

RSS Feeds: Worth a Look

By Ruth S. Stevens

RSS feeds are not a new technology, but attorneys have been slow to embrace RSS as an important current awareness and marketing vehicle. This article examines the unique features of RSS feeds and reasons why attorneys should consider adopting this increasingly available method of receiving and sharing information.

Let's start by taking a look at what RSS feeds are and how they can be accessed. RSS is an acronym for "really simple syndication" or "rich site summary," a way of automatically collecting information of interest from Internet sources.¹ This is done via a "reader," which locates RSS feeds that are available on various sources of information, such as news sites, court and government sites, and blogs. Once a user subscribes to a feed, the RSS reader gathers new information from the source of the feed, as it is posted. The advantage to the RSS subscriber is that the feeds from different sites are collected in one place, instead of arriving as separate e-mails, clogging the user's e-mail inbox. The user simply opens the reader to view the information.

Readers are available through services like Yahoo and Google and also as separate, downloadable programs.² An advantage of standalone readers is that the information they collect can be read offline. The trend is for web browsers to incorporate RSS readers, and this feature is currently available through Firefox and later versions of Internet Explorer. Some mobile applications also provide readers.

Once an attorney has mastered the basics of signing up for a feed, there are many law-related RSS feeds to choose from.³ In October 2008, Findlaw.com added a feed that allows a subscriber to receive summaries of new opinions within hours of when they are issued.⁴ Users can choose between

receiving summaries of opinions by practice area, such as labor and employment or intellectual property, or by court. As of late 2008, the Findlaw opinion service covered the United States Supreme Court, all 13 Federal Courts of Appeal, and state court opinions from six states. Another option is to subscribe directly to feeds offered by courts, although these are not yet widely available.⁵

Other government information is also available through RSS feeds. Attorneys who practice in the area of products liability can subscribe directly to Consumer Products Safety Commission recall lists,⁶ while

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environmental law groups might be interested in feeds from the Environmental Protection Agency.⁷ The Michigan legislature also offers a subscription to a feed highlighting newly adopted legislation.⁸ Finding available government feeds is relatively easy, because both the United States government and the State of Michigan offer a list of feeds on their websites.⁹ Using these directories saves time that would otherwise be spent browsing individual agency sites looking for feeds.

Many other types of information are available through RSS. RSS is closely associated by many people with blogs, because so many legal and other types of blogs offer feeds. RSS feeds are also a popular way to access news. Individual newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Jour-*

nal provide feeds, as do news services such as CNN and Yahoo! News. The American Bar Association offers feeds on a number of topics, including law practice management.¹⁰

There are many ways to locate RSS feeds on legal topics. Attorneys looking for feeds on a particular subject can consult a directory of blogs, podcasts, and feeds, like www.blawg.com. The VirtualChase website also maintains a helpful annotated directory of RSS feeds relating to law.¹¹ Another way to find feeds on topics of interest is to use a site like LexMonitor,¹² which aggregates content from numerous blogs and other sources. The content on LexMonitor is organized by practice area, so an attorney can use the site to see what is available in different areas and then decide whether to access the information through LexMonitor or through individual feed subscriptions.

But are RSS feeds just one more source of information that will add to the virtual pile already sitting in our e-mail inboxes? The answer is "yes" and "no." There are currently thousands of feeds on legal topics, so an overenthusiastic subscriber can easily bury himself or herself in legal updates. As legal technology consultant Steve Matthews notes, "Taking too many feeds, or failing to filter those feeds, is a recipe for information overload."¹³ A few strategies can help the savvy attorney hone in on the material that is most relevant to his or her areas of practice and to realize the benefit of being on the cutting edge of current awareness technology.

Many sites offer feeds tailored to the interests of the user. As noted above, FindLaw offers subscriptions by practice area and by individual court. A subscription to court opinions can be limited to an individual circuit or an individual state. An advanced feature of some readers is a "rinse" or search feature. This feature automates a search in the feed results for certain terms specified by the

user. An attorney who wants to keep abreast of new developments relating to a specific client or a specific legal topic can use this to screen results. Some readers, like Google, also allow the user to designate certain folders into which feed results are loaded. This allows an attorney to group feeds on related topics into one folder, another timesaver.

Additionally, RSS feeds are not just a source of information; they also give an attorney or law firm a vehicle for communicating with clients or others. A firm can use a feed as a marketing tool on its website or on individual attorney blogs. This could allow the firm to reach a larger audience with its in-house publications, at no extra cost. Another possible use for a RSS feed is information sharing within a law firm. The same principles that apply to the sharing of external information also apply within the firm. Internal feeds can be set up to alert firm members to new library materials or to material added to the firm's intranet. In fact, some commentators see internal use as one of the most promising future applications for RSS feeds.¹⁴

While using RSS feeds may require a brave leap into a new technology, the rewards are many. When used correctly, RSS feeds can actually minimize the time and headache involved in keeping current with multiple types and sources of information. As the technology progresses, establishing and maintaining subscriptions to feeds is becoming easier and easier. We may all come to feel, as technology consultant Dennis Kennedy does, that, "The new material...I want to read, after I 'subscribe' to the RSS feed, is available to me in one place at my fingertips. That's magical."¹⁵ ■



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FOOTNOTES

1. For a good overview of RSS feeds, see Mighell & Kennedy, *RSS Resources You Can Use: Automated Web Surfing for Lawyers*, ABA Law Practice Today (November 2006), available at <<http://www.abanet.org/lpm/lpt/articles/slc11061.shtml>> and Shuscha, *RSS: Making the Internet Subscribeable*, 79 Wisconsin Lawyer (August 2006), available at <<http://www.wisbar.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=59688>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed December 24, 2008.
2. For a list of available readers, see RSS Specifications, *Selecting a News Aggregator* <<http://www.rss-specifications.com/selecting-a-news-aggregator.htm>>.
3. For a list of recommended RSS feeds for lawyers, see FeedForAll, *Lawyers Use RSS Feeds* <<http://www.feedforall.com/lawyers-use-rss-feeds.htm>>.
4. Findlaw for Legal Professionals, *Findlaw RSS Feeds* <<http://findlaw.com/rss-index/>>.
5. See, e.g., *US 7th Judicial Circuit—New Opinions* <http://www.ca7.uscourts.gov/fdocs/docs.fwx?submit=rss_ops>.
6. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission—Recent Recalls and Product Safety News <<http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/prereel/prerel.xml>>.
7. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *News Feeds* <<http://www.epa.gov/newsroom/rssfeeds.htm>>.
8. Michigan Legislature Bill Updates <<http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/publications/RssFeeds/billupdate.xml>>.
9. See USA.gov, *US Government RSS Library* <http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/Libraries/RSS_Library.shtml> and Michigan.gov, *Michigan.Gov List of Available Feeds for SOM* <<http://www.michigan.gov/som/0,1607,7-192--RA,00.html>>.
10. See, e.g., Law Practice Today <<http://feeds.feedburner.com/LawPracticeToday>>.
11. The Virtual Chase, *RSS News Feeds for Law* <http://www.virtualchase.com/topics/rss_law.shtml>.
12. LexMonitor <<http://www.lexmonitor.com>>.
13. See posting of Steve Matthew to Slaw.ca <<http://www.slaw.ca/2007/03/02/rss-and-lawyers-whats-real-and-whats-not/>> (March 2, 2007, 17:49 EST).
14. Matthews, *Top 10 Uses for RSS in Law Firms* (September 26, 2006) <<http://vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com/2006/09/top-10-uses-for-rss-in-law-firms.html>>.
15. Kennedy, *Explaining Blogs and RSS: A Primer* (September 26, 2006) <http://www.denniskennedy.com/blog/2006/09/explaining_blogs_and_rss_a_primer.html>.