




Twitter Best Practices: Your Guide to Getting Started

*A whitepaper produced by
StrongMail in collaboration with TWTRCON*



Twitter can help you win customers, drive sales, find & solve problems, and manage your brand. If you do not have a Twitter strategy, you need one.

The previous sentence is under 140 characters, the maximum length of a “tweet.” And yet it captures the power of this relatively new short-form messaging system. Twitter has quickly become a critical business communication tool, not just by measurement of its user base, but because it allows businesses to engage with their customers in real-time, and in a highly personal and effective manner.

Twitter offers several advantages over other communications channels:

True immediacy: Twitter updates are posted in real-time, without delays imposed by ISPs or email account gatekeepers. The impact of those updates – new conversation comments, direct sales, feedback for customer service and market research – can also be observed, measured and analyzed in real-time.

Greater ability to be conversational – and this time we mean it: While other communication channels claim to be conduits of “dialogues,” their ability to truly facilitate two-way conversations is limited. Twitter is, by its very nature, a discussion stream where two or more people can actively participate in a fluid conversation.

Going public: To go a step further, the conversations on Twitter are usually public, meaning that anyone can participate. This public dialogue has the potential to nurture deeper and more organic community building around a brand or topic.

Device- and connection-agnostic: Twitter users, including marketers, can post and read tweets from virtually any device – a desktop computer, a smart phone or even via SMS. This flexibility creates the opportunity for customers to comment at any time, and enables marketers to be very nimble with their Twitter accounts.

The Power of the Retweet: Because Twitter messages are public, there is an unlimited opportunity for content—and links to content—to be shared and re-purposed.

Twitter’s immediacy, its potential as a conduit of conversation and community-building, its ease of use and its ability to amplify your messages create a compelling value proposition.

As a marketer, what’s the best way to build and manage a Twitter strategy? This whitepaper will get you started. You’ll learn the basics of how to:

- ▶ Establish your Twitter objectives and goals
- ▶ Build a presence on Twitter
- ▶ Develop compelling content and dialogues
- ▶ Grow and engage your follower base
- ▶ Manage your Twitter operations and measure your performance

Establish Your Twitter Objectives and Goals

The first step to any effective plan is to define your endgame. What are your goals? Your Twitter program deserves the same rigorous process of defining objectives and goals that you would bring to a marketing plan or a new product launch. Your goals and objectives will help drive how many Twitter accounts you should manage, how you brand and operate those accounts, what kind of content and conversations you seed each account with, and what business expectations are set for your overall Twitter program. Here are some thought-starters to help you craft goals and objectives for your Twitter program:

Identify areas of your business that can be served by Twitter. Examples of functions and their possible goals and objectives include:

- ▶ **Marketing and promotions:** build awareness of new products and services, communicate special offers for your Twitter followers, drive foot traffic to physical locations
- ▶ **Customer service:** gather feedback, listen and respond to complaints and questions, and solicit ideas from customers
- ▶ **Sales operations:** take orders and provide delivery updates
- ▶ **Public relations:** disseminate important news and information, help drive attendance for special events, create events exclusively for Twitter followers ("Tweet-Ups")
- ▶ **Human resources / recruiting:** communicate job openings and promote the organization as a preferred employer



Example: JetBlue heavily uses its Twitter account for customer service issues and to solicit feedback.

Define your metrics of success. Every well-crafted goal should be measurable. For each of your Twitter initiatives, take the time to define specific metrics you can use to understand your performance. Examples of these metrics are customer service issues resolved, retweet rate (percent of your tweets retweeted by others) and resumes solicited. Over time, these metrics will help to advance your efforts to analyze and benchmark your overall social media marketing program.

Conduct a competitive analysis. What are your competitors doing on Twitter? What seems to be working for them? What are opportunities that you can exploit?

Read case studies. A steady stream of Twitter case studies flow from industry publications, marketers and even Twitter itself. Keep up with the latest new uses and success stories.

Learn from the experts and your peers. Attend conferences about social media and Twitter like TWTRCON. Consult with experts in the field. Keep the lines of communication open with your peers, and share information, tips and tricks with each other.

Build a Presence on Twitter

The process of creating your official Twitter identity is fairly straightforward:

Create and complete your “bio” on Twitter. Make sure to include a clear description of your brand, the kind of content you plan on posting, a link to your Web site and (brief) information about other related Twitter accounts, if applicable. For your account user name, it’s critical to choose a straightforward but compelling handle. Your existing customers and fans should be able to quickly identify your account name if they search for your brand. Also, complete your bio; it will set expectations for your followers, attract more qualified followers who are interested in your brand and the topics you will present, and drive traffic to related sites or other Twitter feeds. If a specific employee or spokesperson is executing the actual tweets for your account, include that information in the account bio to help personalize the account and set the context.



Twelpforce Best Buy

@twelpforce Anywhere you need us
A collective force of Best Buy technology pros offering tech advice in Tweet form. Search www.bbyfeed.com to find your own answers...
<http://www.BBYFEED.com>

Example: Best Buy’s technical help Twitter bio clearly communicates its objective, the type of content communicated in the feed and the Web site where consumers can find more information.

Create a Twitter avatar and custom background. Have a logo or product package? Consider featuring it as your Twitter avatar and account page background to help build and reinforce your brand equity. Using your brand imagery will also help your followers and potential followers discern your “official” Twitter feed from copycat accounts.

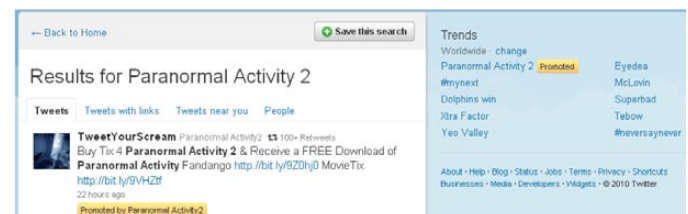


Example: Maker’s Mark bourbon uses its packaging’s distinctive wax stamp as its avatar and features its bottle on its Twitter page background.

Protect your brand and create credibility for your account.

You can help build credibility for your Twitter account by linking to it from your Web site and other “official” communication touch points. Leverage the trust you have built in other channels to create interest in your Twitter account.

Test “Promoted Trends.” Twitter is constantly developing new tools and display techniques to help marketers call greater attention to their brands. One available practice is paid “Promoted Trends” that place a brand (or a topic related to a brand) at the top of the trends list and facilitate easier searching for that brand or topic. Techniques like Promoted Trends can be easily tested and tracked to determine lift and ROI.



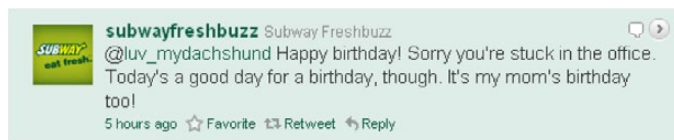
Example: Marketers of the film Paranormal Activity 2 sought to create additional buzz around its launch by sponsoring a Promoted Trend.

Develop Compelling Content and Dialogues

You have control over your Twitter account. Wait...that statement is only half true. While you do have control over what you post as the feed owner, your followers have the ultimate power: they can tune you out or “unfollow” you if your posts (or the discussions you encourage) are not valuable or otherwise worthwhile. To help attract and engage your stakeholders, here are a few tips to create compelling content.

Listen before speaking. Before launching headlong into feeding content through your Twitter account, investigate how your brand is organically being mentioned by individuals on Twitter. The conversation topics that include your brand may offer cues for your own content planning. Furthermore, a listening exercise may help you discover a content hole that your Twitter feed can help to fill. Keep in mind that, like all market research, listening is not a one-shot deal; you should constantly monitor conversations about your brand on Twitter so that you understand the consumer environment, plan your content or proactively head off any emerging issues.

Put significant effort into making your feed conversational. Publicly ask and answer questions, and encourage people to tweet their thoughts on the topic. Address concerns, and ask for feedback or input. If individuals retweet (RT) one of your tweets, thank them through a Direct Message (DM), or publicly if appropriate.



Example: Subway, via its Subwayfreshbuzz Twitter account, engages in public dialogues with its followers.

Share relevant content, even if it's not generated by your brand. Post links to helpful resources – even to other sites that your followers may find interesting. Retweet other tweets that your followers would find valuable or compelling. Being generous with information and outwardly helpful will build credibility for your account and your brand. Retweeting and sharing content (with attribution to the original source) will also help boost the number of your own followers.



Example: The North Face peppers its Twitter account with a combination of product announcements and information that cater to the outdoor enthusiast.

Drive conversations across communities. Understand and leverage the strengths of different mediums to drive engagement and results. Some brands share breaking news on Twitter but then encourage followers to join the discussion on Facebook. Play to the strengths of each medium and use them to drive conversations and create distinct experiences across the social Internet.

John Force makes personal best 4.06 run at Kragen O'Reilly Winternationals - join the discussion on facebook
<http://gf5.ly/6011ZL>

9:53 PM Feb 12th from Sprinklr



8 people like this.

Brian Strom John is BACK!!!
3 hours ago · Delete · Report

Hattie Luce Hilburn way to go john, sad you had to take out your little lady.
3 hours ago · Delete · Report

Mark Bundren Nice Goin John, i think its gonna be a good year of racing. Im ready for Houston already. (Its the closest race for me)
3 hours ago · Delete · Report

Carolyn Schellhardt Happy day!!! Tony lost, Greg Anderson lost, and John won!!!
3 hours ago · Delete · Report

Andy Alvarado On a hole shot no less! Go Team Force!
3 hours ago · Delete · Report

Toni Delano Way to start the year. Go TEAM FORCE !!!!
3 hours ago · Delete · Report

Example: Castrol USA uses Twitter to break racing news but then encourages users to join the discussion on Facebook.

Publish Twitter Lists to further extend your content and attract followers. Similar to retweeting, creating lists of other like-minded Twitter accounts will help provide your followers with valuable and fresh content. And many of the Twitter accounts that you include in your lists will also reciprocate and list your feed, thereby increasing your visibility in the channel.

Focus on exclusivity and special content. Offer your Twitter followers content and information they either cannot get elsewhere or grant them “first to know” status. It can help keep them engaged. While you don’t always have to give your Twitter followers the “scoop” at the expense of your other channels, it’s a good practice to make them feel special as often as possible. This can range from exclusive discounts on the promotional side to sneak previews and Twitter-only interviews (“Twitterviews”) on the content/media side.



Example: Pepsi used the tweet below to promote one of its sponsored sporting events by giving away prizes to attendees who were also following on Twitter.

Test content themes and reward your loyal followers. Your followers may respond positively to certain categories of content such as polls, trivia, historical facts or challenges. Track engagement with these categories of content and go back to the well as needed. Devise ways to reward or recognize your vocal or influential followers who participate or win.

Be responsive. Listen and respond to customer inquiries quickly. Recognize where the customer is coming from (by geography, communication touch point, lifecycle, etc.), and respond accordingly.

Encourage followers to use hashtags when discussing a certain topic. A hashtag is a method of categorizing posts around a specific topic. A hashtag consists of a “#” symbol followed by a term and included within a post. Using hashtags enables a conversation topic to be easily searched and can create an instant community around that conversation. Marketers often use hashtags when discussing a specific product/brand, conference or event, or even a current topic in the news. Sometimes a hashtag becomes so popular that it becomes a “trending topic” on Twitter and gains even further momentum.



Example: To help create word-of-mouth buzz, Coors Light encouraged its followers to talk up a free iPad giveaway by asking them to retweet the information and use a specific hashtag when tweeting about it.

Consider multiple Twitter accounts to streamline content or satisfy different objectives. Depending on your brand and communication goals, you may be best served by maintaining separate Twitter accounts. Define what content you want to message and determine if certain types of messaging may be overshadowed in your main Twitter account. For example, if you use your main Twitter account for customer service, you may want to roll out a separate feed for offers and discounts. Just be careful you don’t create too many accounts, or you’ll run the risk of diluting your efforts. If you do add multiple accounts, create and secure a naming convention so you can be easily found and followed.



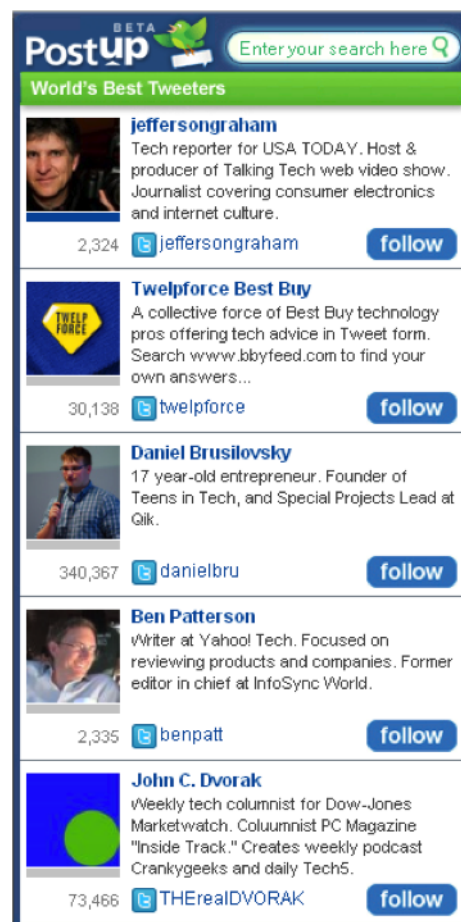
Example: The National Basketball Association uses its primary Twitter account for game updates, special offers and breaking news. It launched a separate Twitter feed dedicated to historical facts and trivia to target its more avid fans.

Don't be a spammer. It may be obvious, but it needs to be said. Focus on contributing relevant, worthwhile tweets and retweets. Many Twitter users have a hard time cutting through the clutter – don’t give them a reason to cast you aside. The more valuable the content in your Twitter feed, the more you will engage your followers.

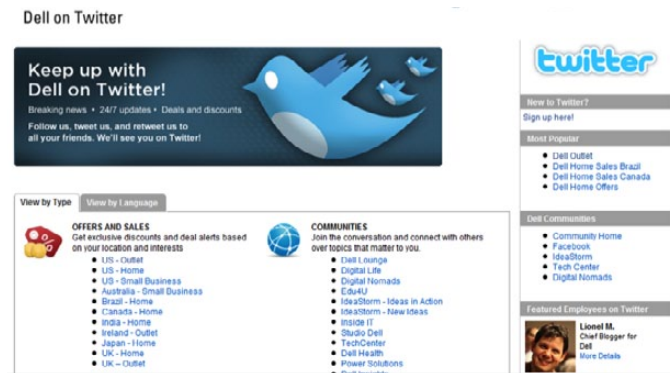
Grow and Engage Your Audience

Wait, why does “build your audience” come after “develop compelling content?” Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Actually, one of the best ways to build a base of engaged and loyal followers is to deploy great content and encourage your followers to help spread the word. Once you have the hang of engaging your followers with quality content, your audience will grow naturally. Even so, there are a series of steps you can take to reach out and start building momentum:

Integrate with other communication touch points. Do you buy media, staff a call center, produce point-of-sale materials, manage physical locations, send direct mail or manage other digital touch points like a Web site or email? Leverage those contacts to remind your customers and partners to follow you on Twitter. It’s one of the easiest, quickest and most cost-efficient ways to grow your Twitter base.



Example: Silicon Alley Insider, a Web-based publication, includes a widget on its home page that features a feed from the “World’s Best Tweeters” to help showcase fresh, compelling content and encourage reader interaction.



Example: Dell aggregates all Twitter communities on a jump page allowing consumers and clients to easily follow and engage with the most appropriate employees and divisions.
<http://www.dell.com/twitter>

Find people already tweeting about your subject, and follow them. Enter your brand name into Twitter Search or on Twitter-related sites like wefollow.com. From there, you can identify people who tweet about your brand or about topics relevant to the audience you're looking to attract. If you follow them, it's likely that they will reciprocate and follow you back. If they find your content valuable and retweet your messages, you will most likely pick up some of their followers too. You can also look for experts in your field by tapping into helpful sites like wefollow.com which organizes influencers by topics and key words, e.g. "racing". Tip: don't automatically follow everyone who may tweet about your subject. Go for quality, not quantity: follow back users who share your interest and passion for the topic.

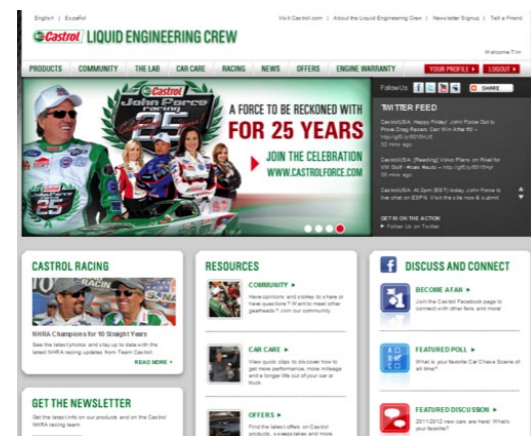
List your Twitter account in directories. Services such as Twellow.com, Twibes.com and followfinder.googlelabs.com help individuals organize their Twitter accounts by subject area. By listing your account in these directories, potential followers can easily find you. Tip: steer clear of tools that automate the following process or promise to secure thousands of followers overnight. Odds are, you'll acquire followers who are spammers and bots, or simply not interested in what you have to say.

Showcase your most engaged Twitter followers. Feature your most active and valuable Twitter followers on your Web site, email newsletter and other touch points. Publicizing these individuals—and their tweets—and demonstrating your appreciation of them may help acquire other like-minded consumers who are interacting with those touch points but who have not yet followed you on Twitter.

Identify your key "influencers." Use CRM data and social media data overlays to understand who among your customers are on Twitter and how influential they are. If you follow them, chances are that they will reciprocate and become a key source of followers.

Propagate your Twitter feed beyond just Twitter.com.

"Widgetize" your Twitter feed and integrate it into your Web site. Not only does it expose potential followers to your Twitter content, but it can also provide fresh, engaging content on your Web site.



Example: The NBA features a social media pod on its home page that includes a real-time feed from its Twitter account. Castrol incorporates both Twitter feeds as well as the latest Facebook poll and discussions prominently on its loyalty home page.

Manage Your Account and Measure Performance

Scaling up to create a reliable, consistent Twitter business strategy may require some additional resources and planning. As your account grows and you see the rewards of your initial forays, you may want to consider some of these best practices:

Create a team micro-blogging strategy. In order for your operation to be nimble, responsive and relevant, you'll want to involve a broad group of people in the initiative. The good news is that many people and groups across your organization will benefit from a successful Twitter presence. Get them involved. Recruit from different functions to help bring breadth and depth to your Twitter presence, as well as to imbue a sense of ownership and buy-in throughout the organization. Functions typically sourced for Twitter resources include digital/Web, marketing, communications/public relations, content/editorial, operations, market research, sales and human resources. Invest in a tool to help manage conversations and accounts with multiple users.

Get a campaign management tool. Real-time campaign management tools are extremely cost effective and provide tremendous operational efficiencies, such as the ability to schedule tweets or to convert content RSS feeds into tweets. In addition, they can enable tracking and reporting to measure performance. Some of the best also allow you to easily create lists, to manage and grow audiences and to port data back into your datamart to enhance customer profiles.

Analyze engagement to improve your tweets. By understanding when your followers interact with your tweets and what type of content they prefer, you can continually optimize your Twitter operation. Use this information to build a communication schedule.

Gather market research, in real-time. Twitter is a powerful tool to help keep your finger on the pulse of what your customers are saying about you (and your competitors) – in real time. Using immediate customer feedback through tweets and responses to surveys, you can better understand your customers' attitudes and preferences, and leverage that information to quickly inform business decisions.



Example: After social media users used Twitter to flood The Gap with criticism about a new logo, it decided to revert back to its previous, traditional logo.

Create new customer satisfaction and service metrics. Track the number of customer service questions and issues posted on Twitter, and develop metrics that measure how successful you are in resolving those issues.

Be a stickler about channel attribution. Use unique coupon codes for Twitter-only discounts and offers so you can track Twitter-driven conversions and traffic more accurately. Shorten your URLs using a service like bit.ly that can track link clicks through Twitter.

Understand the dynamic between public and private tweets. Public @mentions can be viewed by anyone on Twitter. They certainly serve their purpose in terms of building your community and nurturing public discussions. However, if you are communicating with a customer about a topic that is sensitive or the conversation contains personal or private information, then consider switching over to private Direct Messages with that customer. It's often the discrete way to handle a one-to-one dialogue with a customer.

Two green lines start from the top left, curve downwards and to the right, then loop back to the left, ending near the top right.

Conclusion

Twitter is a still-new ecosystem that is constantly evolving. A great deal of its evolution is driven by its users. In fact, many of Twitter's product innovations, including @username messages, hashtags and retweets, were originally suggested by the platform's users. The takeaway: Twitter and other social media will continue to change at a quick pace, and businesses are discovering new ways to benefit from Twitter every day. The techniques and best practices of today will morph into new ones tomorrow. By galvanizing your internal team and partnering with experts, you can stay current with best practices, maintain and grow your follower base, and ultimately build competitive advantage.

About the authors/contributors:



StrongMail's Agency was created to provide leading brands with digital-marketing expertise, award-winning creative and market-leading email and social media technologies - in order to optimize CRM across multiple marketing channels. We create lasting, powerful and meaningful conversations that grow your relationships and business.

Our approach is simple: Deliver the best possible results by turning your best customers into your strongest advocates. Ready to see how StrongMail's Agency can help your brand connect? Visit us at www.strongmail.com

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TWTRCON (<http://twtrcon.com/>) is entirely focused on the business use of the real-time web. TWTRCON produces the TWTRCON Business in Real-Time conference, a one-day event that features case studies from leading brands, workshops led by social media practitioners and mini tutorials about real-time tools. The company also publishes social media business case studies, statistics and videos on its web site at TWTRCON.com. TWTRCON is produced by Modern Media, a team of people dedicated to driving innovation in the media industry.

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