

Building Your Brand Online

SEARCH TO GATHER INFORMATION

One of the most powerful Twitter features is the ability to search users, posts, and subjects. For the former Twitter can operate as a “global human search engine.”²² In almost any field of expertise, it is possible to find someone on Twitter with relevant information to share. In a live conversation, listening is the best way to learn; on Twitter that function is filled by searching.²³ Developing good search skills is necessary to get familiar with the audience being addressed and to see what they will respond to.

Further, search can turn up information about specific topics. As tweets are displayed in reverse-chronological order, a researcher can look to see how frequently a specific topic is updated to get a feel for what the audience is interested in. A topic that receives many tweets is obviously important to more people. When beginning a SMM campaign, start using Twitter by looking up the brand’s name, the competition, and what is being said about each.²⁴ This approach will give a feel for the social landscape and suggest intelligent future tactics.

The ease of topic searching is aided by hashtags. Included in the form of “#topic” in tweets, clicking on the word with “#” in front (the hashtag topic) will draw up a list of other tweets that have been tagged with the same topic. For example, if someone were looking for news about the economy and Federal Reserve, that individual could try searching *#economy* or *#Fed*. To find information about SMM, one could search *#socialmedia* or *#smm*. Users place hashtags in their tweets to make them more visible, so take advantage of this feature both when gathering information and attempting to pass messages on to others. Twitter users can also search topics without hashtags, although hashtags are still useful to track information at conferences and other live events.

KNOW THE AUDIENCE

Using the search function to navigate through Twitter is helpful for building a portrait of the target audience. Think back to Chapter 3 and the persona development cycle. Twitter, with its easily searched database of faces attached to personal interests and hobbies, provides an optimal arena to study and develop different user personas. To do this, find one person whose profile seems to exemplify a certain persona. Then, look at the list of similar people to follow, which Twitter provides. Make note of how their expressed interests are similar to or different from the first profile. Continue this process until a more fleshed-out persona emerges. Aggregating together different characteristics of Twitter users who all might be interested in a brand or product allows a picture of the target market to emerge.

A word of caution on using Twitter to estimate more general target audiences: the demographics on Twitter do not necessarily reflect those of the general public. Adoption of Twitter is more pronounced in some groups than others. For example, there tend to be more young (18- to 34-year-old) Twitter users and more African American and Hispanic Twitter users than would be found in a random sample of the population.²⁵ While this skewing introduces complications into statistical research, it should not affect the persona development process described in Chapter 3. Twitter is such a large and diverse community that many people can be found possessing any particular value or need that a social media marketer might be interested in. Focus on the segment that will be drawn to the marketed product, and then aggregate demographics become less important.

CUSTOMIZE THE PROFILE PAGE

When deciding whether or not to follow someone, the profile page (see Figure 6.1) plays an enormous role in a viewer's decision. Generally, looking at the profile is the most research that a Twitter user will do before deciding to follow or not. A good profile page will help to develop a solid following and also provide external benefits such as views to the main site and more interest in the marketed product.

Twitter offers many options to customize a profile's home page. Background, text color, avatar picture, and description are the most noticeable features that can be modified. The first, and perhaps most important choice, is selecting a good avatar picture, which will appear next to every tweet, so the avatar should be recognizable and eye-catching for best results. It is very common, and perhaps the best practice, to use a face picture as the avatar. Generally, people follow faces more readily than logos.²⁶ Consequently, putting a brand or corporate image as the avatar is less personable than a facial picture. The avatar picture does not have to be overly polished; casual photos can outdo studio photography by transmitting a more relaxed image.

The profile's description should complement the avatar by providing context and important details. Writing space is limited, so the description will have to be concise. The background image can fill in the rest that cannot be conveyed in the description.

A custom-made background image can display personality, longer explanation of the product or services, and past accomplishments. The background is also a place to put URLs for other social networking profiles, websites, or blogs.²⁷ The combined result in a profile page should both encourage viewers to follow and to give links to other social media platforms in order to allow deeper engagement.

TWEET CONTENT

On a Twitter feed, it is especially easy to miss tweets that do not immediately catch the eye. If an account does not provide appealing content, users will ignore it. As a golden rule, the best content is "interesting, fun, and valuable."²⁸ The first two are



Figure 6.1 Twitter Profile page Debra Zahay-Blatz

self-explanatory, but creating valuable content is more complex because it must be both timely and relevant. Think about the sorts of concerns, interests, or values that the target Twitter audience might have, and address those first. Also, refer back to the six types of tweets (covered earlier in the chapter). Keeping a balance between different categories will make the content fresher and more engaging. Companies like Zappo's have made their reputation by tweeting out various forms of content, everything from the personal plans of its CEO to the work of its customer service department.

While it is important to have varying content, do not cover too many different topics in quick succession. Having multiple streams of thought going at once can make replies from followers confusing and can prevent outside viewers from understanding the overall message(s). Even if several tweets are sent out each day, keep each day's tweets to a common theme or idea.²⁹ This practice will help prevent miscommunication.

With a limited space to write on Twitter, some content will be too large for a tweet, so it only makes sense to provide a link to another site. Distributing links to interesting articles, images, or websites can be valuable to readers and draw a positive response. However, sharing a link is no guarantee anyone will visit it, especially if the content is poorly described, is uninteresting, or seems untrustworthy. In particular, links without a title attached are unlikely to get a response.³⁰ To save room for describing the linked content, use shortened URLs. A few link-shortening services include tinyurl.com, is.gd, ow.ly, and bit.ly.³¹ Some of these services also provide free analytics to determine how many people clicked each link, a metric that can be valuable feedback for choosing later content.

Aside from clicking on links, another way to know if followers listen or care about what is being discussed is to look at how many retweets are given.³² Users can retweet a post, displaying its author on their own timeline, or they can use “RT @[author]” and mention for a similar effect. Twitter will show which posts are retweeted and who did the retweet. Twitter users retweet content they enjoy or are willing to vouch for, so it is a signal of approval when a retweet occurs. This process gives insight into which sorts of content are most popular.

Building a Twitter Following

Twitter is set up such that users only receive tweets in their feed from people they are following. Therefore, if a profile has no followers, then functionally no one will see what is being posted!^{††} Because of this, as well as the status some associate with a high follower count, many thousands of words have been written about the best ways to gather Twitter followers. This section will cover some basics.

Many different strategies have been employed to gain Twitter followers quickly. One classic is the mass follow strategy in which one follows lots of other profiles and hope they decide to follow back. Stefan Tanase, one researcher studying this issue, “found that simply following almost 50,000 people [gave] him nearly 8,000 followers in return, a follow-back rate of about 17 percent.”³³ However, this approach has several pitfalls. The first is technical: Twitter implemented new rules that block users from following more than 2,000 profiles unless they are also being followed by a similar number.³⁴ A policy intended to deter automated accounts, mass marketing and spam, this reform makes mass following difficult. The second problem is practical: most of the users who follow back automatically will be mass marketers and spammers, who will never read the tweets from profiles they follow. This reality makes followers gained from the mass follow strategy largely worthless.

Another approach to gathering followers is the equal ratio strategy, which aims to keep the profile's following and follower counts as close to equal as possible. With this system the profile will only follow users who seem likely to follow back; it also

follows back all followers. This strategy handily avoids Twitter's imposed ratio for those following over 2,000. However, the downside is that this approach is very slow to get off the ground. When starting a new Twitter profile, it may take weeks or months to gather even a hundred followers unless the brand is already well-known. For many SMM strategists, that period will be too long to wait.

A happy medium between the two methods above is the targeted follow strategy. The first step is to search for and follow a few (somewhere between 50 and 150) profiles with similar interests and ideas or those that already have members of the target audience following them. For a business this may mean following the competition! Ideally, choose accounts that have roughly equal following/follower counts, as such counts indicate these accounts are more likely to follow back. However, focus more on the content and interests, and do not be overly concerned about following some that are unlikely to return the favor immediately.³⁵

To increase the chance of being followed back, consider sending a mention (perhaps also with the hashtag *#NowFollowing* or similar) to inform the person about gaining a follower. On Twitter, the mention feature makes directed messages very simple; a tweet with “[*[name]*]” will be viewable on the @Mention section of that person's home page. Notifying someone she or he has been followed and promoting that individual's name with a tweet signals the follower is active and worth following back.

Even with best efforts, do not expect perfect results when gaining followers, especially early on. Not everyone will respond. Following an unknown Twitter account is somewhat like leaving an old-fashioned calling card.³⁶ If the person finds the “card” (the profile, avatar, and description) interesting enough, he or she may decide to follow also. From this starting point, some of those early follows can become core connections to draw from later. Strike up dialogue when appropriate, and begin developing relationships.

The advantage of following relevant accounts with similar topics of interest is granted by Twitter's “Suggested People” feature. Users see lists of similar accounts as well as suggested people to follow based on which profiles they view and follow. This feature can lead interested viewers back to related profiles. For example, consider a small café starting up a Twitter presence; it could follow other coffee companies (such as Seattle's Best and Starbucks), coffee wholesalers/retailers (such as Maxwell House and Folgers), as well as other local businesses in town. Then, if someone was searching through Twitter profiles related to either coffee or the local town, that person might find that small café's profile as a suggestion. In this way the suggestion feature can help to access the target audience.

The second stage of the targeted follow strategy is more passive: choosing which profiles to follow back. Hopefully, many followers will be interested in the brand or business, but others may be following indiscriminately in hopes of boosting their own numbers. Early on, with less than 500 to 1,000 followers, it is worthwhile to follow back nearly everyone.[†] Twitter accounts with few followers tend to lack credibility and draw in followers more slowly, so do not risk losing the first few! After the account has grown, one can afford to be more selective in choosing who to follow back. Ultimately, the goal of this targeted follow strategy is to draw in followers who will read and respond to messages or who will become future recommenders or sources of expertise. In this respect quality of followers is far more important than quantity.

While a targeted follow strategy is often the best match for the marketing objectives, it is not the fastest way of gaining Twitter followers. For those with less patience, there is the purchase option. Many different services offer to provide Twitter followers for a fee.

[†]Why “nearly” everyone? Some Twitter accounts are overtly racist, sexualized, or otherwise in poor taste. For almost any industry, following a problematic Twitter account is a potential scandal waiting to happen. If a profile's background, tweets, or avatar image is offensive, it may be better to avoid association and not follow back.

While this option may be tempting in order to get an account started, it is *not* advisable. Much like the mass follow approach, bought followers will likely be some combination of automated accounts, inactive accounts, and accounts not in the target audience. Joel Comm observes that “the price to be paid for having a large number of followers is often a less-targeted market and a lower conversation rate of followers to customers or users of your own site.”³⁷ This observation is especially true when there is no guarantee that all of the followers are real people! Although it takes time, this pitfall is the reason that a Twitter following must be built, not bought.³⁸

Finally, synergize with other communication media to draw existing contacts into the Twitter following. It is possible to easily integrate Twitter with Facebook, LinkedIn, Digg, and other social media platforms, but this tactic is just the beginning. Provide a link from the company website or blog requesting viewers to follow on Twitter. People browsing a page may be drawn to the attached Twitter account. When asking people to follow on Twitter, phrasing is important. According to one study,

The way web sites tell users to follow them on Twitter has a dramatic effect on the clickthrough rate. Saying simply “I’m on Twitter” produces a click-through rate of 4.7 percent . . .

Ordering users to “Follow me on Twitter” increased that clickthrough rate by 55 percent, pushing it up to 7.31 percent. Making the phrase more personal by saying “You should follow me on Twitter” increased the click-through rate to 10.09 percent, and providing a link for people to click in the phrase “You should follow me on Twitter here” was the most effective of all with a clickthrough rate of 12.81 percent.³⁸

A higher click through rate indicates more people going from the linking website to the Twitter profile. On a high-traffic page, a well-worded Twitter follow request can bring in a large number of followers.

Twitter can be integrated into even more communication media. After a variety of content has been posted, consider assembling a string of tweets into a blog post; it will draw attention to the Twitter page as well as providing an easy, interesting blog update.³⁹ A Twitter account can also be promoted through personal contacts. Attach the Twitter handle to business cards, email signatures, and other outbound communications.⁴⁰ People who are already known from other interactions make great Twitter contacts because they might have some interest in the brand or business already. Collecting followers is especially fruitful when there is a prior relationship to build from.

Best Practices for Crafting an Effective Twitter Channel

The tips above provide a baseline of knowledge to start a Twitter account and begin using it successfully. Many businesses have developed a Twitter presence and have had positive results. One new derivative product is Twitter brand insurance, which will compensate companies for lost reputation on Twitter.⁴¹ Intended to hedge against

³⁷There are also more subtle ways of “buying” followers on Twitter. Some companies do giveaways, offering a chance to win some new technology product for users who follow and then mention the company’s Twitter profile. While this is a way to gain followers quickly, and is more likely to draw in actual people (instead of automated accounts), it suffers the same flaw of drawing an untargeted following. While giveaways can be useful for building community good will or awareness of a brand, they are still not the best way to gain valuable targeted followers.

unauthorized tweets or image smears online, this insurance (in million-dollar quantities) demonstrates how much businesses invest in microblogging as well as how easily those efforts can be ruined.

Twitter can become an extremely effective marketing channel, but only when it is used with forethought. Making a profile pay off over time will require a commitment of time, energy, and attention to detail. Keep the following in mind over the long-run execution of a Twitter SMM campaign.

1. SELF-PROMOTE CAUTIOUSLY

The first lesson in marketing on Twitter is to not market too much. In principle this advice may sound contradictory, but in practice it is essential in order to reach an audience and to keep that audience's attention. Do not assume that Twitter users will care about product announcements, updates, or promotions; there are thousands, if not millions, of obvious (sometimes automated) Twitter marketing accounts vying for their attention.

To distinguish oneself from the crowd of advertisers, focus on relationships first. Do favors for others, providing links or mentions, and they may reciprocate. A good ratio to keep in mind is 10:1.⁴² In other words, promote others or share information ten times for each self-promotional tweet. The best Twitter "advertising" will come as a result of mentions or recommendations by contacts and followers, so foster those connections early on by generously promoting others.

2. CHOOSE OPTIMAL TWEET TIMES

Without a direct mention, someone will probably never see a tweet unless that individual is online and looking at his or her home page in the minute that it is posted. Especially for users who follow many people, it can take just minutes or seconds for a tweet to escape that person's view. Therefore, putting out updates when people are online to see them is essential for making an impact.

Some simple logic can illuminate when the best time to post is: people must sign on in order to make their own updates, so that is the time they are certain to be online. Therefore, in order to be seen, post updates at times that followers are also updating the most.⁴³ Some have found "midday and midweek tend to produce the best results." However, a well-timed tweet, like Oreo's "You Can Still Dunk in the Dark," posted during a blackout during the 2013 Super Bowl, can have life long after its initial post.⁴⁴ Also keep time zones in mind. Depending on where the audience is located, it might be asleep when a tweet is posted. Adapt the posting schedule to allow more viewers to see and react to each update.

3. RESPOND TO QUESTIONS

If the prior steps have been done well and if useful content and links have been shared, this air of expertise may lead other users to ask questions. This is one of the most frequent uses of Twitter for firms: quickly responding to consumer questions and comments. For example, Nike uses a separate Twitter handle @nikesupport to provide a single place to answer user questions quickly. Other firms rely on Twitter's speed and focus to create superior customer service.⁴⁵ As users can access Twitter from many different devices, engaging their questions in a forthright manner can create a sense of closeness unparalleled by other platforms.⁴⁶

Microblogging encourages users to seek input from others, and in a business context, this practice means responding to comments, questions, or issues that potential customers might have. Providing useful information can build a brand's reputation and thought leadership (see the case studies in this chapter for some examples).

4. GATHER FEEDBACK

While it is possible to passively observe and respond on Twitter, a more proactive strategy is to request answers directly. Asking for opinions or product reviews is a cheap alternative to focus groups; Twitter users are generally happy to share their thoughts when asked politely. Take advantage of this impulse, and seek feedback whenever possible. If the following is interested and engaged, some are likely to respond.

In addition to gauging general sentiment, it is also possible to solicit expert advice through microblogging platforms.⁴⁷ For example, one real-estate agent asked his Twitter following whether a client could get a mortgage for a property where the well had not undergone a safety test.⁴⁸ After receiving a quick response of “Yes” from one of the agent’s expert Twitter contacts, the client was able to get the loan. Instead of paying a lawyer or doing extensive research himself, the real estate agent was able to save time and money and ultimately serve the client better. This represents just one potential usage of microblogging to find useful advice, and undoubtedly far more applications also exist.

As feedback from Twitter can be very helpful, it is good to encourage and reward users who are willing to provide it. After asking a question, acknowledge the people who respond or provide an answer.⁴⁹ If followers are left feeling unappreciated, they will be less likely to help in the future. These give-and-take relationships, which may seem insignificant individually, can aggregate into a powerful machine for gathering input and information. Being kind, polite, and appreciative helps to grease that apparatus and keep it running smoothly.

5. PROVIDE UNIQUE VALUE

Implicitly, every successful Twitter marketing profile must answer the question “why follow and listen to the messages being offered?” If the answer to this question is unclear, it is unlikely that many users will pay attention to what is said. While stellar content can draw in viewers, even that alone may not be enough to guarantee results.

A simple way to keep viewers’ attention that many companies have employed is to offer special deals on Twitter. These can include coupons, promotional discounts, special products, free shipping, and so on. The most important aspect is that the deal is only seen or available to Twitter users. Coca-Cola has been using advanced personalization techniques, a tactic borrowed from direct marketing. Coke buys promoted tweets and addresses the user by name as part of its “Share a Coke” campaign, which has personalized Coke bottles for purchase. The user is encouraged to go to the store and buy a Coke with their name on it.⁵⁰ Followers get a sense of exclusivity and privilege from the special bargain, and everyone has more reason to follow closely for future deals. Since Twitter is a real-time format, using the timeliest tweets is appropriate.

Not only is there value in time-sensitive events that are ideally suited to Twitter, it is interesting to note that multi-tasking, such as watching TV and being on social media simultaneously, is important with social media and Twitter in particular. The Super Bowl, Oscars, and Grammys typically top the list with the Super Bowl garnering millions of tweets. The famous “Ellen Selfie” at the Oscars in 2014 had 1.2 million retweets, demonstrating that people use Twitter to supplement their television viewing experience.⁵¹

Marketing with Microblogging

Due to its versatility, Twitter can assist in almost any marketing goal. Increasing brand awareness, connecting with customers, providing support, and distributing information are just some of the possible benefits. Twitter allows business leaders to “identify influential people . . . who have common interests and create potentially

valuable relationships.⁵² As part of a SMM campaign, Twitter makes every other social media tool more effective by providing a distribution outlet that can reach millions of consumers.

While most of this chapter has been about Twitter, the general principles may be applied to other microblogging platforms with only technical modifications. Other websites may have different conversations, news searching, or social mechanisms, but peoples' values and interests remain a constant factor across platforms. Provide content that is fun, interesting, and valuable, and people will come looking for more. Build reciprocal relationships with other members, and be able to call on their help in later need. These core aspects of microblogging remain a common theme.

Most of all, connecting microblogs with the marketing objectives takes creativity in order to use the briefest communication medium to persuasively convey much larger ideas. The best microblog operators combine creativity with experience and writing skills to keep their following engaged. Developing these talents is crucial to the successful social media marketer.

Best Practices: Building a Personal Brand with Twitter

Create a complete profile. Lesson #1: Figure out who you are. Lesson one is always figure out who you are and create a profile that emphasizes those changes. Whether you are a marketing or tax expert, your profile should reflect that emphasis. Use relevant hashtags (#) in your description so you can be found.

Follow those in your area. Lesson #2: Once you have your niche, follow those important to your interest(s). If you want to go into sports marketing, follow the top sports team. If graphic design is your thing, follow those individuals and companies.

Create lists around your interests. Lesson #3: A great feature of Twitter is the Twitter list. You can create lists around topics such as search engine marketing or a particular sports team. You can use lists to quickly see what others in your area are posting. You can also join or follow specialty lists created by others.

Create a follow strategy. Lesson #4: For most beginners, a targeted follow strategy aiming for those in your areas of interest works best. With a small number to manage, you can thank those who follow you and engage with them individually. This responsiveness will help you become an important person in the network revolving around your areas of interest.

Post at least three times a day. Lesson #5: Conventional wisdom says because of the real-time nature of the postings they will not always be visible to those who are on Twitter. You should post at least three times a day and one useful tool is klout.com. You can use Klout to find relevant content for you to post easily and also track your influence. Although the algorithm is not perfect, it can help you see how you are improving in your social presence. Remember: at least some of your content should be original, from your blogs, SlideShare, YouTube channel or other source of original content. Original content will help establish your influence.