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Nine Twitter tips for business

How to strike the right balance when using this popular messaging service

by [Jason Snell](#), [Macworld.com](#)

[Twitter](#) is so red-hot right now that it's united Shaq and Oprah. It's also so good at attracting buzzwords that I can't decide whether to call it a microblogging service or a social-networking Web site. But it doesn't really matter what you call it, or whether you prefer to follow [Ashton Kutcher](#) or [Britney Spears](#). What matters is that users are taking to Twitter in [massive numbers](#). And your business should be there, too.

Does this mean that plumbers need to start posting messages about what they had for breakfast in order to drum up sink-repair orders from desperate Internet hipsters? No, but you can and should use Twitter to connect with your customers, clients, and fans in a way that you couldn't do before. Here are some tips on how to use Twitter effectively—and a few cautions, as well.

1. Don't automate it

If you've got a blog that's connected to your business, you can use a service such as [TwitterFeed](#) to directly channel your new blog posts into Twitter posts. Sounds nifty, doesn't it? Well, don't do it. Your business's primary Twitter feed ought to be hand-fed. If you publish a flood of impersonal links, your Twitter account will just seem like a faceless promotion machine. And that's not any way to engage people on Twitter. Link to the very best stuff on your blog, as well as relevant stuff you see elsewhere on the web, and also post items that don't contain links at all. (Don't forget to use a URL-shortening service such as [tinyurl](#), [is.gd](#), or [xrl.us](#) for your links.)

2. Be conversational

Your business's Twitter account should talk like a person—even if it's a collective "person" representing your company or brand. Think of your Twitter account as a character in a little Internet play—it's a walking, talking personification of your entire company. If you feel like it, take it to the limit: Use the first-person ("They're putting my stuff on sale again!"), invent a personality. Or just use the royal "we" and "our"—"Our editors have the latest on so-and-so." But be chatty.

Some companies prefer to disclose members of their team when they're tweeting from the company account. That's a valid approach, too. For example, the clever group-tweeting service [CoTweet](#) (currently in beta) can automatically append your initials to the tweets you make while representing your company. (Macworld is testing out this service to see if it makes it easier for a group of our editors to jointly operate our various Twitter accounts.)

3. Follow people who are relevant

From your Twitter account, follow everyone on your staff who uses Twitter. Follow colleagues in related companies and in your industry. Follow relevant brands and journalists and pundits in your market, even those who compete with you. It's polite to follow people. And by following people you are creating an ecosystem—people will see who you are following and consider those as suggestions for users *they* should follow as well.

4. Make sure your people are on Twitter, and refer to them

Individuals tweet different things than companies. It's okay for your company's employees to talk about making waffles or going out for drinks, as well as what they're working on. Not everyone will embrace Twitter, but many of them will—and even the most personal stuff that leaks on to Twitter can help make stronger personal connections with colleagues and audience members alike.

This being said, you need to be aware of who your employees are—and make them aware that everything they write on Twitter (unless they're using a "protected account" that limits access) is public. If there's someone who works for your company whose Tweets are a bit risque, you should consider whether or not you want to refer to them from your company's account. An alternative is to ask employees to create two Twitter accounts—one for work matters and one for their personal lives—and keep them separate.

Once your people are on Twitter, they'll be able to mention what they're working on—and reference the brand via Twitterspeak. For example: "Just wrote a cool story for @macworld about the iPod shuffle." That will drive followers to your company's Twitter account.

Likewise, your brand's account can drive followers to your people. For example: "Our very own @vacuumguy thinks the new Dyson is awesome: tinyurl.com/example"

5. Answer your mentions

People will refer to your company's account as if it were a person. You should reply to tweets

that mention you, when relevant. This will give your account more personality and will make those people feel engaged directly with the brand. For example, a person might ask you a question directly: “@macworld Hi. Do you know when Apple will enable SMS message forwarding on the iPhone? Thanks.” “@janevans35 Apple’s not saying, but we hope it’s with the next major software release!”

6. Search for your name

Beyond mentions, which are specific references to your Twitter account, there are probably people using Twitter to talk about your business. Use Twitter’s [powerful search features](#) to find those references, either from the Twitter Web site, a Mac-based Twitter client program such [TweetDeck](#) or [Tweetie](#) that supports saved searches, or even via your RSS reader by subscribing to the RSS feed linked to from every Twitter search results page. There are a lot of companies offering great customer service and support on Twitter by watching what people say about them. When I groused on Twitter about my bad luck finding a JetBlue flight from Oakland to Boston, within a half an hour I had received a reply from the JetBlue Twitter account with an explanation.

7. Consider creating sub-accounts for sections of your business or customer base

If you’re part of a big enough company, consider creating smaller, more targeted accounts. Starting a new section of your site devoted only to fans of the banjo? It might be worth starting a new @joesmusicbanjo account, then Tweeting about it from your company’s main account: “Banjo lovers rejoice! Welcome our new friend, @joesmusicbanjo to the party!”

8. Use Twitter to ask your customers questions...and get good answers


Twitter is a great way to get answers to questions. Trying to figure out what your customers want to see or are interested in? Use Twitter to ask them. Sure, it’s not a scientific survey, but it can give you an immediate snapshot of the zeitgeist. This can be both instructive and productive. About five minutes before I went into a product briefing with Apple, I used Twitter to ask readers what they wanted to know. I ended up with dozens of great questions, and used them as the framework for the article I wrote after the briefing was over.

9. Be a good Twitter citizen

Can you persuade your Twitter followers to promote you to *their* followers? Sure, but be mindful: He who has the most followers doesn’t necessarily win. If you get people to promote you to their friends in order to win a prize or enter a sweepstakes, you may end up creating a harmful backlash. I’ve seen it happen myself: Recently, a software-deals site offered a free program to anyone who would tweet about its bundle to his or her friends. The people who tweeted were rewarded, but many of their friends felt like they were receiving spam. Even though the people who tweeted were complicit in the act, it was the company that induced the tweeting that received the bulk of the criticism. The etiquette of Twitter is still evolving—be wary.

Even if you’re not the type of person who uses Facebook or Twitter yourself, there’s no

denying that these new forms of connection and communication are powerful and becoming increasingly important. That's why your business should be on Twitter now.

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