in the information, in the content of what you're delivering.



For e-mail, it traditionally takes the form of a newsletter. The core of any online e-marketing campaign is to start establishing permission through a newsletter and building those relationships over time so that what you send to people is information that's important, that's desired, that comes on a regular basis, and therefore it's not spam. It's valuable information that also is personally relevant to their interests. That way, the marketer can optimize their relationships so that they're always presenting information that's most intriguing to their readers. What we provide is a full set of publishing tools for assembling content, templating the content and delivering that content, and most importantly, then being able to measure how people make use of this material.

What we are able to do with our new RSS feed feature is to take the information that's in a newsletter and immediately publish it as a feed the same way that we publish it as an e-mail. The user doesn't take any additional interaction; it automatically just happens.

We can embed what we call trackable RSS. The trackable RSS is something that's unique to our service, and what it means is that in the same way that you collect someone's subscription to a newsletter by having them provide you with an e-mail address, you can also collect subscriptions to your feed so that when a user requests to receive your feed, they can register for that feed and get a unique web address where they can find this news feed. That way, the feed that they get is going to be personally relevant to them. It can be personalized so it includes the content they're interested in, and it also can provide information back to the publisher. We can know how often the feeds are being used. A marketer can find multiple channels for distributing their content with our service. A marketer can simultaneously provide content on the Web -- on what we call a companion microsite, on e-mail or through an RSS feed. All three are ways in which the content can be put into the hand of recipients.

eMarketer: How does your DirectBlog business relate to all of this?

PM: A blog is similar in nature to a newsletter, but different. A newsletter is formal, regular communication. It usually has an editorial calendar with a set number of sections and a set timeframe. It's fairly planned and organized. A blog is a less organized, more frequent, less regular type of communication, but it has many similar characteristics that we see.

Content is an important component, and that content doesn't necessarily have the pressure of being full articles -- they could be small snippets of information. They're delivered on a timely basis. Typically, blogs may not have much of an e-mail component, but we see a very important aspect of e-mail in relation to blogs. With blogs, there's a Web presence for a continuous stream of material. There's also a reason to send e-mail to highlight key developments on the blog to those who subscribe, and one of the drivers of RSS is blogging. RSS is a very natural fit for the DirectBlog product. It uses the same type of technology we use for our newsletter product, but it's kind of like turning our newsletter product upside

down, where the newsletter is primarily an e-mail product with a companion microsite, and the DirectBlog product is primarily a Web site publishing product with an e-mail component and the RSS feeds.

eMarketer: Do you have clients who are already starting to produce these RSS feeds?

PM: It's just starting now.

eMarketer: Even for the near future, do you see much of an audience for the RSS feeds themselves?

PM: There's a number of benefits of RSS feeds for those people who you have important communications with. One is you are avoiding e-mail -- you can use it as another mechanism for distributing content outside of e-mail. To the extent that e-mail filtering and other types of delivery issues become problematic for certain audiences, you can also make sure the content is readily available through other means.

eMarketer: In the practical sense, on the consumer end, is anyone really reading RSS? One can use RSS to avoid the e-mail issue -- that much I understand, but will it then get to anyone?

PM: That's obviously a big question. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? What's really going to drive this? Blogging, with individuals doing millions of blogs, and the fact that these blogging tools can create RSS feeds, is to a certain extent driving this. The more content that's out there, the more people will start to use these tools. My understanding is hundreds of thousands of people have already downloaded these blog aggregators, these RSS readers, for use on their own desktops. They use them as consoles for managing content. They could have ESPN and *The Wall Street Journal* and all these publications they read on a regular basis. The nice thing about RSS readers is usually the readers are programmed to automatically retrieve the newest feeds on a regular basis.

It's a great hybrid, where a Web site has very passive content that you have to wait for someone to find and go to, and e-mail is very active -- you're pushing content to people. RSS and RSS readers offer a unique hybrid between the two. The reader has complete control over what they subscribe to, and they automatically will retrieve the feeds on a regular basis. They always have the latest information on their desktops. It's a combination of push and pull, and it gives consumers much more control.

eMarketer: I'm getting the sense, and correct me if I'm wrong, that the people who are using RSS readers today are like the people who were on the Internet back in 1992.

PM: You're definitely going to have your early adopters in any fad or craze or new initiative. That's certainly the way it was back in '92; the early adopters were the ones that had the browsers. That really catapulted that industry, and now everybody has a browser.

eMarketer: Do you have any sense of what it would take to get that catapult to launch?

PM: I think that there are probably a couple of things that will help that along. I think what's gotten RSS to where it is today is all the bloggers out there. To the

extent that more and more people start publishing and creating that actual content, then more and more people will start to find that they'll want to use these readers. Also, I think it's possible that Microsoft and others that provide these core tools may start to build in the capability of RSS. There are a number of add-ons already for Exchange and other e-mail programs so that you can have one area of your e-mail program where your incoming e-mail is and another area of your e-mail program where your RSS feeds reside.

eMarketer: I'm thinking that once you have it as part of Microsoft Outlook or Internet Explorer and part of the AOL interface, then you'll have something that can catch on. If you're waiting for people to download it and learn how to use it, and it's third-party software, people will just be scratching their heads.

PM: You could integrate it into a Web browser. One of the key things about an RSS feed is it includes links to the Web site where the rest of the content resides. It's really just a way of getting headlines out so people are aware of the new information. Then they can choose to click that link. It ties very closely into a browser.

We have over 800 customers that are worldwide, businesses large and small, mostly mid-tier, mid-size organizations within larger companies. All of these clients will be able to have their content published as an RSS feed without any additional work whatsoever. It's really that easy and that transparent to the user.

The author wishes to thank blogger [Andrew Raff](#) for feeding some input into RSS.

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