

Taking on Twitter

Ten steps to optimize your Twitter experience

At the SATW Atlantic-Caribbean Chapter meeting in Charleston, SC, fellow member Laura Overstreet was telling me about a unique situation she was in: she needed to sell the remaining tickets to an event within a week's time. I suggested Twitter as a possible avenue to start making connections with new people interested in her destination, Rappahannock County, VA. Together, we walked through how to get your Twitter account started and start strategically networking. While Laura turned back to traditional marketing to finish her task, the steps we took over the course of an hour outline how you, too, can use Twitter for your marketing needs.

1. Get started and join the conversation

At <http://twitter.com>, click the big green "Get Started—Join!" button. You'll be led into setting up your basic user profile, including your full name, your user name, password, and your email address. Your full name should be your real name, but you should think strategically when you create a user name. Your user name defines how people refer to you on the network, and sets up your personal URL. In Laura's case, she wanted to define who she represents, so she chose VADestinations. If you're setting up a Twitter account as the voice of your business, your business name is a smart choice. If you're trying to brand yourself, use a name that relates to your brand.

2. See if your friends are on Twitter

Use this option if you have a Gmail, Yahoo, or AOL email account. Sign into your email account through this page and Twitter will find all of the folks in your address book who already have Twitter accounts, so you can choose to follow them. If you don't have one of these types of email accounts, select the "Skip This Step" link at the bottom of the page. If you do, click Continue, and you'll be shown a page of potential contacts to follow. You'll often find people you haven't been in touch with in years. Once you opt to follow any or all of these people, a secondary page says "Why not invite some friends?" Use your discretion here. I'd advise skipping this step, since it sends a bulk mailing out to your address list. Better to invite people personally. Skip the "Look who else is here" page, too, unless you want to follow a bunch of celebrities. When you click Finish...

3. What are you doing?

You'll launch right into your Twitter home page, which should be full of comments from the people you chose to follow ... or empty if you skipped all of the steps in #3. No worries! Go ahead and type something in the box to get your feet wet. Then move on to...

4. Create a more robust profile

Go into the "Settings" option on the menu at the top of the page. Your basic account information will come up. Select your proper time zone and language, and define your location. Under the More Info URL, use the main URL that people can use to connect with you. The One Line Bio is very important. You have 160 characters to make an

impression. Each word helps people find you when searching. For Laura, we chose the following:

“Visit culinary and cultural gems in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia's Piedmont region”

Choose your words carefully to make an impact and to provide keywords for people searching for people to follow. Be sure to select “Save” at the bottom of the page after you make your changes.

5. Add your smiling face

Under the “Picture” tab beneath Settings, browse for a photo of yourself and upload it. It’s a simple but important step to take when establishing an account on any social network, since people naturally gravitate to other people, and will be less likely to follow you if your image is the default icon.

6. Reinforce your brand

Under the “Design” tab, you can change the default theme. I strongly suggest you take advantage of the “Change Background Image” option. If you’re savvy with Photoshop, create your own Twitter background. The general specifications are 1255x555 pixels, with room on the left for a 245 pixel sidebar and on the right for a 250 pixel sidebar. Optimize as a web graphic: your finished file size must be less than 800k. By creating your own background, you can match the colors and imagery to your existing branding on your website, and can include text on the far left side of the page to help market yourself. For an example, see my page at <http://www.twitter.com/sandrafriend>. There are also websites that will generate a free Twitter background for you (with their own branding element worked into the design), including www.mytweetspace.com, www.prettytweet.com, www.twitbacks.com, and www.arttweet.com.

7. Set up saved searches

Click back to your home page. In the right sidebar, you’ll see a search box. Use this to look up terms pertinent to what you do. If you’re representing a tourism bureau, you might want to look up popular destinations in your region, as Laura did. No one can see your saved searches but you, and it’s your strongest method of intelligence gathering. As you have time, check on your saved searches to see who’s talking about the topics you’re monitoring. It will help you clarify who to follow, and who to engage in conversation. For Laura, we saw the editor of Blue Ridge Country pop up in her saved search for “Blue Ridge,” so we followed her ... and she followed right back, more than likely with the expectation that @VADestinations would provide ideas for her magazine.

8. Engage in conversation

It’s easy to start networking with total strangers on Twitter if you have common ground to comment on. In Laura’s case, we immediately found a person commenting on her excellent experience at a local restaurant. When you see a comment you want to respond to, click on the arrow below the star highlighted to the right of the tweet. That will set up their username at the start of the response. Then, within the constraint of 140 characters,

type a short, meaningful comment or question about their tweet.

Once you've started responding to tweets, people will respond to you. More than likely, they'll follow you, too. You'll find their responses in two places:

- In the right sidebar, under "Home," you'll see your Twitter username. Click on it to see a list of everyone who's mentioned your username in one of their tweets. Typically, it will be people who want to ask you a question or are responding to an inquiry of yours.
- Click on Direct Messages to see a list of people who've contacted you privately. You can respond to them privately on this page.

9. Share ... and save

While using your saved searches strategically will help you reach out to new people, don't forget to share your successes – and your interesting finds – with all of your network! Share links to articles you're reading, and links to your blog. Twitter has been compared to a "modern-day telegraph" for its value in bringing up-to-the-moment news to people, so do your part by sharing your own breaking news when you can.

Make a habit of saving informative tweets in your own virtual clip file by clicking on the star above the arrow to the right of each tweet. Those tweets will go into your Favorites, accessible through the right sidebar. It's a quick way to save links of interest to follow later, and you can remove them from your favorites by clicking the star again.

10. Make time

Terrified that Twitter will suck up your time? It can, if you're not careful. Put your involvement on a timer. Depending on my workload, I may jump into Twitter once or twice a day to check messages and leave comments. I've found that the more I engage in conversation, the quicker my following grows ... but fragmenting my attention too much wreaks havoc with my work day. Better to slowly grow my network and stay sane. Pick a couple of times of day that work for you, and limit your use.

Author Sandra Friend came to travel writing with a background in Information Science and systems design, and launched her first travel-related website in 1995. You can follow her on Twitter at @sandrafriend