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twitter

How to use Twitter in your business

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[Twitter](#) is a "micro-blogging" service that allows you to make posts of no more than 140 characters (including spaces). This allows you to send very short messages to people and therefore has a range of useful business applications.

Initially, when Twitter was launched in October 2006 it was seen as a method of updating people with your current personal activities. So, it quickly became populated with messages such as "I'm just going down to the shops" or "Had a bad day, off to bed now". These mini messages are called "Tweets" and their random and personal nature has meant that Twitter has not been seen as a serious business tool; but it is.

There are several ways in which Twitter can be used positively within businesses and organisations of all sizes. For instance, the Los Angeles Fire Department has its own Twitter account to alert people about current emergency situations; that could save lives. The University of Texas is using Twitter to pass on useful information to students. Hewlett Packard is delivering press release headlines via Twitter and the BBC is using Twitter as a breaking news service.

Clearly, there are plenty of organisations and companies using Twitter in innovative ways. But how can your business benefit from this micro-blogging tool? Well, the first thing to do is ignore the notion that it is just for people who seemingly want to tell the world they've just fed their cat, or made a cup of tea. Instead, think of all the kinds of short pieces of information a business needs to pass on. These could include:

* Staff in/out status
* News headlines
* Emergency information
* New staff appointments
* Event listings
* Price list announcements
* Stock availability
* Share price index

There are literally dozens of different types of short pieces of information that every business provides already - perhaps via phone messages, on web sites or in person. Twitter merely provides an extra delivery mechanism - and the means of automating existing ways of getting short items of information out.

The 140 character limit for Twitter is there for a reason - it means your Tweets can be sent via SMS (text messages) on mobile phones. Your customers, for instance, could choose to have your Twitter information sent to them on a mobile, or as an RSS Feed, or via email. As a result, Twitter can deliver short pieces of information in exactly the way your users want.

TWITTER AS A PR TOOL

As an example, consider the delivery of press releases to journalists. At the moment, it might come as a surprise, but almost no press releases ever get read by journalists. They are far too busy to read the millions of words that are sent to them each day. But what if your business had separate Twitter accounts for the, say, four groups of journalists you would like to

keep in touch with. They could subscribe to your specific set of Tweets relevant to their interests. They would be able to read the 140 characters and only then look at any more in depth information if they are interested. The "old" way of delivering the news meant that journalists were presented with the in depth material first - and this put them off right at the outset. The Twitter way of PR means increased engagement with the media. And this is just one possible way of using Twitter.

TWITTER AS A SALES PROMOTION TOOL

As another example, consider how you currently let customers know about price reductions or special offers. You might change your web site, or send emails, or print special promotional leaflets. Whichever way you choose, your customers either need to come to you or your web site to get the information, or you need to send them the information which makes them feel "overloaded" and hence it gets ignored. Now, with Twitter, you can update selected customers with a Tweet for each individual price change all via SMS or an RSS feed. In either case, customers only get the new price information they need, in a short bite-size chunk, making it much more acceptable.

Whatever kind of short pieces of information you send out already, Twitter will provide you with a way of making that material more accessible and more acceptable. Without using Twitter for short pieces of information, your business will start falling behind the competition which will be using Twitter as a business tool.

USING TWITTER IN BUSINESS

How do you start? Firstly, draw up a list of all the kinds of short pieces of information you currently produce or could produce. Then, write down all your separate audiences you would like to reach. With both of these lists you can then decide on the specific Twitters you can set up.

Having got your target audiences and sets of information organised, go along to Twitter and set up your free account. You will need one account for each target group you are aiming at. Once your accounts are set up, click on the Settings link for each one and then on the Notices tab and add a mobile phone account. This will allow you to update Twitter by adding Tweets from your mobile phone when you are away from your desk or don't have Internet access. You can also add a picture and change the design; you may want to do this if you have several Twitter accounts so that you can distinguish between each one.

You should also get a Twhirl account organised as this will allow you to manage your multiple Twitter accounts in one place. Twhirl is a desktop computer program, so it is only of value when you are at your PC; even so, it makes using Twitter much easier if you have several Twitters for your business.

Another multi-Twitter tool is Tweetlater. This allows you to arrange Tweets in advance. You could, for instance, programme in a series of price reductions into a price promotion Twitter that were automatically added over a series of days, or weeks.

One more essential tool is Twitterfeed. This allows you to automatically post items to a Twitter account from an RSS feed. So, going back to the press release example, you could publish the entire press release on your web site but use Twitterfeed to submit just the headlines to your interested

journalists. That way, all you have to do is write the full press release on your web site and let the combination of Twitterfeed and Twitter do the rest.

JOIN THE TWITTER CLUB

The Twitter Club is a useful source of information and help for anyone using Twitter. There are plenty of other Twitter users there who provide ideas and support; join in the discussions to find out more. There is also an active blog and discussion about Twitter at Twittown that is worth reading. You should also check the Twitter Fan pages to find a long list of downloads and services which can all enhance Twitter.

Twitter is not something you can ignore; there are increasing ways of using Twitter and every business can benefit from having at least one Twitter account. There are over 100 competitors to Twitter and Google has recently bought Jaiku. However, it is likely to have an uphill battle because of the vast number of Twitter users already in place. Google's argument is they don't need the Twitter users, as they already have millions of their own. What Google is forgetting is that Twitter is currently integrated with virtually every social networking site around. Adding members to Jaiku might be straightforward for Google; but disconnecting Twitter from the networks will be much harder. So, even though Google is currently working on the micro-blogging boom, using Twitter is a pretty safe bet. Besides which, if you don't start using Twitter, your competitors will.

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