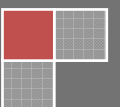


# Modular Media Technologies:

**RSS, WIDGETS, OR VORTEXES: WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOUR BRAND?**

A guide to evaluate the importance of having a modular content strategy for a brand, and a tool to evaluate leading modular content platforms like widgets, RSS, and Vortexes.

The Real Time Matrix Corporation  
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## INTRODUCTION

This whitepaper is intended for the marketing or advertising professional who has heard about “modular media technologies” (e.g., widgets, RSS, and Vortexes) and wants to learn more about how they can be effectively deployed in a strategic marketing program. After reading the white paper, you will have a solid understanding of the consumer trends behind Web content portability, the benefits and drawbacks of various portable Web technologies, and the knowledge foundation for developing a strategic approach to pursuing Web content portability for your brand.

## THE MODULAR MEDIA PHENOMENON

Perhaps the largest and most significant digital trend today is the phenomenon of modular personal content. It is absolutely the critical underpinning of the biggest news in the digital space. Consider:

- **The key 2.0 platforms are built on the appeal of modular personal content (blogging, user generated video (UGC video), social networking, microblogging, and photo sharing.)**
- **Personal homepages like My Yahoo! and iGoogle are fast becoming the preferred starting point for users to access the web. Said Marissa Mayer, VP of Search Product and User Experience at Google, “The Google personal homepage is the fastest growing Google product. This market is going to be very large.”**
- **7 of the top 10 largest sites are either totally reliant on modular personal content for their success (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube) or have modular personal content as a lynchpin of their future business strategies (Google, Yahoo!, Windows Live, and MSN.)**
- **All of the leading Internet players (Microsoft, Apple, Yahoo!, Google) are committed to developing new and more powerful uses of modular personal content.**

All of these initiatives have resulted in an explosion of new “lean forward” web real estate. Consumers are demonstrating a deep preference for this type of content, as is evidenced by the tremendous amount of time they spend in places like personal pages and social networks. The challenge for marketers, however, is that the consumer is truly in control of what he sees in these environments. Getting a place at this personal content table requires a brand to truly add value to consumer experience.

About six months ago, the widget really grew to be touted as a ready solution for marketers to capitalize on this phenomenon. By giving consumers a way to make some types of web content portable, it was believed that widgets had the power to transform consumer behavior, and with it consumer marketing.

No one disputes that widgets have had enormous impact. With household penetration of widgets over 50%, it is clear that consumers are integrating these units into their daily lives.

But it is also clear that widgets are only a part of the modular content opportunity. The category of widgets includes many “content light” offerings that can make the genre seem toy-like. Toys are great for some things, but for many purposes consumers demand high quality experiences that can’t be delivered by admittedly popular items like the Fun Wall Facebook widget-application.

RSS feeds and readers are another form of modular personal content. As is Real Time Matrix’s Vortex™, a modular communications platform that brands and publishers can use to deliver real time content to consumers that helps build brands through deep engagement. What widgets and RSS and Vortexes do is different, but they each help to deliver on what consumers want and expect: high quality content on their terms.

In this new era, consumers have ultimate control over the modules of content they select, so brands need to create modular experience that they will welcome. And brand marketers need to ensure that the modular content brand experiences they develop deliver the sort of high quality impression needed to further their objectives. The user interface of their modular units, coupled with the overall experience provided needs to be rich, satisfying, and inviting. Far too often, options in the widget space have been more like flash-in-the-pan gadgets than deep brand experiences.

So widgets, RSS, and Vortexes offer different “flavors” of modular content and have different purposes and strengths. If you’ve decided that modular content is a priority for your brand (as it clearly should be) you also need to pick the right platform from among these three. This white paper is intended to help you do just that.

## Strategic Considerations

The first thing to consider when creating a strategy for the modular media space is to determine what sort of “home grown” content your brand can leverage in its effort to connect with consumers.

- **Does your brand have content that consumers will find interesting and compelling enough to want to receive on a regular basis?**
- **Will a significant percentage of your target care enough about the content to want it ported to them constantly?**

If yours is a lifestyle brand with significant multimedia content, high profile/high appeal sponsorships, or is chosen with a high involvement decision-making process, there are many options to providing modular media to your consumers. For example, an alcohol beverage with broad appeal TV advertising and sports sponsorships of basketball, auto racing and football would have an easy time deploying a modular media application with strong consumer appeal. Such a unit might show advertising, feature real-time sports scores, and offer video highlights within a well-branded environment. Using modular media as a platform, such a brand could stay top-of-mind and develop strong associations with user passions. Further, it could make the most of its marketing assets and sponsorships because more people would see them, more often. In effect, brand content would find the user instead of the user being expected to find the content.

This model works even better for publisher brands. A lifestyle content site could provide a steady stream of text, photos, even video to consumers through modular media. Messages could reach more consumers more often, and have a significant positive impact on ad views and revenue.

But lots of brands don't have such an arsenal of assets to leverage. Many brands may make two or one or even no video messages (like commercials) in a year. While new product news might also provide a consumer draw, the dynamics of many categories may mean that there is relatively little product news available. Many brands may also lack marketing resources to create and manage a steady stream of high-value consumer content.

For example, a cosmetics brand that makes only two commercials annually and has just one major new product initiative a year would have difficulty creating a compelling modular unit purely with its own content. Millions of “beauty-involved” women might sign up for an offering from that company, but with so little new content available over time, most of these consumers would likely become disenchanted very quickly.

While what we have defined here is an extreme example, the general concept is one that is all-too-familiar for many brand marketers that rushed into the widget space; their modular media applications may have had little consumer uptake or short shelf life because they could not meet consumer expectations for new and interesting content on an ongoing basis.

This is an extremely unfortunate phenomenon because such brands may have highly passionate consumers -- people who want to know more about the brand and the category -- but the marketers may see no workable modular media options to leverage this consumer passion in service of their brands.

Real Time Matrix introduced Vortex to maximize the opportunity for brands in both situations. For lifestyle brands and publishers with lots of multimedia content, the Vortex offers a 100% customizable unit with high production values and the versatility to offer video, audio and text seamlessly. It provides a high-quality environment for both lifestyle and publisher brands to feature the best of what they offer.

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*Vortex provides a high-quality environment for both lifestyle and publisher brands to feature the best of what they offer.*

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But importantly, Vortex also has value for brands with minimal content assets of their own. With Vortex, the marketer is not limited to his own content to populate his widget with category- and brand-relevant information. Brands and consumers can define the passion areas which interest them and Vortex will scour the entire Web looking for information on those passions.

Let's return to the example of a cosmetics company with few assets of its own. Using Vortex, they could offer a steady stream of content about beauty, fashion, models and modeling -- really about anything that they believe would enhance their own brands -- and capture the attention and passion of their target consumers.

Such a Vortex might feature the advertising of the cosmetics company, but could also offer links to the latest web pages, blogs, podcasts and videos from Paris runways, footage from behind the scenes of Hollywood movies, or content from the website of the latest beauty-themed reality television program. The Vortex would link the brand to all of this high-value, high impact content.

## Other Critical Issues

There are several other issues to consider when making the decision on which modular media platform to deploy in service of your brand:

### Control

Just as it is imperative to ensure that your advertising, packaging collateral etc. accurately reflect your brand's visual language and messaging, your widget should also offer a physical appearance that is brand enhancing. Unfortunately many of the consumer widgets that are currently available are rather unattractive and would seem to violate the brand standards of the companies that commission them.

An additional control issue is being able to ensure that your application does not accidentally feature content that your consumers may find objectionable, or that you may find detrimental to the brand. A strong platform should

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give you just as much power over what not to feature as it does in defining what you want featured.

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Finally, many brands are concerned that their unit might be featured in untoward areas of the Web. Websites with objectionable language and erotic content, for example, are generally not the sorts of places where most brands want their messages to appear. Before you make the decision on a platform to represent your brand, you should determine what safeguards if any are available to protect your brand from appearing on inappropriate websites.

## **Personalization**

As we said at the beginning of this white paper, and as has been widely reported in virtually every trade journal, consumers want “what they want when they want it how they want it.” We no longer operate in an environment where a brand can broadcast the message that it wants and essentially require that consumers see it. The days of burning a product demo into consumer brains are over. We need to recognize that any modular media application needs to meet consumer needs first, or your target simply won't grab it.

But what does that mean in the context of a branded modular media platform? It means that consumers should be able to customize the content that they receive, without detracting from the marketing value of the unit. Unfortunately very few brand widget suppliers have developed a way to deal with that challenge.

## **Stickiness/Longevity**

The stickiness of a modular media application is also a very important consideration as you make your plans. Unfortunately, many widgets and feeds demonstrate very short shelf life with consumers. People sign up, but quickly lose interest and take them off their Web presences.

At Real Time Matrix we think one of the biggest issues driving this trend is the lack of personalization available in most such units. But content relevance is a significant factor as well.

Another part of what is necessary in order to develop a modular media platform with longevity is to do a reality check about the concept itself. Does it reflect a deep consumer passion? Do consumers sustain the passion over a long period of time? Is the passion something that consumers will want to indulge in frequently?

Still another consideration is striking a balance between functionality and graphical intrusiveness. Certainly, an innovative design or delivery mechanism may capture consumer attention at the outset. But if these design elements impede delivery of valuable content, you may find that consumers lose interest in your application. To take extreme example, imagine a shoe company that builds a widget that looks like a running shoe. The novelty of such a widget might make people more likely to take it and put it in their Web presences. But over the long haul, if the widget design has placed form over function, it's unlikely that consumers will continue to use such an app. The demographics and psychographics of your target are an important consideration here. What a Tween boy wants on his site is likely quite different from what a senior technology executive wants on her's.

## **Social Media**

There are many modular platforms that can “get you into social media.” But in order to assess their value on this dimension, you must consider what “get you into social media” means. There is a big

difference between a modular content unit simply being able to function in a social media environment and one that really leverages and capitalizes on the communicative nature of these environments.

Shawn Sires, COO of Real Time Matrix, likens the distinction to being in a bar.

*“Many widgets and modular media platforms simply enable you to stick them on a page in a social network. They’re like beer signs in a pub. What most brands want and need is a way to participate in the social nature of the medium – like being a person in the pub. People can talk to, connect with, and persuade other pub goers. Pub signs just sit there. They may drive awareness, but most brands have meatier social media objectives than that.”*

In short, if your objectives for social media go beyond simple awareness building, you need a modular platform that actively leverages the social media space to help you engage people.

## CHOOSING A MODULAR MEDIA PLATFORM RIGHT FOR YOUR BRAND

Different brands have different needs, and the ideal platform for one brand will likely differ from the best one for another. The next section evaluates each of the major modular media platforms: RSS, widgets, and Vortex.

### RSS



*This is an example of an RSS feed on MyYahoo!.com, one of the most popular venues that offers a comprehensive listing of RSS feeds.*

### Strengths

Creating an RSS feed is very easy for consumers. So easy that thousands of consumers do it every day, whether for their Facebook page or their MyYahoo! homepage. An RSS feed can be taken virtually anywhere and rests on proven search technologies. Since there are already lots of off-the-shelf RSS feed readers, there are few if any logistical issues in distribution. Further, consumers can add your RSS feed to their existing RSS platforms in just a few simple steps. Developing an RSS feed is an extremely low-cost marketing tactic as well. While gradually becoming more mainstream, the demographics of RSS can be particularly valuable to high income and “tech geek” marketing plans. And if your brand or target is about “just the facts” (for example, Java programmers,) the minimalist experience of RSS may indeed enhance positive feelings about your brand.

### Weaknesses

The most obvious weakness of RSS to most marketers is that an RSS reader tends not to be a terribly attractive or aesthetically pleasing platform on which to build a brand image. It's unlikely that you have any control over the look and feel of the user's reader. In many environments, the readers themselves are deliberately designed to be “background.” The customizing functions of a My Yahoo! page are an excellent example of this.

If your brand has a broad target audience, you may find that RSS cannot realistically reach a true cross-section of your consumers.

Finally, the role that RSS can play in social media is quite finite. Users can certainly add RSS feeds to their social media presences – be they profile pages, blogs, vlogs, etc. They are, however, one way communications tools. They deliver content to the user, but don't facilitate engagement with other users or brands.

## Widgets



*This is the Weather Channel weather widget. This widget was among the first to really catch on among a broad range of consumers. It continues to be among the most popular today – a testament to its ease of use.*

## Strengths

The category of widgets is so broad that there are likely several suppliers that can provide you with units that will meet basic brand information dissemination goals. Companies like Slide, Clearspring, RockYou, and SpringWidgets have all grown rapidly and together offer a strong range of widget options for your consideration as marketing vehicles. If you're looking for an executionally novel or peculiar application, widgets are probably a good bet.

Many widgets are developed on a truly custom basis, with multi-week or multi-month development schedules during which you can help define executional features that you want. You need to pay close attention to ensure a high quality presentation, though.

If you're looking to get onto iGoogle, Netvibes or Windows Live, widgets are certainly a productive route. Millions of users are already comfortable with the idea of grabbing and placing widgets on their personal pages, so the learning curve for these consumers is fairly modest. Since these industry leaders are basing their consumer interfaces on widgets, social networks are also riding the trend, incorporating widgets or, like Facebook and Bebo, widget-applications.

A good widget developer will create a unit that is capable of being placed in a variety of social network environments, not just one. In today's Web environment, there is no need to create individual units for individual networks. Common standards are available to make your widgets more versatile.

Many widgets are built on RSS feeds. Essentially, they are customized RSS readers. Since RSS is a proven technology, you can be assured that your consumers will receive a solid brand experience.

If you're looking to advertise, some popular widgets feature graphical text or video advertisement placements that you can buy. Certain widget builders have created their own ad networks of the most popular widgets so that you can buy advertising across a number of units. This makes the process of buying widget advertising far more convenient. However, you may find that your ad message is very much secondary to the primary message and function of the widget.

## Weaknesses

While widgets have a number of strengths that have led to their rapid growth in the marketplace, there are also a few caveats that you should be cognizant of. You need to be aware that there are already thousands of widgets available to consumers. This should matter to you for two reasons:

1. **It may be difficult for you to deliver a truly unique experience given that so many consumer experiences are already available in widget form.**
2. **Any marketplace with 5,000 competitors is a challenging environment in which to drive awareness, trial, and stickiness. Not only are you competing with other brand widgets, you're also competing with widgets specifically designed by some of the largest Web publishing properties. Their goals mirror yours: building exposure, awareness, trial, and loyalty. This is not to say that it's impossible to create a widget that gets noticed, but rather that the marketplace does not operate like *The Field of Dreams*.**

Another important consideration is social media. Many companies develop widgets as a way of gaining a presence in social networks. In our view, however, the brand needs to think about the larger context of all social media, not just Facebook and MySpace. There are strategic and practical reasons for this.

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Let's start with the practical. If you go to the web page of a heavy user of Facebook, you may find that that person has stacked 4, 8, 12, even 20 different widgets on their homepage. This bank of widgets can extend down for screen after screen. Viewed in that context, it will be at challenge to drive quality exposure in such an environment. Another practical consideration is that while any social networking website has a hard-core user base that visits the site one or more times per day, millions of its members are less frequent visitors. They may be dividing their time across multiple social networks, or they may simply be too busy to maintain an active presence in these environments.

Strategically, the most important consideration is that social networks are not the only venues in which consumers build and expand social relationships. Thus, having a Facebook strategy does little to impact the many enormous blogger communities that are out there, for example.

You also need to consider your objectives for social media along with the capabilities of a potential widget platform. Can you get a meaningful social presence with the platform you are considering? Or is it really more an awareness tool only? In other words, does the potential widget platform make you a participant in the "pub" of social media, or just a beer sign?

Another major challenge with widgets can be development time. Companies that want to be in market very quickly may be hard-pressed to find an acceptable widget solution that can be built in time. Development schedules of six or more weeks are not unusual in the widget market. Part of the reason for this is that many widgets suppliers actually outsource the development of widgets to other companies.

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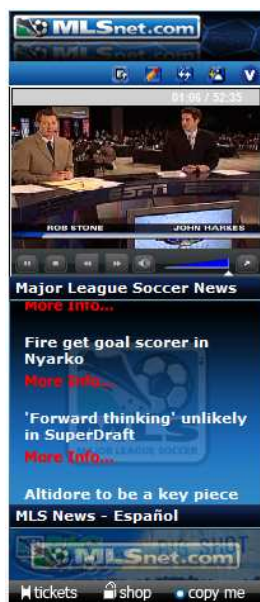
*Companies that want to be in market very quickly may be hard-pressed to find an acceptable widget solution that can be built in time.*

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Different widgets and widget suppliers vary on the extent to which they give brands ongoing control over their units. With a hodgepodge of suppliers, it's natural that some widget makers are better than others.

Finally, the issue of providing a quality presentation deserves another mention. Some widgets don't look good or function well. Given how prominent modular content can be on a consumer's page, this can be a major issue. Make very sure you are comfortable with the appearance and functionality of a widget before you deploy. When you are considering different widget suppliers, check out their past work. Does it ALL look good enough to represent your brand, or are some of their units ugly or klunky. If they are, you owe it to your brand to move on.

## Vortex



*This is an example of Real Time Matrix's Vortex product, specifically one of the Vortexes of Major League Soccer. The unit offers banner ads, video, and scrolling hyperlinks to thematic content, updated all day every day to reflect the latest news and information.*

It won't surprise you that as the makers of Vortex, we believe that it has a number of excellent qualities. Part of the reason for this is that we developed Vortex after researching the strengths and weaknesses of the other modular media platforms.

## Strengths

The starting point for Vortex development was ensuring that our platform could offer the basic strengths of widgets and RSS. But it had to do a lot more. Specifically:

1. **It has been designed to be 100% skinnable with brand imagery that strictly adheres to your guidelines.**
2. **Its patent-pending matching engine offers relevant content from the entire Web, rather than single RSS feeds that power most widgets. The result? Content that more accurately reflects the categories and themes that interest your consumers and will build your brand.**
3. **Vortexes consistently offer a consumer experience of the highest quality.**
4. **Vortex was designed to be easy for consumers to deploy. All they do is make two clicks to get a single line of HTML code that they use to add the Vortex to their social network pages, homepages, and blogs.**

5. It has been created to protect brands from being associated with objectionable content. With Vortex, you define the content it features as well as the content it won't. Vortexes can also be blocked from appearing on a set of objectionable websites that you define. This delivers a higher level of brand safety.
6. Vortex was designed to be easy to deploy. It is a turnkey solution prepared and delivered according to your specifications. We don't farm out the development to other companies. Vortexes were also designed to be deployable in a couple of days versus several weeks for some types of widgets.
7. Content can be changed on the fly. With Vortex, it is easy to update the look and brand graphics that the unit features. Once updated, the changes automatically deploy wherever the Vortex appears online.
8. For publishers, Vortex offers the option to feature video or graphical advertising along with editorial content. This increases your consumer ad views and maximizes revenue.
9. Vortex can be an integral part of a social media strategy. Consumers can take Vortexes to their social network pages, blogs, vlogs, and many other venues. Vortex also offers a powerful Facebook deployment option that lets the brand skin the page around the Vortex, or sell the skinned real estate to advertisers. This deployment option gives you a powerful full page brand experience, and also facilitates engagement, conversation, and connection with and between consumers.

To be fair, it would also be possible to design a custom widget that offered many of these features. But our patent-pending matching engine is a Vortex exclusive, and to our knowledge, no widget supplier can come close to our deployment speed. Additionally, our Facebook deployment option gives the brand a unique opportunity to create a presence on that site of unprecedented power and impact.

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*To our knowledge, no widget supplier can come close to our deployment speed.*

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Another Vortex strength is its ability to allow consumers to personalize their units based upon their own interests. As a critical brand safeguard, however, the Vortex unit only displays customized content to that individual. Other consumers that encounter the Vortex will see only the content that meets the brand's selection criteria. This protects a brand from unexpected associations, while giving the consumer critical ways to customize for themselves. Custom content naturally makes the unit stickier and increases its shelf life but in a brand safe manner.

## **Weaknesses**

Vortex is not for every brand. It is a robust communications platform designed to deliver well-defined multimedia content on an ongoing basis. If your target is very young – Children, Tweens, or Teens for example – you may find that a colorful custom widget may be more suited to your needs. A Vortex, while offering great graphical customization options, is designed to display substantive content first and foremost.

While some widgets are designed to offer a serious and professional appearance, many have toy-like qualities that make them more appropriate for young audiences and perhaps less relevant to adult demographics. To take an extreme example, Vortex is not the best platform from which to have Barney the Purple Dinosaur leap out at the screen. Such action could be customized into a Vortex, but isn't the point of this robust modular platform.

## **CONCLUSION**

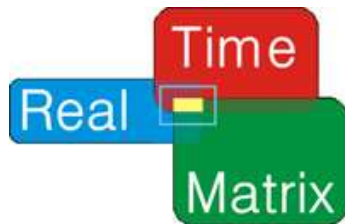
The marketing community supports thousands and thousands of different brands, and the business objectives of no two are exactly alike. So naturally, there is no one single solution for online content portability that will be best for all brands. We believe that our platform has unique strengths that will be valued by a broad swath of brands.

But we also salute the individuals that pioneered RSS, and are impressed by some of the widgets developed by other companies.

We are also indebted to the individuals that pioneered social media and social networks. Our success in developing a meaningful way to create true dialogue and engagement in environments like Facebook is only possible because of the profound environmental changes and consumer empowerment that they are driving.

And the decision as to which platform is appropriate for your particular business situation depends on your needs and objectives. We hope that this white paper provides additional insight into the modular media arena and the marketing options available to you.

Thanks for reading. For more information, contact us at [info@realtimematrix.com](mailto:info@realtimematrix.com).  
[www.realtimematrix.com](http://www.realtimematrix.com)



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