

Syndicate Your Site with RSS

RSS may just be the Next Big Thing on the Internet. RSS, or *Really Simple Syndication*, provides a way for your web site to share headlines and other content with clients, staff, the public, and even related web sites. If your web site changes frequently, RSS is a great way to manage the changes. Or perhaps you want it to change more often, to keep visitors coming back!

What Is RSS?

RSS is a web content syndication format based on XML (we discussed the XML data language in our Q2, 2003 issue). Since RSS is a universal format, any web site can publish an RSS "news feed," and any RSS reader can display headlines and articles from any RSS-enabled web site. Users run RSS software which alerts them automatically when a new article is posted online. Sometimes other web sites can draw upon RSS feeds, such as the ABC News headlines displayed and updated automatically on ITS StartCenter. In this fashion articles from your web site might be posted automatically on other web sites all around the world! Web sites can even have more than one RSS feed, for different topics. RSS commonly appears on news and "blog" web sites that are frequently updated, such as the New York Times, MSNBC, ABC News, and the Wall Street Journal.

Setting Up RSS

RSS works best if articles - or at least the headline and a summary - are stored in a database online. The RSS feed can query the database and

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Case Study: Redesign of TeamITS.com

This month marks the first redesign of our TeamITS.com web site in several years. We at ITS thought we would walk through the anatomy of redesigning a relatively large web site sporting over 1,000 pages.

Any well designed project begins by identifying its goals. Besides a new "look," we wanted to:

- ◆ improve navigation
- ◆ leverage new web standards
- ◆ maintain current page rankings on search engines
- ◆ maintain the fast speed of the site

Improve Navigation

First, we divided our site into six main sections, providing users easier access to the information for which they are looking. While the same information largely still exists on the site, we believe the structure is more intuitive.

Earlier iterations of TeamITS.com had a relatively standard layout with a left-hand menu. Valid points exist on both sides of the "left-hand menu" vs. the "top navigation bar" argument. The main concern over using a vertical menu is the horizontal space it takes up - not only on smaller screens but on the printed page as well. Many sites get around this by having a "view printable page" button; ours put the menu in a separate "frame" - a different browser window pane, if you will. However the main drawback of using frames is the relative difficulty of bookmarking a specific page, since users often manage to bookmark the outside frameset page instead of the page which they are viewing.

For our new site, ITS decided to change to a "top" navigation system to eliminate frames. Instead users see a constant "header" navigation bar that changes to indicate their current

location on the site. This also provides a "where am I?" comfort zone...known by the technical term of "breadcrumbs."

One advantage of a vertical menu is that it is easy to add choices...a web page is infinitely high since it can scroll, but users strongly dislike scrolling horizontally to read text because the navigation bar has too many items on it. By now everyone has printed a web page from Internet Explorer that cut off the right side of the page. Our solution to this? Within each main category a secondary navigation bar appears, showing the user the content available within that area of the site. We felt this maintained the navigation metaphor and provided a consistent way for users to know where they were on the site.

Moving the site navigation to the top of the page also let us add more content horizontally on each page.

Leverage New Standards

The major web browsers finally feature decent support for "new" web standards such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). The main purpose of CSS is to separate the content of a site from its formatting. You may recall our "Writing With Styles" article that described using styles in Microsoft Word, and how changing the *Heading1* style would change the font of all the headings in a document. CSS takes that a step further: formatting for all pages on a site resides in separate style sheets. The result? We can change the font on every single web page on our site in a few *seconds*, by changing one style.

CSS also has the benefit of "degrading" gracefully so that users with older browsers should still be able to access the site content, even if it may not "look right" in their browser. Fortunately our web server logs show

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that only 2% or less of visitors to our site use older browsers, so that was not a big concern.

ITS also wanted to improve electronic communications with clients, so we created a RSS feed for the "What's New in IT" section of our site. Clients can now automatically receive headlines and summaries of updated content as we post it to our site, such as security warnings, tips, newsletter articles, IT news, and more. For details on how to use this feature, see the accompanying article, "Syndicate Your Site with RSS."

Search Engines

Fortunately, our site tends to rank fairly highly on search engines. We tend to receive a lot of traffic based on our newsletter archive and other sections of our site. It would not do to rename or move many pages on the site if it meant visitors would receive "page not found" errors until they fixed their bookmarks or the search engines reindexed our site. So we decided to try to maintain the current filenames and directory structure as much as possible. Further, as many of our pages as possible use the *description* and *keywords* meta tags to allow search engines to accurately summarize each page.

Speed

Despite some appearances to the contrary, our site is not very image-heavy. Even the navigation bars are mostly text, not images! While lots of images make pages look nice, they also tend to slow down a site. We have all visited sites that are relatively slow on broadband...think how much slower they would be on dialup! Though diminishing in number, a large number of computer users in the US still use dialup modems to access the Internet. Having a fast web server in a high end data center helps, too.

Conclusion

It's a lot of work redesigning a site this size, but we feel the effort was worth it. If you have not browsed our site lately, please do - we would love to hear your opinions on our new design!

Trends

Windows 64-bit Editions Released

In April, Microsoft announced Windows XP x64 Edition (XP64) and its counterpart for Windows Server 2003. Designed for AMD Athlon64 CPUs and Intel CPUs with Athlon64-compatible Extended Memory 64 Technology (EM64T), these 64-bit software upgrades promise a speed boost for CPU-intensive applications and memory-hungry server programs. However even though Microsoft is giving away Windows XP x64 as a free upgrade for computers with Windows XP Professional, most users should hold off upgrading for a while.

For one thing, XP64 will not run *any* 32-bit device drivers or low-level utilities such as antivirus and third-party firewall programs. It will not run older 16-bit Windows or DOS programs. Also the "upgrade" will only install on a blank hard drive. Microsoft itself admits that only users that are "pushing the boundaries" of 32-bit Windows versions

will benefit from upgrading.

The benefits? A 32-bit CPU is limited to 4 GB of memory; XP64 is currently limited to 16 TB (terabytes) of addressable memory and 128 GB of RAM, with room to grow one million times more than that amount. Applications compiled as 64-bit programs can move more data around with each instruction. The result is that server applications and programs such as 3D games, video editing, and the like will tend to see a speed increase.

By and large Windows XP x64 Edition will look and behave very similarly to Windows XP with Service Pack 2. However, users should make sure all their current programs and hardware is supported before trying to upgrade.

As we went to press, Microsoft confirmed they intend to release a 64-bit version of Office 12 (the successor to Office 2003) "sometime after" the 32-bit version is released in 2006.

Humor

Software Metrics

by Patti Beadles

The software community has been placing a great deal of emphasis lately on metrics and their use in software development. The following metrics are probably among the most valuable for a software project:

The Pizza Metric. *How:* Count the number of pizza boxes in the lab. *What:* Measures schedule underestimation. If people are spending enough after-hours time working on the project that meals need to be delivered to the office, then there has obviously been a misestimation somewhere.

The Aspirin Metric. *How:* Maintain a centrally-located aspirin bottle for use by the team. At the end of each month, count the number of aspirin remaining in the bottle. *What:* Measures stress suffered by the team during the project.

This most likely indicates poor project design in the early phases, which causes over-expenditure of effort later on. In the early phases, high aspirin usage probably indicates the product's goals were poorly defined.

The "Duck!" Metric. *How:* Count the number of engineers that leave the room when a marketing person enters. Only valid after a requirements document has been finalized. *What:* Measures the completeness of the initial requirements. If too many requirements changes are made after the design phase, the engineering team will avoid marketing, for fear of receiving yet another change to a design which met all initial specifications.

Read about more metrics online at teamITS.com/connection!

Tips

Using Mozilla Firefox

The Firefox web browser has been downloaded over 50 million times in the past six months, according to The Mozilla Organization. This follow-on to the Mozilla Suite browser (itself a follow-on to Netscape Navigator) has proven itself extremely popular as an alternative to Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Here are some tips to get the most out of Firefox.

Tabbed Browsing. One of the main features, tabbed browsing lets one open new pages, sites, and windows within the same Firefox window. This prevents the multitude of browser window icons from taking up space in the taskbar at the bottom of the screen and makes switching between pages easier. Right click or CTRL+click to open a link in a new window. If the tab bar is visible one can also drag a link onto a tab or an empty space on the bar. All open tabs can be bookmarked together in a folder, and can all be opened at once into

separate tabs.

Shrink-To-Fit Printing. Ever print a web page that had its right side cut off? By default Firefox shrinks the width of a printed page to avoid this. Use Print Preview to manually set a width.

Extensions. Mozilla sponsors hundreds of free extensions to Firefox, which you can find via the *Tools/Extensions* dialog. Extensions are even rated by users. Examples include the excellent "Tabbrowser Preferences" and "Web Developer" extensions as well as RSS readers (see accompanying article).

Updates. Firefox will check for updates to itself and display a red up-arrow in its menu bar when an update is available (1.0.4 is the current version as of this writing). Firefox will also check for updates to your installed extensions automatically if that option is checked in *Tools/Options/Advanced*.

Download Firefox. Firefox can be downloaded via teamITS.com/start/.

Q & A

Why can't I send e-mail using Outlook Express? Why do messages get stuck in my Outbox?

Microsoft's Outlook Express e-mail client seems to have trouble if a user's e-mail folders grow too big. When this occurs, common symptoms include messages that do not leave the Outbox (if the Sent Items folder is full), not being able to download messages (if the Inbox is full), or inability to see all the messages in a folder.

In our experience, problems begin not at a specific number of messages but rather when a folder grows to approximately 250-300 MB in size. Users saving a lot of HTML e-mail and attachments will reach this size sooner than users with mostly plain text e-mail. Unfortunately it is not very easy to determine the size of a folder, so we generally advise users to keep mail folders under 2,500-4,000 messages by

emptying Deleted Items, creating annual "Sent Items" and "Inbox" folders if necessary, and using the *File/Folder/Compact All Folders* command to shrink and reindex their mail folders.

Note Microsoft Outlook does not have this problem, however it has a related one. Outlook stores all its data in one .PST file. If this file grows to reach 2GB, Outlook can no longer write to the file. The only recourse is to truncate the file to less than 2 GB in size (losing data in the process) and then archive some of the messages. Users with Outlook can select the File/Data File Management menu item, select the Personal Folders line, and click "Settings" to see a Compact Now button. One must search the hard drive for "*.PST" to find the true size of the .PST file (make sure to click "More advanced options" and "Search hidden files and folders," or else Windows will not find the file).

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automatically pick up the latest headlines, which it then converts into XML code. The staff merely adds the new information into the database, and the new headline is automatically distributed to all subscribers. Adding articles can be accomplished through the use of online forms so data can be entered from a web browser, to speed the process.

Using RSS

So how does one "subscribe" to an RSS feed? By using *reader* or *news aggregator* software. Many types of software exist, from web-based programs to programs that run on your desktop, to plugins that run inside your web browser. Most are free. The web-based readers and most programs also compile lists of RSS feeds to make it easy to pick and search for interesting content. Even large Internet companies like Yahoo! provide RSS reader software to attract members to their free My Yahoo! service by allowing RSS feeds to display on a personalized home page. See the "What's New In IT" section of TeamITS.com for links to several popular readers, and our RSS feed.

A web site that publishes headlines using RSS will typically display an orange "XML" or "RSS" graphic...more than one if several *channels* (e.g., topics, or columns) are published. This image links directly to the RSS code, so users can copy the feed's address into their favorite RSS reader by right clicking it and choosing "Copy Shortcut" or "Copy Link Location" and pasting the link into their reader. RSS readers often have a "Feed" or "Add Feed" button, or a File/New menu item, to start the process of adding a new feed.

After that, depending on the software used, headlines might scroll across the bottom of the screen, show up automatically in the RSS reader, or display when a channel is selected. Users can then click on the headline to open the full story on the host web site.

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