

Twitter: From Trend to Tool

A White Paper

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1. The case for skepticism

It is easy to be skeptical about Twitter. First of all, there is the baby talk brand language (tweet my tweeples on Twitter), the six dollar logo, the association with likeable but lightweight celebrities such as Ashton Kutcher, and the evangelical overpromises of zealots. You may suspect that Twitter is nothing more than a particle accelerator for narcissism, banality, procrastination, distraction, and trendiness—and it's that special trendiness that has a toe in hysteria.

And then there's the company's attitude toward its business model, which sounds a lot like most people's attitudes toward cleaning up the basement: it would be nice to do, but just not this weekend. Why should your company invest resources in a media that might not be here in two years?

For you will be making an investment in Twitter, even though you won't pay them a cent. Twitter is zero-cost but high maintenance. Someone at your company needs to spend time a) planning how Twitter fits into your marketing strategy b) learning Twitter's distinct possibilities and protocols c) tweeting and d) monitoring and responding to the tweets of others. Since the most effective tweets often contain links to useful sites, the effective use of Twitter includes research time. You also need to seek quality followers and filter out inappropriate ones.

The Twitter experience is remarkably inefficient. Twitter doesn't have any customers yet: you're really a beta user. So it doesn't have the habit of micro-innovation that customer service inspires and enforces. (Toyota calls these small improvements "kaisen.")

Twitter doesn't yet have the habit of micro-innovation that customer service inspires.

What innovation there is over and above the basic interface is dispersed in more than a dozen third party solutions, which need to be researched and integrated. The basic Twitter interface does not allow you to edit your tweets, easily shrink urls, create distinct streams of tweets, isolate conversations, create a list of favorite followers, find any particular follower easily, or organize your favorite tweets. Customer service, such as it is, is glacial and

unresponsive. The shortcomings of Twitter illustrate that innovation isn't all gurus and legal pads. Innovation comes from people bitching to an engaged frontline service staff.

2. The case for Twitter

Yet, once every objection has noted, Twitter still makes a great deal of sense for many businesses and organizations that function like businesses. To understand why Twitter is useful, it helps to understand how it improves upon the world before Twitter.

Twitter vs. Conferences

Because it allows you to cross-pollinate ideas with loose contacts, Twitter can be profitably described as a ten-minute virtual business conference.

Twitter = Business conference – travel – face-to-face time + short daily contact

Twitter vs Google

Twitter also improves on Google by adding a human element to search.

Twitter = search + opinion about links + discussion of links

Twitter vs Business Blogging

Twitter is business blogging that people might actually read.

Twitter = daily posts + shared forum + enforced brevity

Twitter vs Web Sites

Twitter makes up for the greatest weakness of a web site: passivity. Your current site just lies back and dreams of click throughs. Twitter allows you to broadcast content.

Twitter = web content + active broadcasting

The medium is evolving, but it appears you can do at least four things on Twitter:

- *Communicate.* Send out short messages for free; those messages can contain links to deeper content.
- *Amplify.* Broadcast the messages of your allies; they can, in turn, amplify your messages
- *Listen.* Easily find out what your customers or supporters are saying.
- *Learn.* Gather business intelligence by following knowledgeable people. A recent survey by the MarketingProfs verified that learning new things is an important and underacknowledged use of Twitter.

And, as of now, you can do all this at no charge. Twitter has assured its users that the basic service will remain free.

3. Organizations that might benefit from Twitter:

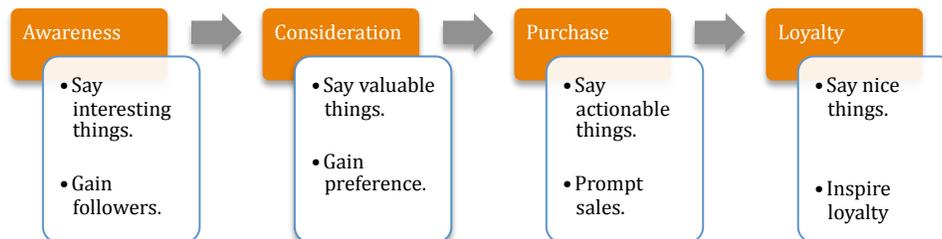
Twitter will not solve every problem for every business. But most organizations can find some use for free 140-character text messages to a selected audience. Those organizations include:

- *Businesses that sell expertise.* Twitter is to expertise what free sample day at the grocery store is to frozen pizza.
- *Businesses that want to strengthen relationships with customers or allies.* You can share, retweet, and converse with your strategic allies.
- *Businesses that want to monitor what people are saying about them.* Enter a search for your name and see what comes up. Enter a search for your industry's buzz words and see what people are saying.
- *Businesses that want to reach a targeted band of customers with specific offers and news.* The question has been posed, why would my dry cleaner want to be on Twitter? Maybe it doesn't make sense for my local dry cleaner, but my local pizza place—Punch—is on Twitter. On the night of a much

ballyhooed winter storm, it sent via facebook and Twitter, an offer for a free pizza. In an evening when schools were closed and events were cancelled, they sold 500 pizzas.

4. How Twitter can enhance your marketing process:

Unlike Punch, not every business can use Twitter to tell the world that there's hot pizza waiting. But when Twitter's capabilities are viewed in the light of the traditional marketing sequence, it's clear that, properly used, there's potential for advancing sales.



5. How Twitter can enhance your capabilities:

Businesses have more valences than ever before, with consultants joining forces, mid-sized shops subcontracting experts or freelancers taking on projects for larger agencies. Twitter allows you to expand your rolodex by conversing with specialists from other fields. If you're putting together teams, Twitter appears to be especially well suited to adding those specialists who might be called tertiary: people whose skills are valuable for select projects.



I'm a writer and creative director, but I follow SEO consultants, a social media measurement company, PR firms, and user experience specialists. While I find regular team members through experience and referrals, I find more specialized experts through Twitter.

6. Twitter protocol

Like Google, Twitter is a free, popular, gathering and sorting tool. So the mysticism that has sprouted up around Google spills over into discussions of Twitter. Because Twitter is social rather than algorithmic, the mysticism is even mistier. "Social media" awakens somewhat utopian thoughts in even the most jaded of us.

As a result, there are a bunch of "rules" which can baffle the uninitiated. Fortunately, the rules radiate from a central insight: Twitter is a social media. Of the four things you can do on Twitter, only one involves broadcasting your own messages. The other three involve sharing, listening, and learning—and those are all social activities. Most celebrities aren't actually using Twitter as a social medium. What celebrities are doing is really Entertainment Tonight by other means.

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When people talk about "getting" Twitter, they mean acknowledging its distinctive social aspect.

Here are the esoteric protocols of Twitter:

- Say "thanks and please." If someone mentions you nicely, acknowledge that.

- *Listen.* Social means dialog, not monologue.
- *Share.* If someone says something smart or adds something valuable, retweet it to your followers.
- *Only speak if you have something to say.* Boorishness is just a click away.
- *Be yourself.* This is not woo-woo, this is branding.
- *Being popular isn't everything.* Twitter is a media. And with other media buys (or grabs), reach isn't everything.

You may recognize these. You heard them, when you were eight, from the original social media guru: your Mom.

8. Twitter and Clutter

The experience of Twitter can sometimes feel like visiting a used record store. You flip, flip, flip, flip . . . and find a gem. This is especially true once you start picking up a significant number of followers. Twitter can be Clutter 2.0. The deluge is made worse by dynamics of Twitter, which encourage multiple tweets. They cost nothing; every tweet might pick up a follower or start a conversation, and the stream-like nature of Twitter tends to whisk your earlier tweets away. The software which tells people how they can become more effective on Twitter invariably tells them to tweet more. The software doesn't care that the twenty-seventh point you make today is probably less compelling than the first point you make today.

The cluttered aspect of Twitter causes two problems: first, your messages can get lost. Second, you can spend a lot of time sorting through the almost overwhelming barrage of tweets to find the good stuff.

Fortunately, there are solutions.

Many—but not all—of the most valuable people on Twitter seem to limit at least their broadcast tweets.

There are also good software solutions, the best of which is Adobe's Tweetdeck which is

currently in beta and available for free. Tweetdeck allows you to create streams. In my case, I have distinct streams for social media, design and advertising, friends, and journalists.

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Ideally, Tweetdeck's functions as well as other improvements—such as the ability to switch between accounts—would be incorporated into the basic Twitter interface, but they are not. This is where

Twitter's all "Eureka," no "kaisen!" approach to innovation really shows its deficiencies.

9. Summary

As with all trends, there is cause for caution. We may all decide that Twitter is too much trouble, just as we all decided that blogs are too much trouble. (Blogs do continue, see below, but in a more modest and useful form.) We may exceed the human threshold for words starting in "tw." Or Twitter may take some unexpected new form, as it is reconfigured in response to its unannounced business plan.

But cynicism is the laziest form of intelligence. There are also real possibilities in Twitter for targeted communications, innovative marketing, new connections, and meaningful learning.

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For further reading:

The Marketing Prof's Twitter Survey Results: <http://tiny.cc/632Oy>

Edward Boches' Adweek article, "What Twitter Can Do For You"
<http://tiny.cc/qjLrT>

Duct Tape Marketing's "Using Twitter for Business," a helpful practical guide:

<http://www.ducttapemarketing.com/twitterforbusiness.pdf>

These four business blogs discuss the wider strategic issues of social media:

Radian6 (social media measurement): <http://altitudebranding.com/>

Axiom PR (public relations): <http://www.dailyaxioms.com/>

Cision (PR software): <http://blog.us.cision.com/>

Top Rank (online marketing and search engine optimization)
<http://www.toprankblog.com/>