

Twitter 101

Ron Graham

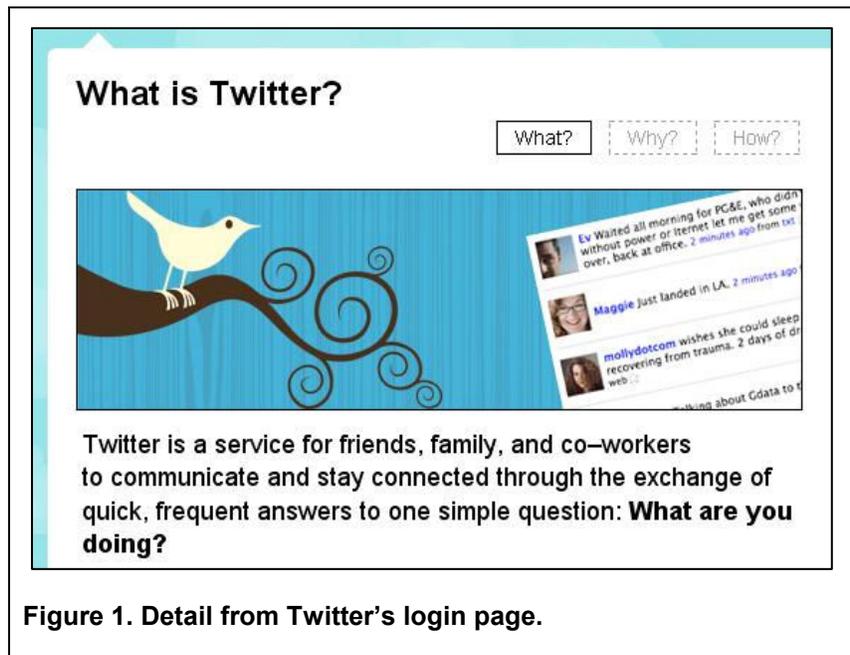
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Introduction

“Hello to all my Tweeps in Twitterville! Let’s hear some great tweets!” To me, this is like some kind of speech impediment. But it’s the speech of choice for many (not most, fortunately) participants in Twitter, the social network that is as of 2009 sweeping the Internet. I’m not really into the speech of choice, but I am into the platform. It’s for microblogging: you get all of 140 characters to say your piece. And you can do it as often as you want. I have found I can complete a single thought in 140 characters, and at times that may be enough. It really depends on what you want to do.

You may have heard of Twitter in one or other of the following contexts:

- The Berkeley student jailed in Egypt, who is able to keep in touch with friends around the world via Twitter, and those friends find ways to pressure the Egyptian government to cut him loose.
- Rep. Joe Barton (TX) puts the following on Twitter during a joint session of Congress: Aggie basketball game is about to start on espn2 for those of you that aren't going to bother watching *pelosi smirk* for the next hour. (With six characters to spare! In fairness, Barton claimed that was written by a staffer.)
- This was written by someone at the scene of a deadly earthquake in Chengdu, China: Slight ly dizzy after being shaken around by the Chengdu earthquake for several hours now.



These examples are not most of Twitter. But then again, even if the nonsense postings lampooned by comedians like Jon Stewart and cartoonists such as Garry Trudeau are most of Twitter, Twitter is still worth it because of the things you occasionally see, like the above.

You may not like Twitter. You may not like what you’ve heard. You may have read the Twitter login page as shown in Figure 1, which asks “what are you doing?” You’ve just finished complaining about those inane status updates that appear on most of the other social networks, e.g. MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Twitter

seems to want you to be just as vapid. And clearly some people are. We must face two facts: (1) most of the world doesn’t really care what we are doing, and (2) it takes a conscious effort to be interesting.

I think of Twitter as a cocktail party, with everyone in little knots of conversation; occasionally someone gets up and makes an announcement to everyone. And that announcement is sometimes heard by someone. Plus, the announcement lives on to be heard later, if people at the party love you enough to come back and listen later. But the party is composed – as all parties are – of people everyone loves, and

people nobody loves, and all levels in between. It's the Internet: you've got to earn the right to be heard. You don't get that right by being first in the room, or loudest, or even richest.

Right now the party consists largely of Internet marketers, life-skills coaches and SEO guys; but everyone's invited, and others will come, entrepreneurs first.

Description



Figure 2. A basic Twitter timeline.

Figure 2 shows a timeline, or a series of “tweets” for those a particular user (myself) is following. Each of the people who have posted here are people whose Twitter feeds I subscribe to, which in Twitter-speak is called “following.” Here are some of the features you can see here:

- Twitter users can design “themes” for their own individual expression. Mine includes icons for several small businesses I’ve worked with, and a recent photo. Many users have much nicer themes, and many users have something designed to say more about them than they can say in a bio (within which you only get 160 characters to describe who you are and what you do).
- I have an avatar that shows up with each tweet I post: in this case, my face Photoshopped onto a NASA stock photo of an Astronaut.
- There is a grid of 36 avatars on the right that show some of the people I’m following. I don’t know how those particular 36 are chosen. Is that important?
- Most of the tweets shown here are replies to others, which are prefaced by the @ sign followed by the user name of the person being replied to. This is a valuable technique most Twitter users employ

to engage one another. As is true with almost anything else on the Internet, your success depends at least in part on your ability to engage others.

On Twitter you have “followers.” This word evokes images of adherents to a new religion, or evil minions, or Star Trek convention fan-boys. This may be why they’re like a badge of honor, and many Twitter users will trumpet when they reach some new threshold of followers: a multiple of 100 if you have fewer than 1000 followers; a multiple of 1000 if you have more.

What’s really important for you is this: the more people you follow, the more will follow you back in return. The more following you, the closer you come to finding the people you really want to meet. Twitter has a real advantage over other social networks in this regard: these relationships are being forged in real time, and you can follow someone whether they choose to follow you back or not; you can see what others have to say no matter whether they care what you say.



You’ll notice in Figure 4 a close-up of a particular reply. It starts off with the @ sign, then my user name, highlighted as an active link so that others can check it to see what they can about me if they choose. To the right are two symbols: a star, which I can use to make this tweet a favorite of mine, and an arrow, indicating I can respond to this. If I respond, my response will start with @belindaang.

Figure 4. Replies.

Your Experience

You decide to join Twitter. You create a user name and log in for the first time, and you have (say) an hour to work on it. What must you do?

1. Set up a profile. This includes the 160-character bio (you can add to that in a background theme later), a single link of your choice (so choose carefully!), your name and location.
2. Start following people. It doesn’t do any good to start posting tweets if there is nobody to read them. And following others is going to gain followers for you: many will follow you back as a matter of course. Many people consider it common courtesy to follow back when someone follows you, and I do that unless the person following me is far away from my areas of professional interest. I also send a “direct message” to people who follow me, thanking them and telling them they can get free stuff from my blog. So people visit my blog.
3. You will encounter interesting, helpful people. You will also find egomaniacs, spammers, trolls, lurkers, and people who just plain don’t interest you. You are under no obligation to follow them, even if they follow you. You didn’t ask people to follow you; you were just there!
4. When you have a few followers of your own, start tweeting. I recommend that you write something interesting if you can, but at least not completely gormless if you’re not sure how to say anything interesting yet. If you post something that’s not correct, or has typos, or is embarrassing, you can delete it from the timeline and start again. But try to think at least for a moment or two before releasing it to the world. You could be judged by it. Stars, companies, and news organizations use Twitter as a headline feed. Other individuals use it to share information within their specialty areas.

You may use it the same way, and put your own stamp on it, with tips, quotes, event notices, links, real-time coverage, and conversations.

5. When someone responds to a tweet of yours, you'll see the power Twitter offers you for engagement. Companies use Twitter for customer service and new customer retention.
6. When your network of followers grows, you will find there is a "critical mass" after which a network will grow on its own. If you are interesting, people will hear about you. There are also tools such as Mr. Tweet (<http://mrtweet.net>) that you can use to find new folks to follow. When you hit critical mass, you will also learn of business opportunities: at first they won't apply to you, but eventually some will be of interest.

Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh gives Twitter credit for all this:

1. Transparency & Values: Twitter constantly reminds me of who I want to be, and what I want Zappos to stand for
2. Reframing Reality: Twitter encourages me to search for ways to view reality in a funnier and/or more positive way
3. Helping Others: Twitter makes me think about how to make a positive impact on other people's lives
4. Gratitude: Twitter helps me notice and appreciate the little things in life

Managing All That Information

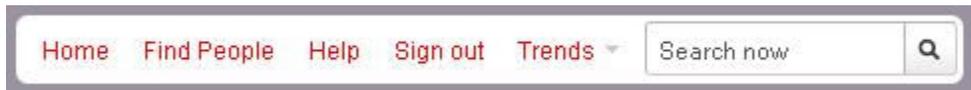


Figure 5. Bar at the top of a Twitter page.

The bar in Figure 5 can help you locate people to follow and monitor what people are talking about. Both powerful tools in harnessing Twitter for business purposes.



Figure 6. Twitter Navigation.

Figure 6 shows the navigation bar for a Twitter user. In this case, the home page is highlighted.

- @Replies shows the tweets responding to something you wrote. Each will be prefaced by @[your user name].
- Direct Messages are like @Replies sent just to you and not to the whole world.
- Favorites are those tweets you have marked with a star, as seen next to the message in Figure 4.
- Everyone shows the tweets of everyone currently logged on. That's a lot of people!

There are other sites that act as Twitter support-mechanisms:

TweetDeck (<http://www.tweetdeck.com/>) is an application you can download (free) that will help you organize tweets by subject matter.

TweetLater (<http://www.tweetlater.com/>) allows you to track keywords via alerts. It also enables you to have tweets sent automatically at specific times of day, e.g. to have friends in Australia or China hear your thoughts while you sleep.

Twitter Grader (<http://twitter.grader.com/>) tracks your activity on Twitter, and "grades" you by how often you reply to others and how often you post to Twitter in general. It's based on a mathematical system but it's quite subjective. I treat it as a curiosity only, myself.

Final Word

Some people are finding new business through Twitter; many people new connections, believe it or not. I have met some interesting, helpful and funny people; I believe it will help me in business more and more as time goes on. I don't believe in letting an opportunity go by because of the likelihood of an oncoming "next big thing." Twitter is a "big thing" now; I intend to take advantage of it.

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