

■ KENNETH E. KENDALL, Feature Editor, School of Business-Camden, Rutgers University

I decided to write this month's column about a technology I use to simplify my life. As you might know, I am a technology buff who turns part of my life over to technologies such as TiVo, Palms and Palm Treos, and now RSS Readers. I don't have enough time to read or see everything I want, so it helps to deploy technologies that go out and fetch content for me, filter the content so I read what I think is important, and which then go back and find more information for me the next day. Not everyone will embrace this technology, but take a look—you might be pleasantly surprised.

RSS Readers: Push Technologies Rise Again

by Kenneth E. Kendall, Rutgers University



Kenneth E. Kendall

is a professor of e-commerce and information technology in the School of Business-Camden, Rutgers University. He is one of the founders of the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) and a

Fellow of the Decision Sciences Institute. Dr. Kendall has been named as one of the top 60 most productive MIS researchers in the world, and he was awarded the Silver Core from IFIP. He recently co-authored a text, Systems Analysis and Design (6th ed.), published by Prentice Hall and Project Planning and Requirements Analysis for IT Systems Development. He edited Emerging Information Technologies: Improving Decisions, Cooperation, and Infrastructure for Sage Publications. Dr. Kendall has had his research published in MIS Quarterly, Management Science, Operations Research, Decision Sciences, Information & Management, and many other journals. Dr. Kendall is the past chair of IFIP Working Group 8.2 and served as a vice president for the Decision Sciences Institute and as an associate editor for many journals including Decision Sciences. Ken is currently a member of the review board of DSJIE.

Kenneth E. Kendall

*School of Business-Camden
Rutgers University
Camden, NJ 08102
(856) 225-6586
fax: (856) 424-6157
ken@thekendalls.org
<http://www.thekendalls.org>*

In 1997, push technologies were proclaimed dead. They seemed like a great idea at the time, but no one used them. Writers were quick to proclaim "push is dead" (Pflug, 1997). Some said that there was a lack of quality content (Bing, 1997), while others said there was already too much, that push providers needed to realize that "less is more" (Cronin, 1997). Others pointed out that the news offered was just a repackaging of links that were already there (Poynder, 1997). Still another researcher proclaimed, "Unfortunately, webcasting as Apple has practiced it has become little more than 'Webcasting as Infomercial,' in which they take every opportunity to push their own software and hardware at the expense of the subject of the webcast itself" (Johnson, 1997.) For an elaboration and classification of push technologies, their development, and use, see Kendall and Kendall (1999).

Push Technologies: More than just Webcasting

What exactly are push technologies? In one sense they are software products that send information to customers, much in the same way we receive content on television or the radio.

In fact, the most basic form of push technology is Webcasting, which includes live streaming and event repro-

duction. It also includes delivery of content from electronic news services. I remember watching the first college football game ever broadcast over the Internet. It was a game between Nebraska and Fresno State. Nebraska was chosen because it had a fabulous team that year (Go Big Red!). Fresno State, if you haven't figured it out yet, was chosen because they are close to Silicon Valley where the infrastructure is located.

I tried three delivery systems that day: RealPlayer, Apple QuickTime, and Microsoft Media Player. Microsoft's product delivered the best streaming video. Still, there was no companion product that tracked progress on the field, statistics, or even the score itself (which appeared extremely tiny on the miniature screen).

I guess the experiment wasn't that successful. We haven't been offered another game yet.

In addition to Webcasting, the term *push technologies* means delivering content in text and graphics. I remember using a great service called Pointcast. Pointcast delivered news, weather, sports, and business to my desktop. I would open a folder and skim through the stories. The only problem was that I had dial-up service and it took 20 minutes to download the content. We all knew that wasn't going to last.

Pointcast later developed a small toolbar that could be added to a browser to get stock quotes, news, and other information. The problem was that so many other companies tried the same approach. I liked the toolbar from *The New York Times*, but I tend not to appreciate distracting things crawling across my screen when I work, so that tool bar didn't last long either.

Those Orange Buttons

If you haven't noticed, a lot of orange buttons are beginning to appear on the Web pages you visit. These buttons or icons, marked RSS or sometimes XML, indicate that you can subscribe to a new type of push technology. RSS stands for

Really Simple Syndication, and it is an XML-based tool and standard that providers can use to deliver content. (Actually, the concept came along in the late 1990s just when all of the authors cited earlier in this article were writing that push was dead.) What RSS does is help the provider package the information along with the date, title, and link so it can be easily and quickly (now at rapid, broadband speeds) to your desktop. Once it arrives, you can read it with an RSS reader.

The approach calls for some cooperation from the push providers. They need to develop feeds (also called channels) that are used for syndication. This is important because each of us wants

the opportunity to specifically choose the channels we want to watch.

I won't get into the details here, but there actually is more than one standard. Those of us who lived through the VHS versus Betamax controversy (and who will hopefully survive the Blu-ray® vs. Dual-layer controversy) will appreciate that Google tried to divide the world with a competitive standard called Atom. But don't panic yet. At this time, we have readers that read both RSS and Atom feeds.

RSS readers allow you to keep abreast of a specific topic. While it is true that you can get news and financial quotes easily, you can keep up with sales on e-bay or Amazon.com. You can

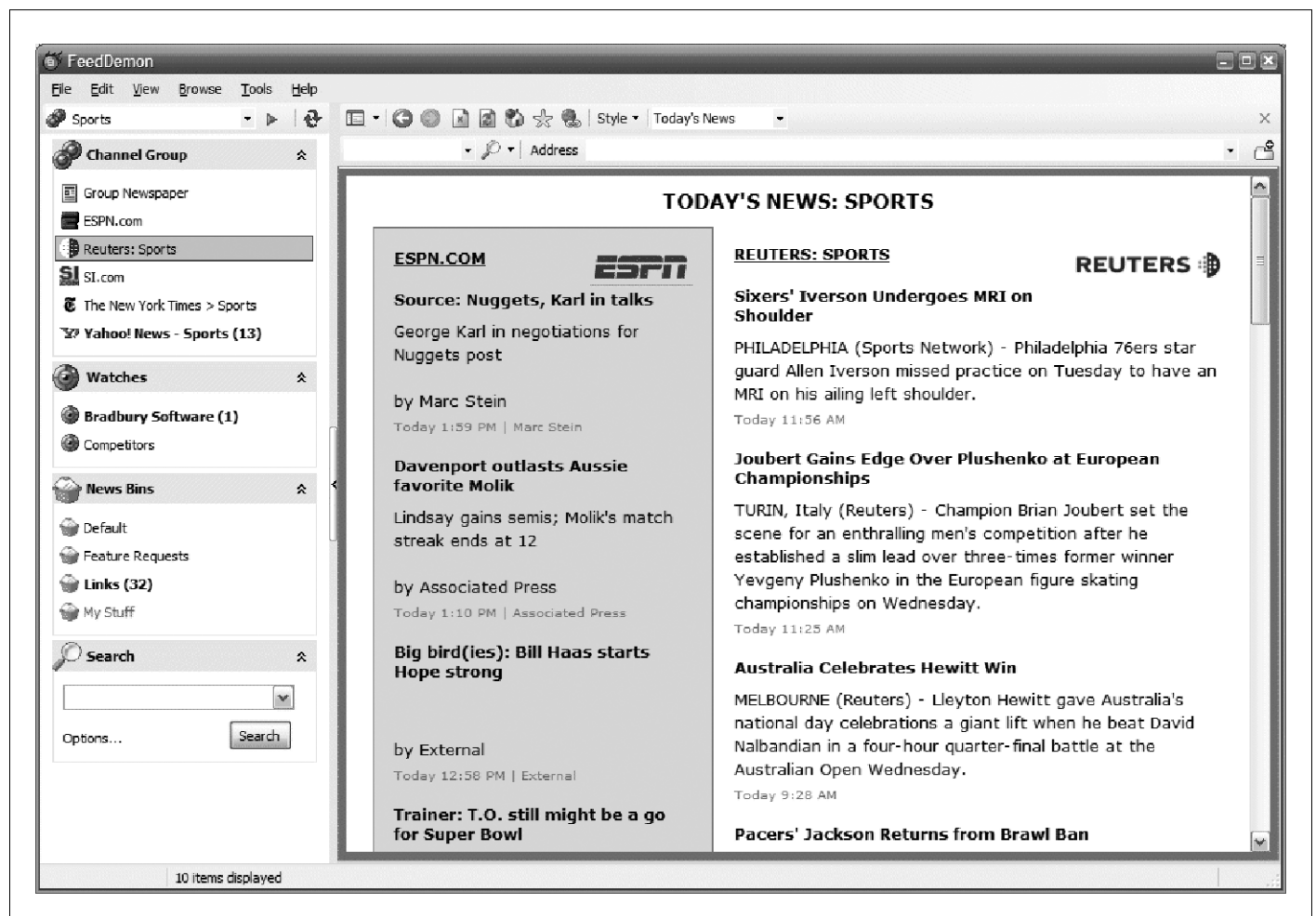


Figure 1: A screenshot from FeedDEMON showing titles and abstracts of news articles. The full stories are available by clicking the links. [FeedDEMON screenshot courtesy of FeedDEMON (www.feedException.com)]

also search for specific material. A sample screen from a product called FeedDEMON is shown in Figure 1. You can see that it is easy to select and read stories that have been collected by the RSS reader.

As a Palm enthusiast, I use an RSS reader to search for new products, software, and reviews for my Palm Treo 650. I also use it to keep track of reviews of plays, musicals, and comedies, as well as the Broadway and Off-Broadway theatre business (you'll see the results in some of my upcoming research publications).

Start Using an RSS Reader Now

So how do you get started with RSS? Here's how to begin getting the content you want in five easy steps:

1. Get an RSS reader. The good news is that some are free. Here is a list of good RSS readers in alphabetical order:

Bloglines
BottomFeeder
FeedDEMON
FeedReader
Feedster
Fyuse.com
MY MSN
NewsIsFree
NEWSMONSTER
Pluck
RSSBANDIT
SHARPREADER
MY YAHOO!

I should mention that the capitalization has nothing to do with the quality of the reader. Nor does it imply that the news you read will be in UPPER CASE LETTERS only. It is just a fad. Suffice it to say that one reader capitalized its name and the others followed.

There are two types of readers: 1) a standalone reader, and 2) a reader that integrates with your browser. The main difference is that the standalone reader is invoked any time you want, and only when you want. The integrated reader (also called a plug-in) is there when-

ever you open your browser. The standalone reader I use the most is FeedDEMON (\$29.95 US). The integrated RSS reader I use a lot is Pluck, which has the advantage of permitting you to sign in and receive your blogs and news at several different locations. The downside is that it takes up space in my browser window until I conceal it. I also worry I have too many tasks open already!

Any reader should have the following features:

- Pre-selected **popular feeds**, so you can start using it right away if you are trying it for the first time.
- Alerts or watches.
- A news bin or location to store your favorites.
- A way to search for channels.
- Capability to read and synchronize blogs.

2. Install your RSS reader. Download and install the products just as you would any other software.

3. Add channels or feeds. Your reader will come with a set of popular channels and top newspapers, but you will undoubtedly want to add your own.

4. Customize the information you receive. If you search for information about RSS feeds for Palm computing, you'll get a number of different feeds. You'll need to decide which ones to subscribe to (so far, subscriptions are free). If you want to limit your search, you can indicate Treo650 and your life will be even simpler.

5. Remember to prune your feeds. I'm not going to be carrying a Treo650 forever, so someday I'll want to stop receiving information about that particular model. You will want to eliminate the channels you don't read.

DSI and RSS Readers

Wouldn't you like to receive information about DSI conferences, journals, and other news about DSI just by selecting the "DSI Channel?" As readers become increasingly popular and more sophisticated, we can easily start broad-

casting our own DSI feed. Remember that organizational emails often get trapped by spam filters, but stories that are delivered by push technologies are those on channels you've selected to receive. They will be there for you to read, whenever you want.

You'll know when the reviews from the conference are in and whether your paper is accepted faster than ever before. You'll see what articles will be coming out in our two premier journals, and you'll get your copy of *Decision Line* as soon as it is finalized. In addition, you'll be able to join communities that publish similar research and share papers, bibliographies, and events. Furthermore, RSS is now available in a very limited way on your home television through TiVo® service, so you might be reading one of my future columns on your TV some day.

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