



TO TWEET OR NOT TO TWEET

THIS month, we take our second step into the world of Social Media, and look a little more closely at one of the most popular platforms, Twitter.

LET'S first dispel the myth that it's all about telling people what you had for breakfast. As a little taste of the much richer smorgasbord that is Twitter, here are just six things I learned from Twitter when I sat down to write this article:

- A colleague on my current project replied to a question I asked earlier in the day.
- "If only they enforced bank regulations like they do park rules, we wouldn't be in this mess."
- A contact is having a problem with a stuck volume control on her iPad.
- Australian futurist Mark Pesce said: "Closed networks are ignorance amplifiers".
- The world's lightest material has been created – a nanotechnology metal grid 100 times lighter than polystyrene foam.
- Somebody else is making their Christmas pudding this weekend, too.

So what does this all say about Twitter? It is amazingly diverse, if nothing else.

It is a way for people to stay in touch with each other; you can keep up with what's happening when you are out of the office. For some, it has eased them back into the flow of things when returning from maternity leave. For solo consultants, it provides the network that office-based workers can easily take for granted. Twitter can provide a support network for all types of needs – not only the IT needs, but there's a good chance that someone in

your extended network can answer almost any question. (For those within a company or community, there is also Twitter's organisational counterpart, Yammer, but that's another story.)

Twitter is excellent for short observations on current events. Tweeters are everywhere; many news events break first here before the traditional media can be on the spot. You can also expect to see pithy opinions and commentary on any subject. The other side of Mark Pesce's coin is that through an open network such as Twitter, you can amplify your knowledge and awareness. Many people pass on interesting things they read; from scientific journals, newspapers or blogs. Anything sufficiently interesting will be "retweeted", and thus propagated across the interconnected personal networks on Twitter. As observed recently on the Buffer Twitter Tips Blog: "Twitter exposes you to a range of thought and wisdom that has never before been possible in history."

Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters. You can see a lot of messages in only a small piece of on-screen real estate, whether computer or smartphone. The speed at which those messages appear depends on how many people you choose to follow on Twitter. Twitter is an asymmetric system – you can follow anyone you like; others choose whether they follow you. You may follow a few close friends, or thousands of acquaintances. Demi Moore has over four million followers, but only follows 30,000. (By contrast, Yoko Ono follows back almost half of her 1.7 million followers.)

So what does all this mean to my business? Can I use Twitter as another marketing channel?

Well, yes and no. It is much more than a channel – it is more conversation than megaphone. Again, it's about openness and engagement. People will only come in and join you when you open the door.

Qantas was roundly criticised for using its Twitter account to just push out "mechanical" announcements of the recent fleet grounding, and not directly engage with followers. This behaviour potentially contributed to further damage of the company's reputation. Virgin took the opportunity to use Twitter to promote its services to stranded passengers, to great effect.

Twitter communication also has to be honest and transparent. It must be clear who is writing the tweets. When Hugh Jackman tweeted "Having lunch on the harbor across from the Opera Center" in 2009, it became immediately obvious to Australian observers that a media minder was writing his tweets. (He subsequently apologised.) Julia Gillard is now writing some of her own tweets, and personally replying to some of her 150,000 followers.

By using Twitter to fully and openly engage with your audience, you can develop your own unique competitive position. You don't need to do it all by yourself; your followers will help you, so long as you are listening. Support your customers, and they will support you.

In the next issue, we will have a look at Facebook. For now, I'll leave the last word with Pete Williams, the CEO of Deloitte Digital here in Melbourne: "It can be scary, but my sense is that if you don't embrace change, and understand how you can leverage it, you will just fall behind."



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