

Twitter

James L. Horton

*Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.*

Alexander Pope
An Essay on Criticism, 1711

Anyone who pays even minimal attention to technology has heard by now of a short message service called “Twitter.” (<http://www.twitter.com>) Major media – *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Financial Times* all have written stories about it. Some are transmitting headlines to readers through Twitter. Blogs have blathered on about Twitter. Even presidential candidates like John Edwards are “tweeting.” This is a fast rise for what has been described as a 140-character mini-blog. The rise has been so rapid that Twitter has generated opposition from those who dislike getting beeped about the inane things people do in their lives.

A question in a PR practitioner’s mind is what, if anything, can one do with such abbreviated communications to serve internal and external clients? How much one should get immersed in a technology that asks “What are you doing?” Twitter strikes many as self-referential and egotistical, and it is, but it needn’t be just that.

What is Twitter?

Twitter is a free service blending instant messaging, social networking and wireless communication through computer and cell phones to distribute 140-character messages about what someone is doing. A person opens a Twitter account and invites friends to join or connect with other members. A Twitterer gets a personal Web page that shows each post. One can “tweet” just to friends or read what others are saying about themselves. Twitter says the service is for “staying in touch and keeping up with friends no matter where you are or what you’re doing.”

There are competitors and add-ons to Twitter such as:

- **Pownce:** (<http://pownce.com/>) Pownce lets one send things to friends, such as music, messages, pictures, links, etc. It is more functional than Twitter but there are fewer users and at the time of writing, it was still under development.

- **Jaiku** (<http://www.jaiku.com/>): Jaiku's goal is to enable people to “share their presence.” It is similar to Twitter in that its mini-blogs reach both computers and mobile phones.
- **Mobio**(<http://www.getmobio.com>): Mobio makes small software applications, called widgets, for mobile phones. The widgets work together and deliver various web services including Twitter.
- **Various add-on applications:** Because Twitter has been fast-growing since its introduction in early 2006, developers have been scrambling to build applications that hook to it including a Google Map that shows where a Twitterer is “tweeting” from and a “TwitterGram” that lets one send MP3 sound files through Twitter rather than text messages.

What people are doing with twitter?

The idea that everyone wants to know what one is doing every moment of the day is hard to believe, and there is evidence that Twitterers are starting to cut back on revelations of what they are doing in their quotidian lives. *The Wall Street Journal* (July 11, 2007) noted this in a recent column:

“Twitter began life last year... At the time, skeptics, this column included, viewed Twitter as just the latest example of Internet exhibitionism mixed with information pollution. Why did I need to know that blogger X just had a chicken sandwich for lunch? Lately, microblogging appears to have reached a burnout phase among the early adopters in the tech world....”

As is usual with new phenomena in the tech world, there is an effort to justify what people are doing. Twitter calls these 140-character messages “ambient information” about a person. Jaiku calls them “social peripheral vision.” Neither explanation seems to carry much long-term communications practicality.

On the other hand, there are times when others do want to know what one is doing. One “twitterer”, for example, dispatched updates from the delivery room as his child was being born to those waiting to hear the news. A small technology company announced a new product launch using Twitter. News organizations such as the BBC are using Twitter as an alert service for headlines and a BBC reporter used Twitter to track his trip through Turkey in order to keep readers up to date on what he was doing. A sports team has used Twitter to provide scores to fans. At least one TV show has used Twitter for promotional purposes.

What PR practitioners could be doing with Twitter.

The various uses that individuals and companies have found for Twitter already suggests practical uses beyond answering the question, “What are you doing?” It is clear that Twitter can function as a short and fast message service like telegrams of old or wire service news headlines of today. Twitter also can be used for promotion – a celebrity tracks his or her day for fans, for example, or a CEO lets employees know where he is and where he is going to be. Twitter also can provide researchers with a glimpse into the real life experience of others. Short, 140-character messages can allow one to limn a day of a product or service user, for example. All of these communications could be done as easily by e-mail but Twitter is appealing because it is new, brief and fits easily into computers and mobile phones. Twitter forces one to maximize meaning in limited space. Less is more.

Twitter’s advantages are its limitations. It provides focused communication with a purpose, but when there is no purpose to communicating, one should turn off Twitter. The “Technorati” of the world regrettably think everything they do and say has purpose. They don’t and won’t. In other words, one should use Twitter well rather than indiscriminately. Otherwise, people will ignore it eventually. Twitter is work, not fun.

A Passing Fad?

Will Twitter last or is this technology yet one more passing fad from technology developers? It is too early to tell. It requires a retrospective of two to three years to see what happens. However, Twitter has the feeling of a complement to other services rather than a standalone application. It strikes this older member of the technology world of being similar to spell-checking and grammar-checking software that word processing users bought separately before Microsoft merged them into its word processing program. Twitter also suffers from spam – already! – and the more junk messages that flood into the application, the less people will pay attention to it.

One point is clear. Twitter and its ilk suffer from too much hype. PR practitioners should experiment with Twitter to see if its practical applications might work in their jobs -- for example, quick alerts to employees (*“We won the big contract!”*) or perhaps, local promotions along the line of “Where’s Waldo?” (*I’m at fourth and Main. The first one to greet me here wins free pizza for a year.*)

Twitter, however, is not a killer application that everyone needs to know like word processing or spreadsheets and yes, PowerPoint.

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