



INSIGHT

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How to Tweet and Not Be a Twit...

So you have 140 characters - too short to say much, but long enough to get yourself into trouble. But that's Twitter for you. Millions have joined, but few really understand how to use it. Facebook might be a good way to stay in touch with your friends, but power Tweeters have realised that Twitter is much more than a bit of fun. It's about building direct connections with people who may be your most valuable customers.

Doctor Yoshiro Nakamatsu is one of Japan's most eccentric inventors. Not only did he famously invent the CD while holding his breath at the bottom of his swimming pool, he also wrote down what he ate for breakfast every single day for the last 30 years. Despite what some people might think - random bits of personal trivia is not what Twitter is for. The real power of Twitter is in its simple ability for you to share content. Interesting thoughts, links, pictures, videos - Twitter is the ultimate distribution platform of users hungry to redistribute your best stuff to their own networks. Here are five ways to get the most out of the service:

1. Build Your Herd

There is a big difference between a follower and a friend. You will not have met many of the people that subscribe to your updates. In fact, you probably will not even know who most of them are. But whether you are a dietician who tweets with regular nutrition tips, or the tour manager of a pop star who regularly shares the inside story on what goes on behind the scenes of a rock concert - people will follow you when you have something useful to say. That said, unless you happen to be Ashton Kutcher with almost three million followers - the best way to start building your herd is to stay focused on a topic, and work on getting other people in that space to retweet your comments and shared links.

2. Influence the Influencers

In the very early days of email, there was a short window of time when you could get important people's attention by emailing them directly. Suffice to say, that no longer works. However, whether you are trying to connect with a high profile venture capitalist or a company you would like to work for - following them on Twitter, replying to their posts with smart observations, and sharing useful information with them is a good way to get them to pay attention to you. At least, that is, for the next few months until everyone else figures out how to do it.

3. Track Trends

Twitter is becoming a very powerful source of real time information. Google is great for things that have already happened. Google the Gulf War and you will find millions of sources. But for situations that are unfolding in real time, Twitter is unbeatable. Just recently, the US State Department went so far as to ask Twitter management to postpone a scheduled maintenance downtime. They realised how influential Twitter had become to people sharing and looking for information on the Iran elections. Of course, it's not just politics. As a brand manager, you can also track what people are saying about your brand in real time. Either use the query field on search.twitter.com, or set up a permanent search of your brand name on a desktop application like Tweetdeck. Think of it as the ultimate trend engine, without a focus group.

4. Go Direct

Many companies use blogs as a way of talking in a more informal tone about their industry, new product releases and their company culture. Twitter is a great complement to your online conversational strategy. The advantage of building a large number of followers on Twitter is that it's easier to get their regular attention. While a customer might only check your blog every now and then, they are more likely to click on a shared link to a new blog post or enter a competition that you tweet to them. Twitter is also a great way for your customers to talk back to you. Even the best customer support systems can bury critical problems that are evolving in real time. In the Twittersphere, for good or bad, there is no where to hide from what people think and say about you.

5. Turn Your Events into Platforms

If you are holding an event or a conference - one of the most valuable things you can do is to make use of the hashtag format to standard tweeting. So for example, if your next sales conference is called 'Loyalty Unleashed 2009', you might create and publicise the Twitter code #LoyaltyUnleashed to all attendees. This will create a simple method for everyone involved to start a public conversation about the speakers and the issues being discussed. Not only will this allow you to aggregate these comments on your website or on public screens at your event, people who are not even there will start to take notice and take part in the conversation.

Conclusion?

Twitter is not rocket science, but it can be highly combustible if handled clumsily. Unlike traditional marketing, you can't hide behind slick advertising or your PR department. On Twitter, authenticity counts. If you pay your agency to tweet for you, sooner or later, you will be found out and you might have been better off staying silent. But after all, that's really the point. You can't have a conversation with your customers, and not expect them to talk back to you. If you want to know more, you know what to do. Follow me on Twitter - www.twitter.com/mikewalsh