

## Mind Your Micro-Blogging Manners

Robert Stribley, December 2008

If you have any doubt about the impact of Twitter as a powerful forum for communication, talk to the folks at Motrin. In mid-November, Motrin pulled an ad aimed at mothers – or Motrin Moms – from the homepage of its Web site after scores of angry moms protested on Twitter that the ad slighted them for using baby slings. As a result, Motrin had to restructure their site after taking it down for part of the day.

Arguments followed as to whether Motrin should've pulled the ad or not. Perhaps, some argued, they overreacted to a vocal, if highly organized (thanks to Twitter), minority of voices. Regardless, the episode is another milestone in Twitter's growth and proof of the economical power it affords. Instead of smarting at the impact of the medium, companies would do well to embrace it, as a powerful and economic means of Social Influence Marketing™.

### Why Your Company Should Be Using Twitter

Any company or organization hoping to communicate with and learn more about its audience would do well to establish a presence on Twitter. Why?

#### 1. Ease of Use

Setting up a Twitter profile couldn't be easier. It takes seconds and there's little need for further design, other than uploading a logo. The addition of a simple, nicely designed background couldn't hurt, and some thought should certainly be given as to what helpful information should accompany the company's profile. From there, the functionality of creating and posting "tweets" couldn't be simpler.

#### 2. Low Overhead

Setting up a profile takes very little investment and, depending upon the company, shouldn't take much time to monitor. It might even be attended to somewhat informally in addition to someone's (or a team's) other duties.

#### 3. Creates Good Will

When administered judiciously, an active profile on Twitter can generate good will for a company. For example, consider a pharmaceutical company, which offers a drug for the treatment of diabetes. The company could use Twitter simply as a means to push its product, spamming those unfortunate enough to subscribe to its feed. Or, more helpfully, a dedicated subject matter expert could search for tweets on diabetes in general, subscribe to the profiles of those regularly tweeting on the subject, and then engage them in conversation about diabetes and their specific needs. The company's products

might never be mentioned. From there, they might tap into a diabetes-related social network and contribute to the community, creating good will for the company – in addition to many, many valuable contacts.

#### 4. Affords a Wealth of Information

Twitter has only been active since mid-2006, yet there's already a wealth of content available to savvy searchers on any subject you can imagine. Naturally, that means there's a lot of commentary on various companies and organizations, the public's perception of their respective identities, as well as their products and services. That content should be a goldmine to any company wishing to monitor and maintain their brand. [A search on Disney](#), for example, reveals that company's name is mentioned in some context or another every couple of minutes or so in the Twitterverse – and that's without anything Disney-related cropping up in the news. Does Disney have a presence on Twitter? Apparently not. [Dell](#), it may not surprise you, does. Smaller companies like Hulu and [Revision3](#) are known to trawl Twitter for mentions of their brand, too, whether or not they have a presence there.

## How to Behave

Regular users of Twitter will have noticed a tremendous influx of media, public relations types and, yes, even corporations over the past several months. Now you can jump onto Twitter to find out not only that your friends are tossing back beers at the local pub, but that JetBlue flights are delayed due to weather, that a Presidential candidate has just announced his VP selection, that there's an earthquake in China, or that a famous journalist has just died of a heart attack.

While they all certainly enrich Twitter, these relative newcomers would do well to follow a few protocols in order to ensure the service remains a valuable and engaging experience.

#### 1. Publish in Moderation

Regular users of Twitter know the disappointment of adding a person or an organization only to find their screen dominated by that individual or company's tweets upon subsequent visits to their homepage. Tweeting indiscriminately serves only to annoy users as it clutters their screens, obscuring tweets from entities they care as much or more about. So don't dominate the virtual conversation. For example, if a user signs up for general news alerts and starts receiving scores from random sporting events or celebrity sightings, it may not be what they had in mind. Save the more granular information for narrower channels and alert users to more important events. CNN's Breaking News feed on Twitter ([cnnbrk](#)) does a good job of this. You can pretty much trust it not to interrupt you with a news story, unless it's a significant one.

Other organizations, however, don't always get the medium. Signing up for one news service, for example, I opted to have their updates sent directly to my phone. Big mistake. I was awoken at 1:15 in the morning as 14 consecutive tweets shot through. Apparently, the newspaper had published 14 new stories to its Web site, which automatically triggered 14 updates on Twitter. My phone was ringing incessantly and I had to unsubscribe from phone alerts right away. Clearly, someone set up a feed to load Twitter every time a batch of content is deployed on the paper's Web site. So even if

your phone doesn't go off, a visit to Twitter reveals a screen full of the paper's articles. If it's inconsiderate for an individual to broadcast their every thought or motion, then it's inconsiderate for a newspaper to do so, too.

On the other hand, Austin's [The Statesmen](#), apparently the fourth-most followed American newspaper account on Twitter, is curated by an Internet editor and proclaims itself "not just a feed." That's the right direction. Have a real, live human being tailor updates for Twitter, rather than batch deploying an incessant series of headlines with links.

## 2. Don't Have a Presence Without a Purpose

Some companies simply haven't established a purpose for their Twitter accounts. For example, [AirTran](#) and [American Airlines](#) currently seem at a complete loss as to what to do with their largely abandoned accounts. Better to follow the examples of [JetBlue](#) and [Virgin American](#), who often tweet discounts or delays to their flights due to weather and respond directly to customer inquiries and suggestions. Both airlines do this in a largely informal fashion, generally eschewing marketese. Similarly, rather than creating a profile and waiting to accumulate followers, [Comcast's Frank Eliason](#) began tracking down customers' tweets of the issues they experienced with the company's services and responding to their concerns. He still engages in friendly, helpful banter with customers throughout the work day. That's a model with purpose.

## 3. Don't Spam

The beauty of Twitter, of course, is that users don't have to subscribe to anyone's updates at all and can unsubscribe without the publisher's aid (this fact alone should mean a death knell for email). If I subscribe to a company's feed for updates and current information, I probably won't appreciate them seeding their updates with incessant links to products and services. Of course, it's any company's prerogative to advertise its goods as often as possible, but they should also keep a sense of balance in mind. If all I see is product being pushed my way, that "Unfollow" button is only a click away.

## 4. Be Credible

Companies can easily make the mistake of electing the wrong person to address the Twitter community. They should select someone with an authentic and authoritative voice, who can address the public's issues in the right tone, providing the right sort of feedback. With that in mind, depending on the company and its products, a subject matter expert is probably a better choice than a marketing employee. Either way, the person (or people) providing that voice should ensure it keeps the customer (or user) in mind, so they're not seen simply as pushing the company's product or point of view.

Companies hoping to take advantage of this powerful new medium would do well to adhere to these simple evolving protocols, if they hope to add value to the information stream, rather than choking it up. Twitter is likely still in its nascent stages, despite the intense growth we've seen in the medium in recent months. Smart companies – and smart people – would do well to jump into this medium now to take advantage of the torrent of valuable information it offers. It's your stream to channel, and its value increases the more you invest in it.

What did Motrin learn from their tangle with Twitter, you might ask? It's hard to tell. Almost a full month after the incident, they have an out-dated apology notice on their homepage. And no presence on Twitter. What a wasted opportunity.

### **About the Author**

Robert joined Razorfish as an information architect in June 2006. He has acted as both an IA and content strategist for Razorfish, Wachovia, iXL, and Computer Associates working with clients in the financial services, hospitality, media, IT, and automotive industries. At Wachovia, he worked with a small team, which was awarded one of The Nielsen Norman Group's awards for Ten Best Intranets of the Year (2003). He holds degrees in broadcast journalism and English education and is a freelance critic of music and the arts. He's also scribes on Twitter.

### **About Razorfish™**

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