

MEDIA RELATIONS INSIDER

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S WORKING TO INCREASE YOUR MEDIA COVERAGE

SUPPLEMENT TO BULLDOG REPORTER'S BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE EDITIONS

TOOLS & TECHNOLOGY

RSS Could Be a Vital Part of Your Communications Toolbox—But Can it Score You More Hits?

In the modern communications world, it's now clear that the blogosphere is the place to be. PR pros can quickly and easily access news about trend activity and competitors' announcements, as well as monitor public perception of their companies and products online. Furthermore, RSS ("Really Simple Syndication") feeds make it even easier to customize and organize information for your audiences.

But is RSS really a media relations tool? The short answer? Well...there is no short answer. But the possibilities are virtually unlimited for how blogs and RSS can influence the media. "RSS makes it possible for public relations agencies and corporate PR professionals to leverage the Net as their own custom electronic media distribution network," says **Eric Schwartzman** of LA-based **Schwartzman & Associates**. "RSS news feeds—which are essentially a form of XML for syndicating news and information online—are for PR the first practical solution for establishing and maintaining your own 24/7 network for the distribution of text, audio and video."

A recent seminar affirms this potential. "I actually ran a weeklong session on IAOC's (International Association of Online Communicator's) blog on this very topic," says **Robert Geller** of New York-based **Fusion PR**. "It was well attended by a variety of marketers, PR folks and journalists, who shared their thoughts."

In brief, here are some of the ideas that emerged:

- RSS can be used as a new channel of communications with the media to work alongside existing email and voice communications.
- RSS can be used to syndicate blog content. "We are helping clients launch their own blogs and to guest blog on others' sites, as well as [post] other content such as white papers, event alerts, case studies and, of course, press releases," Geller says.

- RSS can also be used to syndicate rich media content, such as podcasts [saveable video files].

"What is important is not only the mode of communications but the implications," Geller adds. "As Marshall McLuhan famously said, 'The medium is the message,' and it is hard to separate RSS from the blogging explosion."

Some agencies have clearly tapped into ways of using RSS for media relations success. "There are two key ways we use RSS to achieve media relations goals on behalf of our clients," says **Amanda Cote** of New York's **Chandler Chicco Agency**. "First, as information junkies, we can't consume media fast enough. RSS allows us to consume more news and blog commentary faster than we've ever been able to, so we can predict trends before they hit the mainstream. Since we can customize the frequency with which specific information comes to us based on our clients and media relationships, we always have our fingers on the pulse of the latest news," she explains.

"Second, as PR people, we recognize that no matter how strong our media relationships, we can't predict reporters' last-minute story ideas and inspirations so that we can encourage them to include our clients," she says. "For us, RSS offers the next best thing. It allows us to help journalists find our clients as their story ideas call for them, so we don't have to predict. By offering journalists RSS feeds of our clients' news, they can subscribe and search for relevant information as needed. It's a much better tool than simply sending emails and press releases, which often eventually get deleted."

Another example: "We also use the blogosphere to find out what reporters are writing about," offers **Rebecca Parkhurst** from Worcester, Mass.-based **PAN Communications**. "Recently, I was reading [*BusinessWeek* scribe] Stephen Baker's blog and he mentioned that he was going to write a story on mobile blogging and that he didn't know much about it. So I dropped him an email and offered him the opportunity to speak with our client, Lycos, to learn more about it. The article appeared in June and Lycos was the only vendor mentioned."

Her larger point: "PR professionals need to be using blogging and RSS to not only get their clients out there, but to know what is going on in your clients' industries before anyone else does."

In addition, the media are also embracing RSS technology—for both communicating with PR pros and for expanding readership. "Our magazine, *Pure Contemporary*, is a relatively new online magazine. We use RSS feeds to virally market ourselves—and our industry," says magazine publisher **Diane Burley**. "We focus on high-end contemporary and modern design, which is a slow-growing niche in the home furnishings, kitchen & bath industries."

"Our news site was constructed using blogging technology (TypePad; www.typepad.com) that has a built-in RSS feed," Burley continues. "We submitted this feed to many of the top news aggregation sites and, as a result, our site traffic and our page ranking has grown. This page ranking is important for our organic search initiatives—which in turn drives readers," she says. "The bottom line: In nine months since launching purecontemporary.com, the site has achieved more than 60,000 readers from all 50 states and more than 110 countries, a Google ranking of '5' and has over 4,000 sites linking to it—almost exclusively through Internet marketing, including RSS feeds." ★

PR STRATEGY

RSS Dissected: Leading Area Specialists Debunk Four Myths—and Explain How to Bypass Them

The explosion of new communications technologies like RSS is exciting for PR pros, but understandably a bit intimidating. However, there is no denying the impact that RSS is having on reaching key audience segments. "RSS is changing the psychology of the Web," says **Pete Blackshaw**, CMO of **Intelliseek**. "Companies are now thinking more critically about their websites, which have historically been impenetrably inflexible and rarely change content. Suddenly we're in this RSS world where there's a real urgency of keeping attention and sustaining the conversation. For example, if someone sets up an RSS link on Pampers.com, unless Pampers provides regularly freshened content about the brand, those consumers will never receive anything from the brand."

"I think RSS is beginning to cannibalize email because it's convenient and less intrusive," Blackshaw says. "Now brands must figure out how to feed consumers or bloggers useful, actionable content through this RSS

TERMINOLOGY

Syndication: The Real Technology of RSS

Web syndication works the same way as syndicated newspaper columns do, except THAT the medium is the Internet—content on one website is made available for other sites to use. This could be simply by licensing the content so other people can use it, but more commonly by making XML-based documents available from one site so other people can display an updating list of content from it. Although web syndication originated with news and blog sites, it is increasingly used to syndicate other types of information, including audio and video.

"I prefer the term 'syndication' over RSS, because RSS is just one form of this," says **David Berger**, employee strategy communications manager at **IBM**.

"Syndication is really the future here. Some of the technologies that acknowledge syndication will overwhelm blogs and other media because it is a transformative technology. Because of syndication, I'm able to get updates within 20 minutes and read and digest it all quickly. It's an unbelievable way of getting your content out there, and a great way to digest large volumes of content. It will get a lot bigger than it is today. For example, Internet Explorer 7 comes out with a built in aggregator. Right now, five-to-ten percent of Internet users get content via a syndicator. I think you'll see a starburst increase of that over the next 12 months."

"Search engines recognize RSS feeds, perhaps disproportionately," adds **Sally Falkow**, president of **Expansion Plus**. "When you take content from your site and get it out in an RSS feed, other people see it and other sites pick it up. 98 percent of journalists start with a search online when writing a story, and they'll likely see your news. You can get calls and pickup out of that."

"RSS lets everyone know about what you do the second you do it," adds **Pete Blackshaw**, CMO of **Intelliseek**. "This fact will elevate the importance of being agile and responsive, and the world will know every time you mess up. That's a new world, and as much as we want to glorify the benefits, there's also the [result] of everyone knowing instantly what you're doing—which will heighten the challenge for PR people. And it will get a lot more complicated."

mechanism. Everyone in PR should think about this because it's most urgent in the PR space. All external affairs offices should be RSS-based. It's not a difficult technology, but it is a psychological leap from what you've been doing in the past."

Here, leading pros and specialists in this field help to debunk some of the myths that surround RSS—and explain how and why you should join the revolution.

Myth #1: RSS can't be as easy as everyone says it is. "I try to simplify RSS for my clients," says **Bill Flitter**, CMO at **Pheedo**. "It's based on the XML format, which is the next generation of Internet language. It's easy to create an XML feed—sites like LockerGnome (www.lockergnome.com) really explain the process. It's easy to get started," he says.

"Then, there are specialty services like Newsletters By RSS (www.newslettersbyrss.com)," he continues. "Simply take your newsletter content and email it to them and they convert it to an XML feed, and you put that feed on your website. So anytime you update your newsletter, you include an email address that they provide and put it into your distribution list, and it updates the XML feed."

But what about the coding of content, which is required to turn static website text into dynamic Web info? "A lot of the blogging tools automatically [include] an RSS feed for the content you publish, so there's nothing you need to do," says Flitter. "But if you have a content management system, there is some RSS coding that needs to be done." Generally speaking, if you create a blog using online blogging tools, you can assume it comes with RSS built in. But if you're attempting to syndicate material that's on a static website, you'll need a tool that converts your content into syndicated content.

"One of those is PRESSfeed (www.press-feed.com), which was put together so PR departments can take control of their own material online," says **Sally Falkow**, president of **Expansion Plus** and PRESSfeed developer. "IT departments are often very busy and PR can be seen as an irritation. With [basic] RSS, you're putting content in the feed, but you still have to load it onto your site. With PRESSfeed, a PR person with virtually no technical skills can load the content into an RSS feed as well as her company site all at once, and then change or update it easily. You just put in your content, press 'Enter,' and it arrives on your site and goes into an RSS feed instantly."

"Another such tool is Feed For All (www.feedforall.com), a service you can subscribe to in order to convert content into feed," adds Flitter. "LockerGnome is a source for info, and Feed For All is a service that helps you convert." Overall, there are plenty of resources to guide you through the process.

Myth #2: RSS is still too new to have much impact. The fact is, news travels so fast online that this "newness" is a non-issue. "One of the biggest advantages of using RSS is that you get a much wider audience," says Falkow. "Audiences pick up these feeds and see your syndication. They may not even know your site exists, and you may not even know about this audience. They find your feed and publish your content. It's an instant awareness," she asserts.

"There's also a new layer of media called news mastering, which is really like a second layer of media," she adds. "Because there's so much info on the Net, it's hard to find everything about any particular topic. Some people write blogs or use aggregators and become newsmasters in a particular feed. These feeds gather all the content out there on the topic—including news stories, blog content, expert commentary and company announcements." Use news mastering to keep a comprehensive flow of info coming into your RSS feed about the industries and topics you follow closely.

Myth #3: RSS technology is replacing traditional pitching methods. Remember that RSS is essentially a subscription service. If the targets of your pitch haven't subscribed, they won't receive your news—so RSS should be rolled into traditional efforts, not supercede them. "Don't make a drastic switch, but you should definitely start including RSS," says Flitter.

Falkow concurs: "I wouldn't say not to put your press releases on the wire because [that method] reaches a different audience. You should do both." The searchability of RSS feeds is a great reason to use the technology—at least until some journalists opt in for your feeds. "For example, I had a client who loaded her content into an RSS and was later contacted by a journalist that she never planned to target," says Falkow. "The journalist went searching for info to get her story started and found my client's info on a feed on someone else's site. So you can be picked up by lots of other sites and you never know who's going to see it."

Myth #4: RSS puts your company in the spotlight. This myth is actually quite accurate—even more so than you might be comfortable with. That's why it's important to carefully set your outreach goals before blasting your info into cyberspace. "RSS is an important strategy for PR right now, but it's still a murky area. I wouldn't say stop your email pitching now because there are too many people who don't get it yet," says Falkow.

"There's a whole strategy that goes with it," she cautions. "For example, what are you doing with RSS? Who are you talking to? What do you want to say? I was speaking recently with the PR team at Yellowstone Park

and they have so much content they want to get out. But it first needs to be categorized. Also, you need to also have in the back of your mind [the knowledge that] search-engine-visibility strategy helps with brand recognition. The whole thing must be done with a complete strategy from the beginning. You can't just say, 'Oh well, we need an RSS feed.' Put some thought into it."

But with some planning and foresight, you'll be amazed with your expanded reach. "RSS is such an exciting thing, and it works so well," Falkow concludes. "It has brought so much traffic and visibility to my clients and I'm very excited about the future." ★

MEDIA STRATEGY

Get More Placements by Being More Media Responsive—Leading Pros Reveal Their Best Practices

As new technologies increase the demand for 24/7 news, journalists are under more pressure than ever to deliver on tight deadlines. This in turn puts pressure on PR pros to provide their own info quickly—or get left out. Some leading pros offer tips for making yours a more media-responsive organization:

1. Carve out a dedicated media relations team. "Whenever possible, it is important to have a dedicated media relations team whose primary day-to-day focus is satisfying the needs of the media," offers **Matt Batt**, media relations manager for Chicago-based **Tech Image, Ltd.** "For example, many agencies have the account manager both pitching the media and managing their client's expectations. At Tech Image we have two separate departments—one focusing on the needs of our clients and the other 100 percent dedicated to working with the media. This structural approach allows our account managers to be very client-focused, while the media relations managers concentrate on answering the immediate or future needs of the media."

2. Create media-group specialists. "In addition to having a dedicated media relations team, it is important that each member of this team be given a particular area of concentration," Batt continues. "For example, at Tech Image, each media relations manager has the responsibility for reviewing, researching and maintaining relationships with a particular media segment. While one manager's focus is exclusive to national media, another manager is focusing on a particular vertical within the trade media space. This way, we always have individuals monitoring important outlets and each manager can focus on establishing relationships with 30 journalists

instead of 300."

3. Have an 'always-on' back-up plan. "It's important for any media relations team to have a set back-up plan in the event that the media calls while you are away from your phone or desk," Batt says. "A cell phone is good, but it is better to have a back-up person at your office who is familiar with the situation, story or breaking news. This is absolutely necessary when we have breaking news for our clients—we make sure that our calls are forwarded to another media relations manager whenever we are away from our phones. One missed call could mean a missed story for time-sensitive media such as TV, radio and daily newspapers."

4. Send out pre-press release media advisories. "During our most recent national media campaign [for a sexual predator-movement monitoring device], which resulted in \$2.1 million worth of media coverage on all the national networks, the company was carefully instructed on how to handle the media's incoming calls," explains **Linda Spagnoli**, director of communications for Houston-based **SCAN USA**. "It made all the difference. The [resulting] story ran on national TV (three networks), as well as 60 CBS, 59 ABC and 45 NBC affiliates—and we're still counting. We were also covered by the Associated Press, which resulted in over 120 print placements and 10 live radio shows," she says. "My best media contacts were advised seven days before the 'official' press release went out. This gave them ample opportunity to develop story lines and get great b-roll footage in preparation for the release date."

5. When the press comes calling, give them your full attention. "Our staff was prepared," Spagnoli continues. "We discussed how to handle the media's incoming calls. First, the receptionist was specifically instructed to never ask a reporter to call back—if I was busy on another call, she was instructed to find out what he wanted to discuss (financial, technical, legislative, etc.) and direct the call to that executive."

On addition: "Our staff was also proactive—when the media calls started coming in at the rate of about ten per hour, everyone stepped in to make sure the media was handled professionally, courteously and, of course, in a timely manner," Spagnoli adds. "Phones were covered during lunch periods, making sure any media call was handled by a person, not a machine. When 'CBS Evening News' or 'Good Morning America' came calling, we all wished we were having better hair days, but we accommodated the media even though we were given short notice. And it paid off. We were featured on CBS, ABC and 'FOX News Live' two days in a row." ★

—Richard Carufel

