

Getting started with Twitter—and why you should take the leap

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A year ago, almost no one outside of the tech world had heard of Twitter, the micro-blogging tool that lets you build community and swap news in 140-character updates. But, boy, have things changed! Not only are celebrities like Ashton Kutcher (@aplusk), and Demi Moore (@mrskutcher) on Twitter with thousands of followers (in a well-publicized campaign, Ashton Kutcher beat @CNN in a race to a million), so are editors like BusinessWeek's John Byrne. In fact, in the past four or five months, usage of Twitter has basic tripled, with users of the service going from 4 million to 8 million to 19 million world wide in a matter of months.

However, whether you're already on Twitter to share news with your friends, or waiting to figure out some business objectives, it's worth stepping back and planning a strategy.

Ask yourself: Why am I using twitter? What do I want to get out of it? And what would success look like?

If your goal is to help brand yourself professionally, both by sharing knowledge and connecting into a professional community, these tips can help you get started.

1. Set up a professional profile.

First of all, use your real name. That IS your brand, after all. On your Twitter profile, make sure you add a web link when you have a chance to do so. People who land on your Twitter profile page are going to go there and check you out.

I've seen people point to a LinkedIn profile or a Facebook page in lieu of anything else, but, clearly, pointing to a blog, a tumblr, or a web site is better--after all, the idea is to provide more data about yourself for people who might want to follow your twitter stream and get to know you as a professional.

2. Describe yourself carefully—it's searchable.

Make good use of those 140 characters you get to put in your bio. Because twitter is searchable, people will look for specific terms that match their interests. My current twitter bio says: " Blogger, urban homesteader aspirant, product developer, consultant & geek."

At an earlier time it might have said “Online media executive, media strategist, RSS fanatic.”

3. Put some keywords into your profile descriptions.

People are going to search on terms that interest them on twitter search (search.twitter.com) and phrases in your bio are going to pop up when they do so. So add phrases to your bio that reflect how you want to be perceived and your interests—and update them as often as you see fit.

4. Add a picture to your Twitter profile

You MUST add a picture to your twitter profile. No picture=Dork=Not real--and not in a good way. Find a picture. And add it. Pronto.

5. Keep your Twitterstream Open.

Everything you post to your Twitter stream is public and index able unless you lock your tweets and make them private. This means that someone who is not following you (i.e. importing your tweets into the twitter stream of their twitter account for a specific user name where they appear as you post them) can still see your tweets by searching search.twitter.com on your user name, or typing your username into the twitter.com URL (ex: twitter.com/susanmernit).

In other words, twitter is not private unless you lock your updates--On the other hand, it's very hard to participate in the conversation if you lock your tweets. So, don't. You are here to network.

How do I follow people—and will they follow me back?

The way you build community on twitter is to follow people and have them follow you, then have a conversation via the tool. Here are some ways to find people to follow:

1. Use the Find people tab

The Find People tab on twitter allows you to search for people you know, and to import your email contacts from many web based services and see who you know and then follow them. However, you don't need to follow everyone you have ever exchanged email with; be more selective.

2. Search on an interest or keyword

Another way to find people to follow is to search on keywords that interest you. Whether you are searching for "board member" or "reproductive justice" or "social media" or "micro-donations" you will get results, tweet by tweet. Check out the links to those posters; you will find

people who share your interests and concerns; follow the ones that interest you.

3. Understand that some, but not all, will then follow you back.

4. Know how to find people you know on Twitter

Search Google for the name of someone you're interested in and see if they have a twitter account.

If you search for "Susan Mernit" + twitter, my twitter account comes up. You can click to that link on twitter, get my user name, and follow me. Delightfully, this system works as well for people who have accounts using other names (like randomdeanna) as for "real" names. (Try searching for Deanna Zandt + twitter and see what comes up, just for proof it works.)

5. Be adventurous--Click on a name in a tweet or retweet if they seem relevant and/or interesting.

Serendipity and exploration are tools to use. As you see references to other twitters in your stream that seem relevant, check them out. There is no stigma to following someone you do not know, quite the contrary.

6. Position yourself, My friend Deanna Zandt has done some great posts about getting started with twitter and she has some positioning statements worth sharing:

* Pure professional. You're an expert in your field and you want to share this with the world. Pick a couple of "beats" and focus your twittering on those beats. Find other folks tweeting about these topics and have conversations with them.

* Pure personal. Your cat is hilarious, you're thinking about moving to Wisconsin, you're on your way to Miami for a much needed vacation. You get the idea here, but do try to keep your audience in mind as you post some of your life's minutiae. I'm guilty of posting weird stuff, for sure.

* The blended model. This is the way to go, and what ultimately makes Twitter so interesting, in my opinion. If I wanted to know people's political analysis only, I'd go read their blogs. There's a humanizing effect of reading about a distant colleague's child's first words, or seeing that people you think are on top of the world have bad days, too. It creates empathy and insight. When I tweeted that I'd had a really rough, emotional weekend once, I was surprised to see which followers spoke up to say, "Hey, we're with you." And it helped further complete a picture of me for them, as well.

7. Remember that Twitter is a conversation.

One of the joys most everyone gets out of it is talking to one another. Reply often (remember your vocab? the @ symbol is your friend!) to your followers and people you follow. Use Twitter as a two way street, with many, many lanes going both directions.

I want to try Twitter. Besides twitter itself, what tools should I check out?

In addition to Twitter (at twitter.com), which of course is your starting place, there are lots of other tools to enhance or modify your twitter experience. Some of the ones I currently favor include the following:

- * Socialtoo: Sign up for a free account that will report on twitter follow and unfollow stats via email updates, also use to create automatic follow-backs if you like.

- * Twitpic: Great too to take photos with your cell phone camera or camera and then post to twitter, viewable web site.

- * Qwitter: track who unfollows you and which tweet it happened after..

- * Twitterfall: Twitterfall gives you a way to follow tweets on a specific topic in a constantly refreshed, almost real time basis. This is a great tool for tracking breaking new stories or conference updates. You can select both a term or a hashtag and a location and sort geographically as well.

- * Tweetdeck: This downloadable client allows you to create and view multiple twitter streams at one time, by sorting them into groups. Great for high octane twitter scanning, overwhelming for many folks.

- * Backtweets: Search for web links at twitter

- * WeFollow: twitter directory created by Digg founder Kevin Rose. Add yourself and your #hashtags to a category.

THE TWITTER GLOSSARY, WHAT DO ALL THESE TERMS MEAN (USE THIS IF YOU WANT TO...)

Following. These are the people whose tweets you've selected to read; their tweets appear in your "feed" or "stream."

Follower. This is someone who is reading your tweets.

The @ symbol. Put this before any other Twitterer's username to refer to them. Why? It creates a link to their profile automatically, which is handy for your followers to track conversations or look at people you're referring to.

Reply: If you put the twitter name in front of your message, the person you address will see your tweet whether they follow you or not. So will everyone else following your stream. (Ex: @PresidentObama, make sure you eat those veggies from the White House garden, now.)

@replies will usually also show up the reply section of someone's twitter account. This has to be turned on in the settings, but most people select it.

Retweet: Rt, RT or rtw. These stand for "retweet." If you read someone else's tweet and you want to share it, put this before copying and pasting the whole thing, including the original tweeter's username into your tweet.

Here's an example, where Deanna retweeted something that Nancy Scola posted: "rt @nancyscola: isn't there something uniquely DC about 1/5 of Politico's "top 10" DC Twitterers not actually tweeting? <http://ow.ly/qmy>"

(Via): Instead of using retweet, you can use "via @username" to attribute something that you saw with another user. This is good when you are not directly quoting word for word, but paraphrasing or passing a link along.

Hashtag: The # symbol. Words that follow # in Twitter are called "hash tags." It's a way of assigning a keyword to a tweet so that so that others can follow the topic.

For example: When folks were attending the WeMedia conference in February 2009, they would tweet information about the conference and put #wemedia somewhere in the tweet. That way, everyone else interested in news from the conference could easily find and track them via twitter search.

DM or Direct messaging. This is a way of sending a message to someone so that only they can see it— like sending a txt message. The person has to be following you in order to receive messages from you, though! (No DMing Jane Fonda or Henry Rollins unless they're following you, ya hear?)

To do this, you can either go to the person's twitter page (aka, their profile page), and click on the "message" link in the left sidebar. Or, if you're using another device or application besides the Twitter website, you can type the letter d, the person's username, and then your message. I.e., "d randomdeanna let's go to happy hour at abilene later"

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