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Why you need an RSS feed reader

Whenever my colleagues approach me for advice about setting up a blog, the first thing I do is ask them which RSS feed readers they use.

Most of the time I'm met with a blank look, which never ceases to amaze me given how long feed readers have been around.

Using an RSS feed reader is such an important step to take, and since I continue to be met with puzzled expressions whenever I broach the subject, I figured it is high time I explained the concept more fully.

An RSS feed is a summary of website content that can be found on most news websites and blogs. An RSS feed reader is a web-based application that allows you to subscribe to the RSS feed of various websites, then aggregates the multiple feeds, allowing you to read them at a single location.

Feed readers are important because they simplify your life and bring information relevant to your areas of practice and interests directly to you. Instead of having to check in daily at different websites, such as the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal Law blog, those sites' newly created content automatically appears in your feed reader.

The first step is to sign up for an RSS feed reader. Feedly (www.feedly.com) is my RSS reader of choice because it allows you to view the feeds in a magazine-like format and also offers a number of other features — which I'll address in a future column.

Google Reader (www.google.com/reader) and Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) also are good alternatives.

Once you've set up an RSS feed reader account, the next step is to add content. Subscribe to feeds from websites that interest you, including feeds from news websites like the New York Times or CNN.com, feeds from blogs that you enjoy reading and Google news alerts you've set up (a process I describe later). By doing so, you will be notified instantly when new content is created or when news breaks that may affect your cases.

You can locate blogs that interest you by searching for relevant terms at Google blog search (www.blogsearch.google.com) or reviewing the categories at law blog directories, such as Justia's

blawg directory (<http://blawgsearch.justia.com>), the American Bar Association's Blawg Directory (www.abajournal.com/blawgs/) or U.S. Law's directory (www.uslaw.com/law_blogs).

Once you've located blogs you enjoy, you can subscribe to the feed by clicking on the icons located somewhere on the website or by clicking on a "subscribe" bookmark installed via your RSS feed reader located in your browser's tool bar. Once you've subscribed to the blogs you would like to follow, new posts from those blogs will appear in your feed reader automatically whenever you log in.

The same process can be followed to subscribe to any news site feed, such as CNN.com.

Another way to obtain information to support your practice is to subscribe to Google searches for terms relevant to your practice. Once a Google alert is created, Google will automatically search for news stories that contain the terms you've identified. You then can subscribe to an RSS feed of the search and will be notified of new results in your RSS feed reader.

To do this, go to Google News (<http://news.google.com/>) and type in the search terms. At the very bottom of the page, click on the orange "RSS" button. You will be guided through the process of adding the news search to your RSS feed reader. Once you have subscribed to a search successfully, all news items that include your search terms will appear in your RSS feed reader automatically.

It doesn't take much time to set up an RSS feed reader and subscribe to the feeds of websites that interest you, and it's well worth the effort. An RSS feed reader is an invaluable tool that simplifies your online life and offers just one more way to stay up to date about the most recent news in your areas of practice.

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