

Twitter: overrated, underappreciated and why you need to do it today



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If you believe the hype, the Twitter revolution is upon us. In just three years, the microblogging site has amassed over 30 million users, helped facilitate riots in Moldova and protests in Iran; broke the news of riots in China and ice of on Mars, helped citizens monitor polling stations in the 2008 election, allegedly broken up Jennifer Aniston and Jon Mayer and provided a forum for the global outpouring of grief following Michael Jackson's death.

Twitter has Google worried and Facebook playing copycat. It has prompted Time magazine to call it "as significant and paradigm-shifting as the invention of Morse code, the telephone, radio, television or the personal computer."

Is it really? For every one of Twitter's dramatic accolades you can find a sobering limitation. It has a retention problem: 60 per cent of all those that sign up for Twitter stop using the site a month later. It's home to staggering inequality of expression: the top 10 per cent most prolific Twitter users account for 90 per cent of all content. It is dwarfed by other social networking sites: three times as many

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people use Facebook every day than have ever used Twitter.

These statistics reflect that many people look at the Twitter prompt, "What are you doing?" and see no need to respond. Call it humility, call it lack of imagination, blame it on time constraints. The fact is, unlike Facebook, which helps people find old friends, or MySpace, which can be a portal for up and coming music, Twitter still cannot shake its reputation for epic uselessness. It's not surprising that out of the top 100 CEOs in the US, only two have a Twitter feed. After all, why should they? If Twitter is dominated by prolific narcissists, do brands really need to jump on the bandwagon? And if the rumor is true, and Twitter is going to start demanding a fee for company usage, is it worth it?

Yes.

If a brand has ever fancied calling itself social, it needs a Twitter presence. Twitter is overrated, but still revolutionary.

Carl Shirky of NYU says that thanks to sites like Twitter, we are witnessing the "largest increase in expressive capability in human history." But that's only half the story. An increase in expressive capability is of little importance if not accompanied by an increase in listening capability. We often hype up the flashier side of this equation and overlook the more passive, but equally important side. Dormant Twitter accounts are not dead. Those who tweet once a month (or once a year) are not unimportant. Yes, the median number of lifetime Twitter posts is an underwhelming one. But the median number of Twitter "listens" is equally important. Just as a

conversation doesn't work if everyone is talking at the same time, Twitter wouldn't work if everyone were prolific tweeters.

If Twitter is the overrated champion of expressive capability, it is also the underrated champion of listening capability. I for one am guilty of going "tweet silent" for extended periods of time. But I still listen. I still hear what Shaquille O'neal has to say, or what my friends are buzzing about, or what promotion Dell or JetBlue has to offer. Individuals and brands can still reach me. They can still have an impact. And even if I don't take it upon myself to re-express this information with a tweet, I may mention it to my mom through email, or tell a friend via that fast-vanishing medium sometimes called "facemail."

The vast sea of potential tweeters, not the proportionally small pool of active tweeters, makes Twitter revolutionary. Every individual on Twitter, when properly incentivized, can be moved to tweet and spread a message throughout the listening Twittersphere. If you're mobile, have a cell phone, and experience something terrible in a Starbucks, witness an act of injustice, take part in a spontaneous rally, or see a plane land in the Hudson, you can instantly tweet that information. If you don't have a Twitter account yet (and you really should) you can text a friend who does. One way or another, big news, whether political, social, or business-related can become quickly, profoundly, and permanently public. Forget the current Twitter statistics, as long as Twitter is the best service for enabling this potential, it's here to stay, and poised to grow into a basic utility.



The Twitter bird

Six simple ways brands can get on board

Listen

Before you sign up, before you do anything, just listen. Use tools like search.twitter.com to listen to tweets about your brands, your competitors' brands, or the category in general. As Marcel LeBrun of Radian6 says: "Your brand is now the sum of conversations about it, which makes listening such a critical discipline for every company." The Skittles brand has sensationalized this kind of listening. With a website consisting of a Twitter search page set to the word Skittles, the brand has captured a rare, honest glimpse into how consumers relate to the brand throughout their day.

Serve your customers

If you're listening to Twitter and consumers are repeatedly calling your brand crap, it's time to act. Comcast employs ten representatives to search for keywords "Comcast" or, occasionally, "Comcrap" to find customers who mention service complaints it can address. Frank Eliason, Comcast's customer service manager and now the face of Comcast, calmly helps resolve their complaints. Currently, he has over 21,000 followers.

Comcast isn't the only company that sees Twitter as the new way of customer service. In the UK, Pepsi has put its Twitter address directly on it's can, making the age old phrase

"Questions or comments? Call 1-800..." look downright ancient.

Humanize

Twitter offers the opportunity to put a face (and a voice) to the faceless corporation. When Businessweek profiled 50 (rather hip) CEOs with Twitter accounts, many mentioned how it allows them to humanize the business. With a Twitter account, the CEO, or another member of the business (someone who possess charisma, loyalty, tact, and the time) can bolster a small company's reputation or make a big company seem more personal.

Build the brand

If your brand has a mascot (the Geico gecko, Tony the Tiger) it's easy to bring the brand to life with a Twitter feed. The mascot becomes the vibrant, 24-7 spokesperson of the brand, garnering followers through regular, entertaining tweets. As a result, the brand becomes light on its feet - capable of interacting quickly and fluidly with its environment and reinforcing the patterns of behavior that make the brand unique.

If the brand doesn't have a mascot, the creation of a brand avatar through an ad campaign allows you to set up the same type of Twitter presence—providing the avatar is sufficiently interesting. To the best of my knowledge this tactic hasn't been employed, but I know

plenty of people who would enthusiastically follow the star of Dos Equis' most recent ad campaign, "The world's most interesting man".

Sell the product

One of the great things about Twitter is that those you are marketing to actually want to hear what you have to say. Do what Dell has done. Draw in followers with Twitter exclusive discounts, then use Twitter as an efficient and unobtrusive way to 'microcast' about a new product, initiative, or campaign. In one of the rare examples of tangible ROI investment through Twitter, Dell actually made \$3 million in sales through its promotional Twitter accounts.

Twitter as a selling tool can be as creative or as straightforward as it needs to be. Quizzes, trivia, scavenger hunts: nothing's off limits if there is the potential for a reward at the end. In time, with ample rewards and total honesty, you can cultivate a loyal group of superfollowers that will actively spread the word of the brand.

Give

On 12 February 2009 202 cities around the world held Twestivals, bringing together tweeters to pledge money on Twitter for water projects in Africa. In one day they raised a quarter of a million dollars. For generation Y, philanthropy is hip (and mobile). Through

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Twitter, companies can make high profile pledges to non profits with applications like twitpay.me and encourage their followers to do the same. Brands can start their own Twitter philanthropies or encourage followers to pledge at certain times while doing something (i.e. "Next time you are at McDonald's, tweet for charity and receive a free big mac").

The Twictionary

tweet • a Twitter post, or the act of composing a Twitter post

followworthy • a Twitter user who is worthy of following

tweeps • friends on Twitter

twirting • flirting on Twitter

Twitterhea • the unstoppable urge to tweet

twammer • Twitter + spammer: someone who spams on Twitter

twend • a trend on Twitter (also, "tweme")

twawkward • being awkward on Twitter

Fun applications:

Twittervision • real time tweets combined with Google maps (<http://beta.Twittervision.com/>)

twendz • a real-time Twitter trends analyzer (<http://twendz.waggeneratedstrom.com/>)

Twittersheep • track and analyze your flock of Twitter followers (<http://Twittersheep.com/>)

strawpoll • create your own poll through

Twitter (<http://strawpollnow.com/>)

cursebird • track the frequency and type of Twitter cursing (<http://cursebird.com/>)

tweetbeep • get Twitter alerts when someone tweets a selected word or phrase (<http://tweetbeep.com/>)

qwitter • receive emails when people stop following you (<http://useqwitter.com/>)