

Twitter for the Non-Tweeter

I had never used Twitter when work assigned me the task of tweeting about our store. Thankfully, my officemate (who's well-versed in the intricacies of Twitter) helped me out. I thought other new tweeters might benefit from a document to get them started. If I've written anything egregious, let me know: twobluebooks@yahoo.com

What is Twitter?

Twitter is a social network where users post messages of up to 140 characters. Each user has a unique username, and users can "follow" each other. You might follow your friends, who'll post where they are or interesting things they see. You might follow your favorite coffee shop, who posts the daily special and what music they have on. And you can create an account and post about your own happenings.

The many faces of Twitter

It's good to keep in mind that different people use Twitter for different purposes. Some only follow a few users so they don't miss anything, while others follow hundreds and therefore might not see your posts, even if they follow you. Some check their twitter account once a week, while others set their account to beep on their phone every time a new tweet arrives. Twitter can be a source of information, or an endless stream of chatter. Also, some users ask questions via Twitter instead of email.

How to Sign Up

Signing up for twitter is easy. Go to Twitter.com and type in a name, email, and password. (Remember that if you are tweeting for work, the name should be the business name.) You'll be prompted for a username; this is what will accompany your tweets, so (if you're tweeting for work) make it relevant to your business. You get 15 letters/numbers; Twitter will search and make sure the username is available. Incidentally, you can change your name or username after signup, but once you get followers, it might confuse them if it changes.

Twitter will prompt you to start following other users and sending tweets. I would skip this for now, instead checking the settings in your profile. If you don't see a menu tab for "Profile", go "Home" and it should appear at the top. Under "Profile," choose "Edit Your Profile." You'll see a second row of tabs: Account Password etc. (You can also access these tabs via the "Settings" link under your username.)

Under the "Profile" tab found in this second menu, you can add a photo, location, and bio, or adjust your name. For a business, the photo can be your logo or a relevant picture (like a cup of coffee for a coffee shop). Having a photo, location, and bio will make you seem like a legitimate user, which will encourage your customers to follow you. In addition to people and businesses, there are spammers on Twitter, as well as large

companies trying to promote a product to anyone anywhere. Once you poke around, you'll see that the users without photos or locations seem less appealing or trustworthy.

How to Get Followers

Let your customers know you have a Twitter account. Post a sign in your store, or fill a jar with strips of paper with your username, for customers to take. Post a link to Twitter on your website, on e-newsletters, or at the bottom of your email messages. (Look for "Twitter Follow Button" on the home page, to get instructions on how to put this button on your website.)

You can also start following other local businesses and any customers/friends you know, and they might follow you in return or mention you in a tweet. Once you are tweeting, others might re-tweet your tweets if they are interesting or useful, further getting the word out about you.

If you plan to use Twitter for a specific purpose, let customers know what to expect if they follow you. For example, "Follow us on Twitter to hear about the daily special." This would help if you don't plan to post regularly, otherwise, followers might think you are inactive/inattentive. (For example, "Follow us on Twitter to receive a note when we have a special event.") Some businesses offer specials via Twitter that only followers will hear about.

What to Post

You can post many things on Twitter. Articles on "how to use social media effectively" stress that 1) you should think of social media as a two-way communication, and 2) you should post useful, interesting content. Also, 3) life on Twitter moves fast, so don't post or repost anything too old. (A day old is old.)

Find a few businesses similar to your own, follow them, and see what appears on your home page. (When you follow someone, their tweets appear on your home page.) Do their tweets annoy you, or make you want to keep reading?

Here are some examples and my opinions on them:

1. Grapes are on sale this month! Only \$3.99/lb.

This has useful information in it, but this kind of tweet will get old fast. Also, it is too obviously an attempt to increase sales.

2. Today's special is the Triple Caramel Latte for only \$2!

This is useful, but best to do only once a day at most, and only if the specials change. (If this is the special every Wednesday, for example, it might get boring.)

3. The Oscar Meyer Wiener Mobile just drove past our store! Look for it on Main Street.

This is fun and real-time.

4. Mother overheard at the co-op, talking to her toddler: Well I'm sure Spiderman eats organic, honey, he's so healthy.

This is cute and real-time.

5. *Interesting article on coffee bean harvesting and fair trade* www.example.com

This leads your followers to something useful/interesting. Make sure it is relevant to your business, though.

6. *Just reading the paper while I wait for customers to come in. Bored!*

This is kind of pointless and self-indulgent.

7. *Just posted a new recipe on our website - Fried Green Tomatoes with Sour Cream Sauce* www.store.com/recipe13

This leads to useful information with the added benefit of getting users to your website.

Note about links to URLs: Twitter will “shorten” website URLs, creating an address that looks like a series of nonsense letters, but that forwards people to the actual website.

There are other services that can do this as well. I use one at www.s.coop because it is run by a co-op. An advantage is that, at www.s.coop, I can get statistics about how many people followed the link I tweeted, which tells me what kinds of links my followers are interested in. (Many URL shorteners provide this information.)

Re-tweeting

If someone posts a funny or interesting tweet, you can re-tweet it to your followers. If the original tweet is by @Foodimentary and says, “August 5 is National Beer Day”, your re-tweet will look like this:

RT @Foodimentary August 5 is National Beer Day

If you want to add your own thoughts, you can “fake re-tweet” it by copying/pasting and adding the RT yourself:

Thank God we have beer in stock! RT @Foodimentary August 5 is National Beer Day

(There may be a legitimate way to add text to a RT, but I have not figured it out in Twitter. Other tweeting services, like Hootsuite (described below) make it easier to do this.) You might also want simply to use the information in your own tweet, which may or may not feel like plagiarism, depending on how you do it. You can use “lists” to keep track of users who post interesting tweets (see below).

If someone “mentions” you, you might want to re-tweet it. For example, if Food Blog tweets “We had the best coffee @EmilysCoffeeShop this morning, read our review here www.example.com/blog/Emily'sCoffeeShop,” you could re-tweet it so that your followers see the review, or you could reply “Thanks for the mention, Food Blog! Glad you enjoyed the coffee,” and if your followers read the whole conversation, they will see the review. (More on replying below.)

Finally, if you mention another user in your tweet, it is courteous to use their handle (username) when possible; this will help your followers find them, so it is sort of a service to them. It will also alert them to your presence (your tweet will show up in their “Mentions” folder) and they might reply. Other tweeters might “mention” you, too! So, instead of tweeting “I had a nice coffee with the folks from Two Blue Books at the writers’ convention this morning,” you’d tweet, “I had a nice coffee with the folks from @twobluebooks at the writers’ convention this morning.” I know it looks weird at first.

Language and Timing

Follow other users to learn about the language/style and timing of tweets. For example, I started at my store by tweeting about products on sale. but once I started reading other tweeters, I realized how stale this sounded. Tweets are brief: no one expects you to use formal language. Also, you might think that you should send a tweet every hour, to increase the chances that your followers will see your tweet in their feed (i.e., on their homepage). But once you follow someone who posts this often, and get inundated by their boring tweets, you’ll think again. One article I read suggested no more than 3 tweets a day for a business.

Hashtags

Hashtags are the words in tweets that follow a #. They “tag” a tweet so that you can search it. For example, a group planning a science conference might ask all tweeters to include #sciconf in their relevant tweets, so that anyone interested in the conference can search #sciconf and view the whole conversation about the conference.

Hashtags have taken on a life of their own, however, being used to express irony at the end of a tweet:

New York gelato shops are great but I miss NC MapleView Ice Cream! #homesick

Sometimes, a ridiculously long hashtag--something that no one would ever search--is used as a joke:

New York gelato is great but I miss NC Maple View Dairy
#hardtoeaticecreamconeoncrowdedsidewalk

This blog post by Susan Orlean explains the alternate uses of hashtags:
<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/susanorlean/2010/06/hash.html>

Interacting with Followers

At my job, we follow most of the people who follow us. Once a week, I check our most recent followers and, if they are real people or local companies, follow them back. I’m not sure if this is useful, but it seems polite to do it. Following a user does enable the user to Direct Message us (see next paragraph). And, occasionally I spot something in the

store's twitter feed that catches my interest, but new tweets pop in constantly since we follow over 3000 users. (I use lists to help me view the tweets I want to see. More on this below.) Note that a lock symbol means you must get permission to follow this user. I do not try to follow anyone whose account is locked, since it seems creepy for a grocery store to ask to follow you.

Users might "direct message" you. You can view DM's under the "Message" tab, and send a DM back to the user IF they follow you. (You cannot DM users who don't follow you.) Note that many direct messages are spam, even if they seem to come from a real person. For example, something that says "This blog posted something bad about your business" is probably spam leading you to a bad website. So be wary.

If someone posts a tweet about you, or "mentions" you, it's good to participate if you can do it in a positive way. You'll have to decide about this. Also, you can decide to "reply" which all your followers will see (they can then view the start of the conversation if they wish), or you can DM for a more private response, if the user follows you. (There are tons of articles online about dealing with negative feedback, avoiding twitter mistakes, and what to do if you cause an uproar. The key seems to be honesty and humor.)

For example:

If someone tweets (for all her followers to see) "Hey @twobluebooks I think your book stinks!" I might send her a DM saying, "I'm sorry you don't like it; what would make it better?" I probably wouldn't want to create a public conversation for all my followers to see (although anyone who searched @twobluebooks would see her tweet; and replying instead of DM-ing would show your followers that you care and address concerns). To DM this person, use the icon that looks like an envelope, which appears when I click on her tweet or on her username. Don't worry about pleasantries, like, "Dear Joan," since tweets are known to be brief.

If someone sends a tweet about you and you don't know the answer, you still want to reply quickly. You can DM something like this: "Sorry you didn't like today's coffee. I'll pass on your feedback to our manager."

On the other hand if someone posts something useful or amusing, you can reply for all your followers to see. If someone posts, "Is the event still happening? It looks like rain," you could reply, "Our event is still on as of 3 PM, in spite of the cloudy sky. Call our store at 555-1212 for last minute updates." All your followers can benefit from the info. Also, this response is clearer than replying something like, "Yes, so far" which will seem cryptic to all your followers except the one who posed the question.

How to Keep Track of it All (Searches and Lists)

Every day, I log on and check “Your Tweets” to see if my coworkers posted any tweets, and when the last tweets were sent. Then I check the “mentions” tab to see if anyone tweeted anything I should reply to or retweet.

I also check the searches I have saved (like “Two Blue Books” and “TwoBluebooks”) to see if anyone posted anything about me using those terms instead of @twobluebooks. To create a saved search, first do your search using the search box. You can use quotes to search an exact term (like “Two Blue Books”). Then click on “Save this search.” Note that the search might not show up as “saved” right away.

Lists are useful for grouping users you want to follow. You might create a list called “Retweet Me” or “Interesting” and add users who post tweets that you can reuse. Then, when you have no tweeting ideas, simply check on the list and see if there is anything good. You might make a list called “local businesses” so you can see what your neighbors are up to. Lists can be public or private--so, if the coffee shop next door already has a comprehensive list of local businesses, and it is public, you can simply follow theirs. But if you don't want anyone to know whom you are keeping tabs on, make your list private.

To create a list or add someone to a list, go to that person's profile (just click on their username) and click on the icon that looks like a person. The drop-down should include “add to list.” When you click on this, your lists will appear (along with boxes to check) as well as the option to create a list.

Other Twitter Tools

There are other websites and programs that aid in the use of Twitter. The one I have used is Hootsuite, the main benefit of which is you can “schedule” tweets. While this takes away the spontaneity of Twitter, it can be useful for posting on weekends or when events are scheduled in advance. It can also save time, for example, you could post all 5 weekday specials on Monday morning, scheduling one each morning.

Hootsuite has a built in URL shortener that shortens URLs to a series of letters ending with ow.ly. This is cute because Hootsuite's symbol is an owl; interestingly, URL's ending in “ly” are controlled by Libya, so they can be turned off by the Libyan government, and their stability is subject to political unrest in that country! You can use other URL shorteners (like www.s.coop, see above) even with Hootsuite; remember that URL shorteners (including Hootsuite's and s.coop) provide you with click-through statistics. Hootsuite offers free accounts as well as paid accounts with more features.

Using Your Phone to Tweet

You can set up your phone so that by texting a message to a certain number (40404 in the US), the text message gets posted at your Twitter account. There are instructions on how to set this up (via phone) on Twitter.com; you can also log in to your Twitter account and set it up under the tab labeled Mobile (under Profile, Edit Your Profile). Note that once

your phone is linked, you may want to turn off notifications being sent to your phone, otherwise you will receive text messages every time someone mentions you. Do this under the Notifications tab. (From your phone, you can text OFF to stop updates.)

Linking Twitter and Facebook

Using Hootsuite (and probably some other programs as well) it is possible to link Twitter and Facebook, so that when you post a tweet, it appears as a new post on your Facebook page. Articles advise against doing this, however, because the volume of twitter posts is too much for Facebook, because the lack of information in a brief tweet is not appropriate for Facebook, and because Twitter and Facebook use different voices. Facebook “notes” have unique URLs that you can link to in a tweet.

This document was last updated by Emily Buehler on August 27, 2011.