

The Twitter Revolution

How 140 characters has changed the shape of communications

I knew Twitter went mainstream the day that Jay Leno and Martha Stewart were joking about its pros and cons. This was within a week of the big Larry King-Ashton Kutcher faceoff (would CNN or Ashton hit a million followers first? Ashton won) and Oprah's debut on Twitter soon thereafter. For months now, my writing colleagues have been shaking their heads. What's this Twitter thing all about—and why should I bother?

What is Twitter?

Twitter is, in its rawest essence, a communications medium. Debuted in March 2007 by two web-savvy software developers, Twitter was launched to let people with cell phones send text messages from their phones to a website to update their friends on what they were doing. This set the 140-character limit of a Twitter message, or "Tweet," also known as micro-blogging. At our Atlantic-Caribbean Chapter professional development session last June, Shel Holtz mentioned he used Twitter from his cell phone to let friends know he was passing through a particular airport so they could meet up. The idea of sending one message to broadcast to an opt-in group intrigued me, so I jumped in. People were tweeting about their drives, dinner, their dogs, and signed off at night – "night, Tweeps!" – as if closing a radio broadcast. I didn't see much business use for it, until I started following the right people.

Who's following me?

The concept of "Following" in Twitter is much like someone tuning into your broadcast. You are under no obligation to follow back – although it does grow your crowd of followers if you do – because these folks are choosing to hear what you have to say. How do people grow a following? By providing useful content, and building relationships. When someone I follow asks a question (and I happen to see it), I try to provide an answer. When I read an article I like, I share a link to it on Twitter. I automated tweets of my blog posts. And if someone provides an excellent link, I share it (called retweeting). Each of these practices helps grow my following, which in turn grows my reach, or "twinfluence." Despite having less than 1,000 followers, I'm ranked 5,341, or in the top 10% of people on Twitter, which sure beats my Amazon rankings! Ostensibly, one of my tweets can reach more than 5 million people.

Why use Twitter?

There are dozens of reasons for using Twitter, best addressed in detail in a separate column. The exponential possibilities of your tweets being shared provide an unparalleled platform for your message, whether you're a travel writer or public relations professional. Celebrities like John Cleese and Demi Moore use it to respond directly to fans, skirting the usual gatekeepers and paparazzi. As people tweet, Twitter builds an organic search engine which you can use to track trends and find out what people are saying about you and your business. There are many companies now monitoring Twitter and doing just that. Take JetBlue. By assigning staff to keep up with Twitter, their customer service response is almost instantaneous. I tested it out recently on a trip to New York. I'd never flown JetBlue before, and was impressed by the legroom, snacks, in-flight television, and

friendly staff. I tweeted about it when I got to my hotel, and received a thank you from them. A few days later, my return flight was cancelled. I tweeted good-naturedly about it and got an immediate private response from JetBlue—“is there anything we can do?” Lo and behold, I was on standby with 24 other people, there were 4 seats left, and although I wasn’t at the top of the list, I ended up in one of them. Coincidence? Maybe. But with Twitter, customers have the opportunity to speak out—and companies have the opportunity to interact one-on-one with their customers to ensure top-notch service.

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