

Why Do I Need RSS Feeds?

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At one time, having a Web site also meant establishing an email list to help drive traffic to your site and to keep your clients informed. But, the Internet is changing how it does business and RSS Feeds are quickly replacing standard email lists. Let's have a look at what's behind this trend.

For a site owner, newsletters are becoming too expensive and time-consuming to maintain. Due to security and maintenance issues, many host providers are no longer providing built-in listserv support. (A listserv is the name given to special software that supports an email list of subscribers.) Some of the hosts that do offer a listserv charge a fee for the service based on how many emails you send a month. As your subscriber base grows, so do your fees. And, because of the proliferation of spam, many site surfers no longer want to give their email address to lists that may be sold or hacked. Because of these two Internet security issues, potential subscribers are being driven away from independent email lists and toward feed readers. If you don't give subscribers the option of selecting an RSS Feed, you may be missing out on return traffic in the future, especially for your newsletter.

So, what is an RSS Feed and how does it work?

Initially, RSS stood for Rich Site Summary; but, due to several revisions, is generally now considered to stand for Really Simple Syndication. It allows you to quickly deliver, or feed, the changing content, news, and podcasts on your blog or Web site to multiple sources for syndication and directly to readers who subscribe to your feed.

There are three parts to RSS Feeds. The first is a feed reader that displays the information from your blog post to the end user, or subscriber of the feed. The second is the software used by the content generator (you, the author) to create the feed in a special format. The third is an RSS Feed link on your site.

A feed reader, also called an aggregator, is used by the subscriber. It allows them to automatically receive posts from multiple blogs without having to visit each one for updates. There are many feed readers on the market that a subscriber can use for free. Each has different features, but most all of them allow the subscriber to create their own virtual newspaper. Google Reader is becoming one of the more popular feed readers.

To make your blog content available to the feed readers of your subscribers, you must use some type of software program that converts the content into the proper format for the reader. This process is called "burning" your feed. Google owns such a service, called FeedBurner, and it's free for you to use for unlimited posts. It also has some great features, including statistics that show how many folks are subscribing to your feed.

Here's the best part for you. Once you set up your feed burning software account, you can very easily integrate it into your blog. Then, all you have to do is make a regular post entry and it will automatically be available to anyone who has subscribed to your feed. You can also subscribe your own Web site to your feed and it will be auto-populated with your blog entry too. And, folks who run sites that are hungry for content can subscribe to your feed and populate their site with your information. This is called syndication. As you can see, the main benefit of RSS Feeds is that your information becomes available to a much wider audience and all you have to do is make a blog entry.