



SPECTRUM

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Social Media

Here a Tweet, There a Tweet... So Why Not from Our Organization?

Answer these six questions before you make Twitter a part of your organization's marketing, public relations, or strategic communications plan.

Let me begin by saying I'm not against Twitter. I'm not anti-Facebook. I'm not averse to LinkedIn, blogs, or any other social networking. But as a veteran of public relations, marketing, and fundraising in three very progressive cities—Cleveland, Denver, and Washington, DC—I still can't find Twitter at the top of a marketing, public relations, or strategic communications plan.

Of all the definitions I recall from graduate school at the University of Florida College of Journalism, the one I still cite is that of public relations: "the practice of building mutual beneficial relationships." Therein lies the premise of why Twitter, despite all its novel qualities and omnipresent outreach potential, must be evaluated before it is widely adopted as a public relations and marketing vehicle for the healthcare field.

First, consider a statistic from Nielsen Wire: "Currently, more than 60 percent of U.S. Twitter users fail to return the following month...[I]n other words, Twitter's audience retention rate, or the percentage of a given month's users who come back the following month, is currently about 40 percent" (Martin 2009). When compared with Twitter's "competition"—Facebook and MySpace—the data are even more striking (Figure 1).

Despite the figures and stats, I will acknowledge that Twitter does have its place in public relations and marketing. After all, its very basis—two-way dialogue—is what we aim for with our clients, donors, and partnerships. The Twitter model depends on engaged followers becoming respondents themselves. That, by itself, is a marketer's dream. But that's just one parameter of a vital look at this twenty-first century tool. A six-question evaluation can help you determine its value for your organization.

1. Who would byline the tweets?

Name a hospital that has a chief tweeting officer. Name five colleagues who have Twitter sites at their institutions. You get the point. Twitter may be part of



"other duties as assigned" within the PR or marketing department. It may even be on the website right next to the Facebook logo. Still, even if a universal practice of tweeting by hospitals existed, there is unlikely to be a standard answer to the question, who would post the tweets? Should it be the CEO, the board chair, the chief of the medical staff, or the public relations or marketing director? With no definite trend in sight, this may just be your stopping point when evaluating Twitter's usefulness and practicality.

2. Who would write (or ghostwrite) them?

We know that newsletter articles, letters to the editor, blogs, and speeches for executives are often ghostwritten (even if it would shock much of the public). This fact raises the question, who would write and post the tweets? Granted, each message is only 140 characters, but it must combine intellect with humor and information with creativity. This isn't easy. It reminds me of a quote attributed to the actor Jack Lemmon: "It's hard enough to write a good drama, it's much harder to write a good comedy, and it's hardest of all to write a drama with comedy. Which is what life is."

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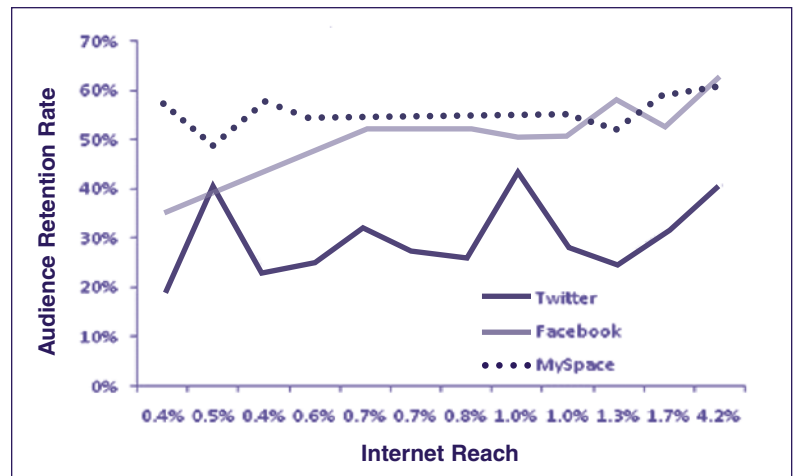
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3. How often would tweets be posted?

You know that quarterly newsletter? The one you swear comes out monthly, although every three months is more like it? Do you recall your pledge to constantly monitor your website home page to ensure accuracy and timeliness? Then ask yourself why anyone would add the constant demands of Twitter to their organizational to-do list.

Twitter's great strength is the fascination of having followers. The trouble begins as soon as one stops frequent tweets. At that point the followers decrease dramatically. There is a direct correlation between frequency of posting and number of followers. Without the organizational capacity to post frequently, the public relations and marketing vision for Twitter and your organization might never materialize.

Figure 1. Twitter, Facebook and MySpace Loyalty at Similar Audience Levels



Source: Nielsen Wire.

4. Whom are you targeting as your followers?

This question pertains to the connection between your followers and your organization's target audiences. If you are a nonprofit hospital, you may be writing for donors, employees, or government officials. If you are investor owned, your audiences may also include shareholders. In each case, individuals are likely looking for information such as clinic locations, online giving, job opportunities, cost of services, hours of operation, specialties, names of trustees, and insurance plans accepted. Few, if any, of these topics lend themselves to Twitter messages.

If you do choose to tweet, make the focus of your tweets on target with your demographic preferences. Although most people are using Twitter to stay in touch or for other personal reasons, news at least ranks third (Table 1).

5. Is Twitter the only way to reach your followers?

Let's assume that those you target are likely users of Twitter. Even if they follow tweets on a weekly, daily, or hourly basis, is Twitter the preferred or only way to reach them? When it comes to measuring outreach and exposure, Twitter is unlikely to match the number of readers who see a letter to the editor, the number of clicks within a website, or the number of subscribers to a newsletter. Twitter, we must therefore assume, does not rise as the preferred metric to measure impressions.

Table 1. Reasons U.S. Internet Users* Use Twitter, by Gender and Age (% of respondents)

	Keep in touch with friends	Update your status	Find news/stay updated	Work-related	For research	For fun	Other
Gender							
Male	33.6%	27.7%	30.7%	22.5%	10.2%	0.0%	2.9%
Female	48.4%	29.4%	21.3%	21.9%	8.0%	0.5%	6.3%
Age							
<35	43.8%	38.3%	24.9%	16.0%	7.0%	0.0%	4.4%
35-54	38.6%	19.3%	27.1%	29.9%	9.6%	0.7%	4.5%
55+	39.2%	19.8%	23.9%	18.7%	16.2%	0.0%	6.3%
Total	41.6%	29.1%	25.8%	21.7%	9.4%	0.3%	4.6%

*who visit social networking sites and use Twitter.

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6. Are tweets designed for individual or organizational PR?

If you've made it to this final question and you truly believe Twitter should be an essential part of your communications plan, one decision must still be made. Twitter's platform is individual-centric. Compare Facebook, websites, and Twitter for a minute. Facebook provides opportunities for people to be fans and post RSVPs, for example. Websites routinely feature "about us," "our services," or "our history" pages. Twitter, meanwhile, is one person sending one message and waiting for at least one follower. It's short and it's real-time. That might be good, but can it achieve organizational objectives like the others?


Some Final Thoughts

The newspaper industry, to quote John Temple, the former publisher, president, and editor of the Pulitzer Prize-winning (and now-closed) *Rocky Mountain News*, strives "to build understanding of why journalism is valuable, and what sets it apart from infotainment or advocacy." If you can't find the journalistic or strategic value in Twitter for your organization,

perhaps tweets belong on Old MacDonald's farm instead of in your public relations or marketing plan. For other organizations, Twitter just may be the added value a public relations or marketing department wants.

The moral of the story (in exactly 140 characters): To tweet or not to tweet depends on the tone, message, and audience. Perhaps it all depends on if the tweet's voice has the "perfect pitch."

Reference

Martin, D. 2009. "Twitter Quitters Post Roadblock to Long-Term Growth." *Nielsen Wire* [Online article; retrieved 9/15/09.] http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/twitter-quitters-post-roadblock-to-long-term-growth/ 

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Iowa Hospital Tweets Live Surgery

On August 31, 2009, St. Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids conducted the first Twittercast of a live surgery—a hysterectomy—in the state of Iowa. After the surgeon hand-picked the patient and the proper HIPAA permissions were obtained, a member of St. Luke's marketing communications team posted the tweets during real time based on information communicated from the doctors during surgery.

Tweeting a live, robotic surgery was a tactic the marketing department developed after evaluating social media and conducting several successful live webcasts of surgeries. We outlined the following goals:

- Gain followers (people receiving our tweets)
 - Communicate to a younger audience
 - Garner media attention for robotic surgery and for St. Luke's as a technology leader
 - Create "noise" and impact by being the first in the market to Twittercast
 - Educate prospective patients about robotic surgery
- From more than 400 national media stories to 700 new

followers (38 of whom we engaged in conversations), the response to the Twittercast has been outstanding. The tactic proved successful in reinforcing St. Luke's as a leader in robotic surgery and in increasing physician engagement with the hospital. We've posted the Twittercast on our website (stlukesr.org) to educate the public about robotic surgery.

Especially gratifying was the positive response from the patient and from family members who followed the surgery live. "It provided real-time information instead of sitting and not knowing in the waiting room," said the patient's son, Joe Cleary. "It made the time go by. We all feel it was a positive experience."

Will St. Luke's conduct another Twittercast? One goal was to be the first in the market, and that unique distinction cannot be repeated. However, St. Luke's has a culture that supports testing new ideas and technology, and we pride ourselves on moving quickly in a competitive market. We'll continue to tweet daily (at twitter.com/StLukesCR), but we'll also move on to leverage other communication tactics.—LAURA RAINEY, director, marketing communications, St. Luke's Hospital, Cedar Rapids, IA.