



Could you retweet that please?

Debbie Mayo-Smith explains the many twists and turns of Twitter.

A few months ago I caught up with an old colleague of mine, Nigel Horrocks. You may recognise his name. He's been involved with the Internet since 1991, helped set up Telecom's Xtra, and was the award winning editor of NetGuide.

"What do you think about Twitter?" I asked. If anyone knows their Internet, it's Nigel.

Up to our coffee, I had just flirted with Twitter and 'tweeted' a bit. A tweet is the Twitter message, you're allowed a 140 character maximum. How can you ignore a social media application that has five billion tweets and is used by 20 percent of those on the Internet?

Nigel said "Well Debbie, Twitter began as a place to send txt-type messages about what you're doing right now. It has now evolved as a recommendation engine. You follow people you trust and take note of what they say or advocate – movies, products, services, interesting news, web links. Some sites, especially blogs, are finding the 'referrals' from Twitter links are now becoming bigger than 'referrals' from Google."

The benefits for business

Twitter has multiple business benefits. It's a superb vehicle for promotion, for example. Just think of the exponential audience possibilities. For instance, say you have 2000 followers and each in turn has 2000 (small numbers by Twitter standards). If only 20 of them 'retweet' (akin to forwarding an email) your contest, event, or blog, your message is instantly in front of 40,000 people – and for free.

Use Twitter as a type of focus group for feedback and testing ideas. Twitter search finds who's talking or complaining about your company, then you can put the fire out instantly.

Experiencing information overload? Let thought leaders, industry movers and shakers or even your friends sort through the Internet for you – their tweets directing your attention to relevant and useful content.

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There are a few negatives you must put up with though. For example:

- Serial Tweeters. Many tweeters rattle off an outrageous number in a row. Less is more in my book. Then you have the people who tweet every clichéd inspirational message they get their hands on. After a daily dose of five or six you can't help but gag. Or do the next best thing...un-follow.
- Celebrity watch. Yes, I like having Stephen Fry, Jimmy Fallon, Justin Timberlake and more talking to me. But really. Is even one thing they say relevant to me or my world?
- Time wasters. How could you get one thing done if you read the tweets of your 6,231 followers? Yes, you can split whom you're following into different groups to prioritise. But even your high priority list will deliver many inscrutable replies into your stream. With no relevance to you whatsoever, they tally up to wasted time.
- Inscrutable. Normally you can look at a hyperlink and have a feel for where it will take you. The brevity required in Twitter means most shorten the links. You'll have no idea of a click payoff.
- Accepted form of plagiarism. While retweets are the golden reward for Tweeters, spare us from the plethora of plain, boring, unoriginal people whose sole content is retweeting others!
- Spam followers. Being naïve I would almost clap my hands when I had a new follower. The brilliant Dave Cooper (king of search engine optimization and now technical director at Saatchi and Saatchi)

told me over coffee that many of the Twitter applications have automatic follow features. For example, a Twitter search for Tweets with the word 'motivation' gives you 5000 people. You can follow all 5000 with a single click. Let's not forget the 'automatically follow who follows me' button. There you are, building an irrelevant list. When I now get a message like Desta Jones (who?) who is following 35,987 in now following me, I don't bother to become 33,886.

As you can see, the benefits can seriously outweigh the drawbacks of Twitter. One caveat, as Nigel noted: "personal tweeting is easy; but businesses need experienced eyes to use it as a marketing device. The wrong comment could easily be retweeted and damage your brand."

Personally, I'm toying with creating a second Twitter identity called @pissedoffmum. But until then, why not follow me @ms_effective on Twitter for business quick tips and ideas?

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