

**RSS**  
**Jumping the Hurdles in Online Communications**

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## **RSS: Jumping the Hurdles in Online Communications**

*RSS is a simple way to jump over the obstacles that stand between you and those you want to communicate with.*

RSS is creating quite a buzz right now, and for good reason. With 165+ million Americans of all ages online, everyone—and we mean everyone—is trying to get their message out on a website or in an email. But, making the connection online is far from easy. There are many communications hurdles strewn across the Information Superhighway. But RSS, a quickly emerging Web communications technology, is a simple way to jump over the obstacles that stand between you and those you want and need to communicate with. That's why it's critical that you understand the immediate, practical applications of RSS as it relates to helping your college or university make the online connection.

Consider the *communications* big picture. How do you currently communicate with your student body and other stakeholders with whom you have well established communications channels? What about prospective students? Do they even know who you are or enough about you to accept, for example, an email message from you? What about wayward alumni—do you know where they are or how to best reach them to give them the latest news and information?

*What forms of communication are prospective students and alumni willing to accept from you?*

Now, for a moment, let's turn this around and look at all this from the other side of the conversation. Put yourself in the shoes of a prospective student. Assuming they're interested in what you have to say (which they are) and that they know where to find you (which we'll talk about later), what method of communication are they willing to accept from you? And, since they're also hearing from lots of other people, what will cause them to remember you? And, MOST importantly, if they do listen to you once, what will ensure they will keep listening to what you have to say? So with this in mind, let's take a look at the pros and cons of

the more common approaches to online communications – the website and email.

## The Website

**Pros:** Students find your site in a variety of ways. Sometimes it's expensive and complex (for you)—buying online ads, endlessly deliberating over the right keywords and pouring over reports analyzing the sources of your best traffic. But, more often than not, prospective students simply stumble onto your site. The good news is that this transaction costs you nothing and that they actually found your site – at least once!

*Everyone will eventually find your website, but how many will willingly return?*

*If they do, how will they know what's changed or what's new?*

**Cons:** But the bad news is that after the first visit, you're in trouble. Your website can be the most informational, awe-inspiring, motivating college site on the Web, but it's got one MAJOR problem. Unless your target audience likes to re-read the same content over and over again, there's almost no reason for them to come back. And, even if you've got a terrific web content management system and dozens or hundreds of content editors keeping your site fresh with new compelling information about your college, returning visitors generally have no idea what's changed or what's new.

Visit your own home page and ask yourself, “why would I ever come back?”. There's probably very little, if any, content that changes on your home page. From a branding perspective that's good, but from your target audience's point of view it's just old news. Maybe you've got a few images that change when you re-visit the home page – and that's great! And, perhaps you've got a dynamic list of links to upcoming events and activities – fantastic. But all this is solving only a part of the problem.

## Email

**Pros:** The great thing about email is that it allows you to repeatedly reach out and grab the attention of your prospects. Emails can be targeted, focused, and can drive prospects to specific “landing pages” deep within your site – hopefully to pages that are new and interesting to them!

*Email is filtered, and your messages are blocked by a growing base of sophisticated technologies and savvy teenagers.*

*Once your emails are blocked, your target audience will never hear from you again!*

*RSS offers both you and your visitors the best of targeted email and voluntary web surfing.*

**Cons:** The problem, in a single word is, S-P-A-M. Let me put it this way, if you think you get a lot of email, just take a look at the inbox of your average high school student. It will literally shock and amaze you. Now keep in mind that to them it's not such a problem. They're not gullible when it comes to email. They filter, and they ignore. Spam filters are getting better and better all by themselves, and with a spam savvy teenager at the helm, you're message is dead in one click – and they never hear from you again.

You can have the perfect demographics, the most honed-in email lists, the most personalized messages, and you can hit your mark dead on with the perfect content and still never have your email read. And guess what? Every other college on the planet has discovered (simultaneously it seems) that email is cheap and easy to send. Your messages are not only going head-to-head with the best and most sophisticated spam filtering techniques, but you're competing with hundreds if not thousands of other college emails. If your email is not caught by the spam filter, it's probably lost in a sea of similarity.

## **RSS to the Rescue**

A new option for communicating is taking hold that offers your prospects something unique – “RSS”. You've heard people say it, and you've seen the colorful little icons everywhere. It's that lovely three letter acronym that so many don't quite know what it means, what the benefits are, or how to apply it.

While some people might still be scratching their heads wondering what those little orange buttons do, your target audience has already figured it out. They know what the benefits are to them, and they're already using it.

RSS offers your students and alumni the benefits of both web surfing and email, with none of the drawbacks. And it offers you the same benefits!

RSS stands for: “Real Simple Syndication”. Syndication is the key that unlocks its power, but the fact that it's simple is responsible for its overnight success.

*RSS updates those who want to know, every time you want them to know something.*

Simply put, RSS allows people and devices not just to link to pages, but actually subscribe to them. And the real magic is that RSS notifies you or your device every time those pages change! This fundamental power has already changed the way your students, prospective students, and alumni interact with other institutions. And it's time they do the same with yours.

Here's how it works. You simply add one or more RSS Feeds to your site – this is actually very easy. There's no site re-design involved, no complex technology necessary, and no visible difference to the look and feel of your site. RSS "Feeds" are transparent to all but those who want to use them.

*RSS Feeds become the news and information conduit that your visitors can easily subscribe to.*

RSS Feeds become the conduit for news and information that is then easily subscribed to by your visitors. They might receive general news, campus event information, or important admissions messaging directly to their favored device. These "devices" could be their web browser, their RSS Feed Reader, their email application, their favorite portal such as My Yahoo, My MSN, or Google, a smart phone or other hand-held device, in fact RSS can even be received as a "What's new" section on any page of your own site.



*RSS isn't filtered or blocked, and your message is delivered to willing recipients.*

The wonderful aspect of RSS is that once someone has found something of interest on your site, they voluntarily "connect" themselves to you, and receive updates and important information that you "push" to them whenever you want. This is like magic! It's not email, it doesn't get spam filtered, but the recipients don't have to re-visit your site everyday to get alerted to new information posted to

*RSS is delivered in real-time, no waiting for your next campaign or Google spider to find it.*

your site – it comes to them – and, if the RSS headlines they receive hit the mark, they simply click and land back on your site – in fact they land on the page with the exact information that interests them.

And, RSS is “real time” information. If something new is added to your site you don’t have to wait for Google to spider it, or your next email campaign to get the word out. Everyone who subscribed to your RSS feed immediately receives the information in real time.

## **RSS – an Example**

Let’s assume you’re adding a new web page for a press release or an announcement of some kind – you could just as easily be updating an existing page. Now you’re site is using RSS, and you’re about to take advantage of it to push your announcement out to your visitors.

So here’s how it works. You add the new content to your site and identify what part of this new content is your “RSS Item” – think of an RSS Item as the headline you want to push to your users.

An RSS Item is the morsel of content you “push”. The Item contains the content that you want your subscribers to see. Those who subscribed to your RSS Feed have the item immediately available once the Item is pushed. And the item includes a link back to the specific page on your site that tells the full story.

*Content you add to RSS feeds drive subscribers back to specific pages on your site.*

The Item is pushed to the RSS Feed. A Feed is something you (as the web site owner) have pre-defined. You can define one Feed for the entire site, or break your site down into subjects of interest, like Campus News, Events, Athletics, Admissions, Campus Life, etc. Students simply “subscribe” to one or more of your Feeds. This is done anonymously, but the act of subscribing effectively connects the student to one or more sources of information from your site, and gives you permission to push information to them.



*Those who subscribe to RSS feeds get information the way they want to receive it.*

The student can receive the item in a wide variety of ways. There are desktop “reader” applications, and a myriad of devices that can subscribe to RSS. RSS Reading is also taking place in the browser, and will soon take place in the operating system itself. The next version of Internet Explorer will become an RSS Reader all by itself – Apple’s Safari browser already is. And the next version of Windows will receive RSS Feeds natively. This means that RSS Readers will become ubiquitous and RSS Feed Items will be pushed to us in ways we haven’t yet dreamed of.

### Start Using RSS Today

Just as the website started off as a project within IT or computing, so has RSS at many institutions. However, it’s the marketing and communications departments that are starting to take the bull by the horns and apply the narrowcast capability and most powerful applications of RSS.

*It’s not too late, but you need to enable at least one RSS feed on your site today.*

The good news is that we’re still early in the RSS game, but it’s critical to take actions now to enable at least one RSS Feed on your site today.

Keep in mind that your audience “gets it”. They’re filtering your email, deep linking to avoid your home pages, and using the power of RSS to subscribe to just the content they need to help them make decisions. If your site doesn’t offer RSS Feeds, you might not be feeding your students, prospective students, and alumni anything – and they’re not receiving your message.

So, what can you do...

- 1) Quickly establish an RSS presence. We can help with this. We work with many colleges and can help you with best practices when getting started. The best time to start using RSS is yesterday, and the second best time is right now! Your RSS Feeds build over time, but you've got to get your Feed out there now to show up on the radar. Every day that goes by without that orange button on your site, is a day your site is being judged as not as eager to communicate with students, alumni, and stakeholders in the way that they prefer.
- 2) Next, identify functions that would benefit from enhanced communications – for example, recruiting, advancement, and I'm sure you'll find many others. Be sure to look at how communication methods like email and even regular mail are being applied, and ask if RSS might not be a more effective alternative.
- 3) And finally, try it! We're offering a Test Drive you can try for yourself right now. This is a fantastic way to see the benefits of RSS and help sell it internally. Look, there's a lot of buzz about RSS, but there's also a lot of confusion. RSS is really a technology rather than a practical application. Let us put a practical application in your hands to drive around for a few days. I guarantee you it will open up a variety of possibilities.

*It's actually very simple to get started using RSS. Contact us and we'll show you how!*

You can sign up for a free test drive of RSS – and a free test drive of OmniUpdate – by visiting <http://www.omniupdate.com/demo/testdrive> Don't hesitate; sign up today.

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