Users want to be informed of updates to their favorite web sites even when they aren’t running them in a browser window. They remain connected to their content while browsing other sites with mashups, receive updates from rich Internet applications (RIAs) on their desktop, and even remain in touch when on the road with mobile applications from their favorite content providers.

Web Slices provide a simple way for users to stay connected with content delivered from your web site. They provide an even richer take on traditional RSS feeds, letting you provide portable morsels of site content to users, and requiring no invasive change to site architecture. Beyond this, Web Slices offer an easy install experience, an easy-to-understand user experience, cheap development using standards-based technologies, stable and reliable behavior in the browser, and free advertisement through the Internet Explorer Add-Ons Gallery (www.ieaddons.com).

This chapter demonstrates how to construct Web Slices and how they can easily integrate into new and existing web applications. I’ll begin by presenting some basic information about how Web Slices work and how users interact with and use them. I’ll follow with tutorials on the structure and makeup of the Web Slice microformat and the process of including them on your web site. The chapter concludes with a deep dive into more advanced topics, such as authentication and alternative sources.

Basics of Web Slices

Web Slices are rich, interactive, dynamic morsels of content that provide constant updates of site content without requiring that the user directly visit that site. Much like feeds, Web Slices are a form of content syndication that gives applications (in this case, the web browser) the ability to be informed of changes and update a cache of selected content.

Web Slices are subsections (slices) of web pages; they use and display markup much like their parent document. Figure 8–1 shows an example of a Web Slice from OneRiot called TopVideos. The slice displays the most relevant information in the Top Videos portion of their site in a consumable and easy-to-update manner.
Figure 8–1. An open Web Slice; this one from OneRiot.com

Web Slices are advertised by a special green icon on web pages and in the browser frame. This icon can also be used by web developers on pages that use this technology, much like the ubiquitous orange RSS 2.0 icon. Figure 8–2 shows this icon.

Figure 8–2. The Web Slice discovery icon

Figure 8–3 highlights this icon in action. On this web page, a user is presented with a Web Slice that is available for installation. The installation can be initiated either on the page through a mouse click on the icon or through the icon in the IE browser frame (in the same place as the RSS icon).

Figure 8–3. The Web Slice icon appears on hover.