

How to Twitter Effectively

Hey,

Today I want to talk to you about Twitter and how you can use it effectively.

Let's get started...

When I first joined Twitter, I felt like I was in a noisy bar where everyone was shouting and nobody was listening.

Soon, I began to decode its many mysteries:

- how to find a flock of followers
- how to talk to them in a medium that blasts to lots of people at once
- how to be witty in very tiny doses.

Twitter is a mass text-messaging service that allows you to send short 140-character updates - or "tweets" -- to a bunch of people at once. They are your "followers." It was designed to be read on a cellphone, though many people read it online, too.

Suddenly a lot of non-tweeters are starting to feel left out. It has a world-wide audience of six million unique visitors a month, up from 1.2 million a year ago, according to ComScore Media Metrix.

But I have to admit I didn't understand the appeal of Twitter when I joined, at the prodding of friends, in November. One answer that explains its popularity: It's not about chatting with your friends -- it's about promoting yourself.

My name was available, so I set up a profile. On Twitter, however, you do not exist without followers, who subscribe to receive your messages. So I set out to follow some people in the hope that they would follow me.

I had to learn the crucial distinction between a "follower" and a "friend." On Facebook, if I'm your friend, you're my friend, and we can read all about each other. Relationships on Twitter are not reciprocal: People you follow do not have to follow you or give you permission to follow them. You just sign up and start following them. It's a bit like stalking. Heather Gold, [a comedian](#) and [Twitter devotee](#), points out that for all its flaws, the term follower "is more honest than friend."

At first, I was the loneliest of social creatures -- a leader without followers. I tried searching for my actual real-world friends using Twitter's "Find People" function, but it was down the day I joined. (Twitter is growing so fast that short outages are not unusual.)

So I asked a few colleagues for their Twitter addresses and began following them. I also searched their public lists of followers and who they followed.

Eventually, I cobbled together a mix of people I could follow: media colleagues, friends, bloggers and various people who are known as great "tweeters," such as the chief executive of online retailer Zappos.com, Tony Hsieh, who has written quite movingly [on his blog](#) about how Twitter has changed his life. He says that being forced to bear witness to his life in 140-character bursts of prose has made him more grateful for the good moments and more amused by the bad moments.

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I discovered that a better way to get followers was to tweet. Every time I tweeted, I got a surge of followers.

Where were they coming from? The likely answer illuminates Twitter's greatest strength: It's easily searchable.

During the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November, people scoured Twitter for postings from eye witnesses. When US Airways Flight 1549 landed in the Hudson River, one of the first pictures was posted as a link on Twitter.

Similar news items may have appeared on other social networks, but they were not as easy to discover. On Facebook, most people's information is viewable only by their approved friends. MySpace profile pages are searchable, but not its blogs or status updates, and it is hard to find anyone you know because most people obscure their real names.

Now, a gaggle of unknown followers were finding something in my tweets -- and following me!

I quickly found that my general musings about life such as -- "thank god they have wifi on jury duty" -- fell like a dead weight, eliciting no response. A larger problem was that it was hard to tweet when I didn't know whom I was tweeting to. Unlike Facebook, where I know each and every one of my 287 friends, I have never met or heard of the majority of the 221 people following me on Twitter.

To understand the medium, I studied others' tweets. Former Time magazine writer [Ana Marie Cox's tweets](#) are a poetic mix of moments like this: "Afternoon walk. Beautiful day, I now see."



Stuart Bradford

And she included wry political commentary. Forwarding a tweet from Sen. John McCain during the presidential election, she wrote: "See, if only he had sent this a year earlier... RT@senjohnmccain "YEs!! I am twittering on my blackberry but not without a little help!"

I spent a surprising amount of time trying out tweets in my head before tweeting. I aimed to tweet once a day, but often came up short. I found it difficult to fit in both news and opinion. Without a point of view, though, my updates were pretty boring. So, for instance, I changed "eating strawberries during a snowstorm." Into "eating strawberries during a snowstorm. not carbon efficient but lovely."

Another trick: including a short link to a Web site, or my own stories (using link-shrinking services like [TinyURL](#)), let me use most of the rest of the 140 characters to compose a thought.

I found a good way to get followers was to get "retweeted" -- meaning that someone would pick up my tweet and send it to their followers. As a result, I gained 22 new followers.

People also seem eager to answer questions on Twitter. I came across 25-year-old Justin Rockwell, who was spending so much time answering people's tweets about how to build better Web pages that he says he decided to try it as a business. He now makes about \$350 a week scouring Twitter for people tweeting about their problems building Web pages. Using the Twitter ID [ThatCSSGuy](#) (which refers to a Web program called CSS), he offers to help solve their problems and asks for a tip in return.

Twitter Glossary

@: At reply. A public tweet directed at a fellow Twitterer, such as @Barack Obama, that shows up in their Twitter stream.

DM: Direct Message. A private message that appears in a Twitter inbox. You can only direct message people who follow you.

RT: Retweet. A tweet that you like so much that you are resending to your followers. Usually includes credit to original tweeter, such as RT @BarackObama, followed by the tweet.

Whale Icon: The iconic blue whale that pops up when Twitter is down. It appeared frequently in Twitter's first year and a half.

#: Hashtag. Used to designate a topic such as #SanDiegoFire so that people can easily search for tweets on a topic. (It is totally unnecessary, though, because a search on a keyword without the # returns the same results).

Nudge: A feature that lets you send a note to a Twitterer encouraging them to tweet more frequently. You can only nudge people who are tweeting from a mobile phone.

But I found it difficult to acknowledge answers I received on Twitter. Twitter's reply features felt clumsy. The easiest way to reply to a tweet is to hit the @reply icon which broadcasts your answer to all your followers, essentially Twitter's equivalent of the "reply all" email function. As a result, I often didn't reply because I didn't want to spam everyone with a bunch of "thanks for your feedback" messages. So I was silent -- which made me feel even more antisocial.

Twitter wasn't designed for these kinds of social interaction or conversations. As Twitter co-founder Biz Stone told me, "Twitter is fundamentally a broadcast system." The messaging features were add-ons.

Twitter is useful precisely because so many people are talking about different things at once. When he was president of Sling Media, for instance, [Jason Hirschhorn](#) constantly monitored the keyword "sling" on Twitter. "It's an up-to-the minute temperature of what people are saying about your brand," he said. He left the consumer electronics company last month.

There are more than 2,000 Twitter applications made by other people to help you sort through all the tweets. One of my favorites is [Twitturly.com](#), which tracks the most popular URLs (or Web links) being shared across Twitter. Others such as Tweetdeck and Twhirl, help you manage and organize your tweets.

Still, the beauty of Twitter is that you don't have to commit to it; no one expects you to read all the tweets rolling in. As a result, Twitter makes for very good people watching -- even if you don't go home with anyone you meet there.