Twitter

Quick Facts

- Twitter has seen exponential growth in users since its inception in 2006.
- Over 250 million users worldwide, with about 60 million in the United States.
- According to some sources, Twitter surpassed Facebook as the preferred social media platform of teens in 2013

Basic Functions

Much more than Facebook, Twitter is an interactive platform, encouraging users and organizations to share updates, photos and short videos instantly as well as to "Favorite," "Re-tweet" or "Reply" to others' updates. In this way, Twitter is truly a platform for two-way dialogue between an organization and those who follow it.

Twitter also is highly mobile, with more than ¾ of its users interacting on the platform primarily via mobile devices. Its streams provide a minute-by-minute or even second-by-second accounting of what the world is talking about at any moment.

Twitter as News Platform

Twitter allows users to customize information streams to curate types of information they receive from only outlets they prefer. In this way, it has become a powerful tool for sharing and receiving news. The instantaneous nature of Twitter has made it a natural fit for sharing and receiving breaking news updates and visuals. The 140-character limit on updates means achieving clarity in few words is imperative, and linking to more detailed information housed elsewhere.

In this way, Twitter is a good tool to use to share information about news and events from your organization. Since thousands of tweets are sent every second, it's likely that your tweet could be lost in the avalanche of updates on your followers' feeds. Thus, it's a good idea to promote events in advance and repeatedly. Of course, there must be a balance between sharing well-crafted updates more than once for the benefit of your followers and "spamming" them with repetitive, verbatim messages.

Composing Effective Tweets

Given the short character limit and thousands of competing tweets launched every second of every day, effective tweets should be optimized to pack a punch, be visible and be shareable. Short, punchy headlines that stand out are best. In addition, be mindful of character counts.

While the limit for a message is 140 characters, use less if possible. At minimum, try to use 3+the number of characters in your Twitter handle less than 140 (e.g. for @DominicanU, 3+11=14; leaving 126 characters to play with). The 3 characters are

for "RT ", which goes before your handle when someone re-tweets you. This allows for others to Re-tweet your full message without losing information.

Going even further below this number allows others to append their own short message to yours when re-tweeting you.

Another way to cut through the constant barrage and make it easier for those who may be interested in your content to find it is to use hashtags. Add a # symbol in front of keywords that are meaningful to folks in your industry. Doing so will turn that word into a link your followers can click on that will take them to a stream of updates from others who have used the same hashtag.

From silly TV catchphrases to serious calls for social action, hashtags help organize the thousands of conversations happening simultaneously on Twitter and allow for meaningful shared experiences by strangers united by common interests.

At Dominican, we often use hashtags to help people share their perspectives during shared experiences such as graduate (#DUgrad2014), Alumni Weekend (#DUaw2014) and acceptance season (#DUbound).

Sharing Links

Sharing links is one of the most powerful aspects of Twitter. Share links to information important to your audience, news items both from your organization and others that your audience is likely to find interesting, or other good content.

To pack long URLs into short updates, use one of the many ubiquitous link-shortening tools such as bit.ly, is.gd or ow.ly. These tools will shrink your long URL into custom short URLs that won't eat as far into your 140-character limit.

Sharing Photos and Videos

Twitter allows for sharing of photos through a variety of supplemental tools by which you can upload a photo and share an automatically generated link to the image. However, in 2014, Twitter began integrating photos more cleanly into users' public timelines when uploaded through the Twitter.com interface—photos now display automatically without users having to click a link. So, if you have a great photo to share, take an extra minute and upload it through the Twitter.com interface.

Videos of up to 6 seconds in length can be shared through Twitter's subsidiary app, Vine. Obviously, these aren't feature-length films, but rather are more like video snapshots that can provide a glimpse into your organization. If your video is longer, upload it to YouTube or another video hosting service and share a shortened link to it. When you do, let people know by including the word Video or VIDEO: in your update.

Spread the Love

Since Twitter is a highly personal platform, with person-to-person (or person-to-organization) conversations happening publicly, it's important not to forget about the two-way nature of those conversations. It's best not to use Twitter only to push out your own messages.

When others share information that is relevant to your audience, re-tweet them. When others share good insights or mention you positively, favorite their tweet, or reply back to them with a friendly thanks. When organizations acknowledge and demonstrate that they value their followers, the result can be a stronger relationship not just with the targeted individual, but all who see the interactions on their feeds.

Give credit where credit is due. If someone shares a great piece of content, one of the best ways to acknowledge that is to share it with your followers. But be a good sharer and give credit either by re-tweeting the originator or acknowledging them with a shout-out (s/o) or other credit ("via," "thx to," etc.).

At Dominican, we have many insightful, interesting Twitter accounts under our umbrella. Heed the call for collegiality and help other offices and departments spread their good news and other updates to outside audiences.

Using Apps

Also unlike Facebook, few users interact with Twitter via the twitter.com interface. Rather, most people use apps such as HootSuite, TweetDeck or iPhone or Android device apps.

Generally, these apps are useful in allowing users to organize the updates from others they follow into categories. This becomes a practical necessity for users who follow hundreds or even thousands of others.

Integration with Other Platforms

In addition to Vine, Twitter integrates seamlessly with other social media tools, including Facebook, Google+ and Instagram. It's possible to connect these tools individually or through a social media management service such as Hootsuite and cross-publish a single update across each platforms.

Doing so is not recommended.

While in some cases, such as a text-only emergency notice, this can be an effective and timesaving practice, for most updates, it's best to tailor them for the platform and the audience on each platform.

For example, a post of more than 140 characters may be fine on Facebook and Google+, but will be cut off in the middle on Twitter, potentially leaving out important information. A tweet that mentions another user by their @handle will look silly on a platform like Facebook that doesn't use the same reply system. Instagram photos can be automatically published to your Facebook on Twitter feeds, but the image that looks great on your might look strange on those platforms. In addition, photos not natively uploaded on Twitter won't automatically show in your feed.

Most importantly, not all of your users use all of the same platforms as you. Different platforms are different for a reason, and users of different platforms seek different things from each. So it only makes sense that you wouldn't share the same information in the same way on each one. Study your audiences on each, and tailor your updates based on both the nature of the platform and the interests of your audiences. Think "narrowcasting" instead of "broadcasting."

Scheduling Tweets

While large companies and others who are expected to be available via social media 24 hours a day, most folks understand the responsibilities associated with managing social media, and that smaller organizations can't be expected to have netizens online round-the-clock. However, since mobile apps have made it possible for social media managers to check in on their accounts any time in any place, if you have a few free seconds, take a weekend peek at what's happening, and chime in if you have something to add.

You can relieve some burden by using services such as Hootsuite, which allow you to schedule posts in advance. This can be a helpful tool to ensure you have consistent posting even when you're not on the clock, or to promote things at off hours, such as weekend events.

Still, use common sense, and be mindful. "Set it and forget it" may work for turkey roasters, but not for social media. There's nothing more embarrassing than scheduling a tweet for an event two weeks in advance and forgetting about it, only to have the event canceled in the meantime, while an hour before the planned start time your account feverishly commands folks to "get in the door before the curtain opens!"