

Using Twitter to Expand Your Business Presence on the Web!



Brought to you by:
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Why Twitter Is Important to Your Business

The last thing your business needs is an empty Twitter account taking up space in the twittersphere. You'll have wasted your time in setting it up and when people find it (a simple Google search will suffice), an empty account will make it look like your company doesn't know what it's doing. While this is worse than not having a Twitter account, you'll be squandering an excellent opportunity in either case.

So, before you jump on the bandwagon and setup your business' Twitter account, or write off that whole social media thing as a bunch of snake oil, take a few minutes to learn why you need a Twitter account.

Find More Customers

Twitter can help you find more customers. Not only can you search Twitter for people who are interested in what your company has to offer, potential customers can find you. For example, if you are a life coach who works with people struggling with shyness, you can find people online who are talking about their struggle. Likewise, people who are shy can search twitter and find your services.

Enlarge Your Network

Twitter works much the same way when it comes to networking within your industry. Not only does this help you keep an eyeball on the competition, but also allows you to get to know, like and trust others in the same on complementary fields. For example, if you're a web designer, you can follow other designers and keep up with what is new in your industry. Some freelancers have even been known to ditch their RSS feeds because industry Twitter leaders have been so good about tweeting the latest and most relevant news and issues.

Likewise, you can also get to know other people in your industry via Twitter. So, when you arrive at that point where you need to outsource some of your work, or hire contractors or employees, you can just send out a tweet for prospects.

Build Your Community Status

Getting known as an expert in your industry is a fast way to get people knocking on your door to hire your company. Social proof exists to confirm that you know what you're talking about and it can be clearly seen in all the brilliant and insightful things you say in your feed.

When you achieve this status, you can just post that you have a new product or service and people will respond. For example, a jewelry and bead store owner that gets a new shipment of beads in can tweet this update to their followers and have a flood of traffic to check out the new merchandise. If she has an online store, this is even better because people can get to her virtual shop instantly. Now, if that store owner had never tweeted before, she won't have much of a response. But if she's been tweeting useful information, providing links to tutorials and answering customer questions, she'll have built up a very responsive following.

As you can see, Twitter is not just about teens socializing when they should be studying their math lessons. When used effectively, Twitter can be an excellent tool for building customer relationships, getting to know your colleagues and promoting your business.

Set Goals for Your Twitter Journey

Achieving success with Twitter is like getting ready to take a trip. You have to decide where you're going to go and how you're going to get there, before you leave. Likewise, with Twitter, you need to sit down and decide what you're goals and how you're going to achieve them before you start the journey. Some goals that you may want to achieve include:

- Connecting with your customers
- Networking with people in your industry
- Driving traffic to your website

Before we go further, let's take a minute to look at that last goal: Driving traffic to your website.

This goal should never be your primary goal on Twitter. It's great for SEO, but not for a social networking site. On Twitter, you're primary goals should be networking and connecting. The traffic will follow if you're successful with the first two goals.

Now, let's take a look at these goals more in depth:

Connecting with Customers

Before you started your business, you should have done a ton of market research. At this point, you should know who your target market is, what their needs are related to what you offer and how you can meet those needs.

For example, if you are a baby sling seller, your research may indicate that really short, petite women need a sling that will fit them without hurting their backs. So your business has created a solution to this problem.

When you're on Twitter, you want to find those women who are having issues with slings that don't fit right because of their size. Once you find them, you'll want to offer advice that might help with their existing slings, or suggest tips for making sure they buy the right size in the future. Notice, I didn't say "send them a link to your website."

Twitter is not the place for a hard sell. Once your potential customer sees that you care about her problem, she's going to want to know who you are and what you can do for her.

Networking with Industry Leaders

Twitter is a unique place where you can follow, and be followed by, people who are leaders in your industry around the globe. You can keep up with what they're tweeting about and interact with them. For example, if you're a virtual assistant, and you see a colleague has won an award, you can publicly congratulate her by using @herTwitterName in your tweet. She'll see this – and you.

You can also offer advice to your colleagues, share information and discuss issues in your industry. By doing so, you will be seen as someone who is an expert in your field. In some cases, this has

lead potential clients to hire you over others without the social proof, or may lead to your colleagues outsourcing work to you. In some situations, this could lead to you getting hired as a subcontractor for a project, because of your Twitter connection.

Driving Traffic to Your Website

Now, as I mentioned before, this should never be your primary goal on Twitter. Tweeting nothing but links to your website, or simply way too many tweets will make you look like a spammer. So, put this goal in the backseat and focus your efforts on your first two goals, as we discussed above. Once you've taken care of those two goals and are consistently providing value to your customers and colleagues, the traffic will take care of itself.

Once you have your roadmap and you know where you're going, getting there will be much easier, cost effective and measurable.

Planning Your Twitter Journey

When you're taking a trip, you'll often set overall goals like: Fly to Orlando, go to Disney World, and meet Mickey Mouse. While those are wonderful goals, they don't contain the plan for how you're going to achieve them. You need to know what airline you'll buy tickets through, where you're going to rent a car, what hotel you'll be staying in and how much it all is going to cost.

Using Twitter to grow your business is like preparing for a trip in that you need to plan out all those small details as well. While you'll have your own goals and will need to create your own plan to meet them, here are some basic stops that you'll definitely need to include:

Follow the right people.

Following your uncle's daughter's third cousin is not going to help you get to know people needing a virtual assistant...unless the cousin needs a VA... Instead, you should use the search function in Twitter to find potential customers and find colleagues that you can interact with.

Plan one month ahead.

You'll need to fit what you'll be tweet about into your overall marketing plan. Now, that's not to say you can't have an impromptu conversation or help a customer with a question. But you should have an overall roadmap for where you're going and have some tweets planned out that will advance your marketing and networking goals.

Automate what you can.

OK, pull over for a moment and let's get straight on this topic. There are some people who say you should never automate and others tell you to automate everything. As a business though, you should take a middle road. Automating DMs or sending out thousands of irrelevant tweets a day are never a good idea. But sending 1 or 2 blog updates per day and perhaps automating a couple of inspirational or helpful comments is not a bad thing. You just need to make sure you balance that with real conversations and connections.

Use tools to maximize your effectiveness.

Twitter tools such as Seesmic and TweetDeck can be downloaded to your computer and used to help you manage your Twitter profile – or profiles if you have more than one. Hootsuite is an online tool that does the same thing. Or you can download the Tweetie app to your iPhone and keep in touch while you're on the road... preferably not while you're driving.

Track your results.

You can pour all kinds of time and effort into Twitter – and trust me, it's easy to do – but if you don't know how effective those efforts are, you're wasting your time. You'll need to keep track of how many people are following or unfollowing you. And you'll need to track how many people do end up at your site. Tools like Google Analytics can help you track the traffic on your site. And you can keep track you conversations and connections in Twitter using the search functions and hashtags.

In short, just knowing where you want to go with Twitter is not enough. You need to have a detailed plan of how you're going to achieve your goals. Once you have the plan, the only thing left to do is implement it!

Setup Your Twitter Profile Properly

The surest sign of a Twitter newbie is a default background, empty website and bio fields and little content. And the surest sign of someone who doesn't know how to use Twitter for business is a vague or inappropriate bio field. That said there are specific things you need to do on your Twitter profile before you hit the road with it.

First and foremost, choose your Twitter username wisely.

Like your domain name, it should be easy to spell and remember. After all, you want people to find your business using the search feature, or even Google. The username should reflect positively on your business as well.

While it might seem like fun to make your username “ilovechocolate,” if you're a virtual assistant whose work has nothing to do with chocolate, this is probably not a good idea.

For branding purposes, it's best to choose either your business name or your name (depending on what you're trying to brand), or a variation of it, as your username.

Write a good bio.

The bio doesn't have to be a literary masterpiece, but it does need to succinctly describe who you are or what you offer. And the bio should contain your keywords.

Keep in mind when you're writing your bio that people will be finding you using the information you put there. So if someone is looking for a virtual assistant, but your profile bio says “chocolate-eating dragon slayer,” chances are no one is going to find you. Well, not anyone you'll do business with.

Choose your profile picture wisely.

The best option for your profile picture is a photograph of you. That said, it should be a professional shot – you really do want to present a positive image for your business. Make sure the shot is clear, well lit and that you've put your best face forward.

You can be quirky or funny, but make sure it's appropriate. So if you're tweeting as the CEO of a major corporation, you don't want your profile photo of you in a Hawaiian shirt sitting on a bar stool. However, if you're a quirky, creative photographer, you might be able to get away with pink hair and a tongue piercing. The bottom line is to be YOU and let others see who you are, without damaging your own reputation in the process.

Use a custom background.

You can have a designer create a background for you or use a free background generator online. The background will not only show Twitter users that you mean business, it will also enable you to display more information about your business and additional means of making contact.

You can also place your logo on the background to further brand your Twitter profile. And if you're branding yourself as a business – say if you're a life coach, for example – you can even put a full body picture of yourself, perhaps holding your logo in your hands, or something memorable like that.

Remember, whatever you do, you want to set yourself apart from the pack with your profile. Make it professional, but memorable. Include information so that people can contact you on other sites, by email and by phone. Make a statement about the value your business can provide to those who land on your profile.

We offer custom Twitter backgrounds at <http://www.TwitterWebs.com>

It's All about Content

You're probably groaning right now at the thought of having to create more content. Luckily, in Twitter land, content is only 140 characters long. And you don't want to overdo it. Such as with blogging or website building, content is king on Twitter. If people like your content, they will follow you and tell others about you. If they don't, you'll be sitting on your own Twitter island all by yourself.

Fortunately, Twitter makes providing content really easy. You don't even have to write all of it yourself. You can simply read through the content provided by the people you're following and retweet to your followers the great content they have written. Or, as you're reading through your RSS feed for the day, you can tweet about the news, interesting blog posts or controversies that are brewing in the blogging world. If you have an opinion, you have something to say.

So what kind of content should you be providing?

Information.

If you know something, share it. It might be a bit of trivia of interest to people in your industry or your customers. Or it might be a piece of relevant news.



Advice.

As a business owner, you should know what your customers struggle with. If you're a WordPress designer, you may know that your customers don't know the difference between a page, a post and a category. Provide insight into the differences for your customers and they'll love you forever.

Answers.

Similar to advice, answers are a more direct way of helping people. Watch out for people asking questions about your field of expertise, product, or service. Provide the answers and they'll remember you – particularly if you just saved them from hours of searching or paying someone hundreds of dollars for the 5 minute fix you provided.

Updates.

Again, I think it's a good idea that you tweet updates from your blog. There are plugins like wptwit that will allow you to automatically tweet the headline and a shortened link to your blog post. Of course, this assumes that your blog posts are original content and useful to others. If you're tweeting spam, your followers are going to jump ship.

Contests.

Running a Twitter-only contest is a great idea. You can blend the contest with an effort to gather opinions from your followers. For example, if you need to know whether or not your customers will pay for a physical version of your digital products, send out a tweet and include an offer to give away a free copy of one of your products to those who reply.

Personal tidbits.

While it's a good idea to give your profile some personality, you have to be careful with this one. Talking about a song you're listening to, or something cool you learned today is fine. Telling us about your indigestion is not.

Now that you have some ideas for content, you can plan out some of the elements. For example, if you're getting ready to launch a product, announce that you're taking beta testers, run a contest to give away a copy or two, and give out a few bits of information about the product to whet your customers' appetites. Throw in a sprinkling of personal fun (professionally speaking) and you'll have a winning combination.

Using Twitter to Network in Your Virtual Community

Keeping in touch with your colleagues and other industry professionals is important to your business, especially if you're running a home-based business and are too busy to get out and network in person.

Keeping in touch with others who share your interests can lead to partnerships, more work, professional friendships, referrals and even jobs. Just like people prefer to buy from those they

know, like and trust, people in your industry would rather work with you than with a total stranger.

While your blog can establish your level of knowledge and expertise, Twitter can enable you to converse directly with that industry leader you'd love to meet or that successful business owner who periodically looks for subcontractors via Twitter. So, how do you get in front of the people in your network?

Post interesting content.

Not the same old stuff everyone else is posting. Talk about your own experiences, your own opinions. Your content needs to be relevant but unique to you. For example, if you have a marketing epiphany from something your kid says, and you post about it, you'll capture attention better than just posting a link to the same boring article everyone else is tweeting.

Respond to tweets.

When someone you want to network with tweets, respond. If they tweet about winning an award or landing a new client, congratulate them. Commiserate if something bad happens, share your own stories that are related to theirs.

Tell them what you think about them.

OK, make sure this is good first. So, let's say you've known another virtual assistant online for 10 years. You know she's awesome at what she does and she has been an inspiration to you. Tell her. Now, don't make it creepy or stalkerish, but you can say, "Hey, you've inspired me to be a better VA" in a fairly sane manner.

Retweet their tweets.

If the people you want to network with post an interesting tweet, retweet it. Not only will you be doing your followers a favor (who may not be following the people you're networking with), but you're helping the original tweet. Oftentimes, when you retweet someone, they will publically thank you and sometimes even go ahead and follow you.

Ask questions.

What better way to engage someone in a conversation than to directly ask them a question. They'll find your question if you use @theirname and most Twitter-savvy people will respond. Just make sure you pick a good question to ask that highlights their expertise. In other words, don't ask the SEO expert if he wears boxers or briefs.

Tweet their content.

There is probably a really good reason that you want to network with people, and one of those reasons is probably that they have some great content. So tweet it for them. They'll appreciate it and they'll notice you. That said, don't spam their stuff. And make sure you read it first.

Most importantly, you'll want to make sure that your efforts are friendly and open-minded. Nothing will kill your efforts worse than spammy, unfriendly, annoying twittering.

Make Sure You Follow the Right People

When you're tweeting for fun, you can follow anyone who sounds or looks interesting and it's no big deal. But when you're tweeting for business, you need to make sure you're following the right people.

Imagine if you follow just anybody: You log into your Twitter client to see if anything important is being tweeted and all you can find are the latest escapades of some random celebrity. Not good for business.

On the other hand, by following the right people, you get yourself in front of those who can have a positive impact on your business and those who you can positively impact.

When you log into your Twitter account, you'll see great posts by people whose tweets you care about, whether they're the industry leader across the country or the potential customer on the other side of the world.

So, the question is: How do you find the right people?

Follow the people who are following you.

Chances are, if someone is following you, they're interested in what you have to offer. So, you should be interested in finding out why and getting to know that person.

Find people by keywords in their profiles.

If you're a virtual assistant, you may want to find people who run small or home-based businesses to follow. You can use a service like Twellow to find these people.

Include your profile in directories like Twellow and Mr. Tweet.

This will make it easier for people who are searching for your product or service to find you. And then you can follow them.

Read popular blogs in your industry.

They often contain lists of leaders that they recommend you follow. Follow those people. While you're at it, follow the blog writer.

Follow the people your industry leaders follow.

People who are successful in your industry and in tweeting are probably going to be pretty selective with who they follow. Check out their profiles to see who they feel is important enough to keep up with.

Use lists to sort the people you follow.

Once you get a few hundred people on your follow list, it's going to be next to impossible to keep up with everyone. So create lists of people, by category, who you'd like to keep a closer eye on. This is especially easy to do if you use TweetDeck or the list feature on Twitter.com.

Once you've created a following, getting more people on board will be easier. You'll have a ton of people that you follow who are providing value to you, your business and the people you follow.

How does that work?

As you read through your timeline, or your list, you'll see comments and links by people you follow that you know will be of interest or value to those who are following you. So you retweet (RT) that comment. It's actually a pretty simple process. You've now given your followers something to retweet for you or just brought yourself to the top of their minds when they read the great post you retweeted. See how that works?

Use the Right Tools to Maximize Your Twitter Usage

One of the reasons you may not have tried Twitter yet, or been successful with it is because you just don't have time to sit and tweet all day. As a business owner, your day is filled with running a business, so the last thing you have time for is keeping up with the latest conversations on Twitter. Fortunately, smart programmers have developed tools that you can use to automate some processes and maximize your time with others.

Here are some favorite tools for businesses to get the most from their Twitter usage:

[SocialOomph](#) - This one's a doozy. Not only can you schedule tweets for the future, must like you can schedule blog posts in WordPress, but you can also track keywords, vet potential followers and more.

[TweetBeet](#) - This tool will help you keep track of your @replies and @mentions so you don't miss out on a conversation. Even better, it will email you the conversations that mention you, your product or your company.

[Twibs](#) - Add your business to this site so people searching for your products or services can easily find you. Naturally, you can find relevant Twitter users as well. You can even tweet from this site directly.

[TwitPic](#) - This service enables you to upload photographs from your computer or your phone and share them on Twitter. This is perfect for a physical product seller who might want to show images of new inventory, a customer making use of a product or a demonstration of a product feature.

[Mr. Tweet](#) - This is a must-have if you're trying to build your following. Mr. Tweet helps you find relevant followers, recommends you to others, computes your Twitter usages statistics and cleans your kitchen sink. (Just kidding on the last part)

[StrawPoll](#) - There's nothing like a good poll to help you understand your customers, the state of your industry or just have a little fun with your followers.

[twitQpon](#) - If you'd like to offer a discount code to Twitter users, this is a perfect solution. Not only can you fill out a simple form to create your coupon to send to Twitter (naturally, you have to

have it setup in your shopping cart...) you can also use the site to search for coupons from other companies.

Use Twitter for Market Research

Market research used to involve direct mail, focus groups, surveys and tons of money. Researching your competition meant hiring friends to scope them out or attending tradeshow to see what they're up to. Finding employees meant running an ad in the classifieds and spending weeks going through resumes. While there is still a place for those methods, small business owners can now make use of a more grassroots and budget friendly research tool: Twitter.

Yep, you read that right. - You can use Twitter to learn about your market, your competitors and even find employees or subcontractors.

Researching Your Customers

The key to using twitter to research your customers is conversation. Yes, you can research keywords and find people who are already conversing. But it's even better to start or jump into the conversation your self. Ask questions, take informal polls and tweet topics that will inspire your followers to respond.

While you're at it, find total strangers in your market and ask them questions. Chances are, they'll respond and you'll be amazed at the kind of information and candor you can get this way.

These techniques will help you dig into your market and find out what your customers really think, what they're struggling with and ultimately, what you can offer to help them.

Researching Your Competition

Finding out what the competition is doing is often a step small, online business owners leave out. The competition isn't in the shop across the street, so it's easy to forget about them – until one of our customers decides to use their service or product instead.

Before social media, finding out what our competition was doing, so we could do it better or cheaper, meant bringing in friends to be our undercover shoppers, buying expensive research or sleuthing at tradeshow.

With Twitter though, it's like we have a window into the competitor's customer service department. By searching for the competitor's name or product name, we can instantly see what people are saying about them. We can also see how the competitors are responding to their customers and how they are interacting with them. We're a fly on their wall.

Finding Employees or Subcontractors

Once we know what our customers want and how to give it to them better than our competitors, we'll need to hire employees or subcontractors. Before Twitter, we had to pay for ads in the newspaper or bargain papers, or hire staffing services. Or hope someone we know can help up.

Once you have a following in Twitter that is interested in your industry, you can tap that pool for potential workers. What better person to provide virtual customer service for your company than someone who already loves what you do?

Twitter has revolutionized not only our social world, but also our market research world. We can now do in a few hours what used to take weeks, and tons of money.

Twitter Automation Tips

If you've been on Twitter for any length of time, you probably fit into one of two schools of thought regarding social media automation.

Automation is BAD!

The first school of thought is that Twitter is strictly for genuine relationships. If you can't show up in person, then you're wasting everyone's time.

Twitter is for engaging conversations with people who think like us and creating dialogues with people who don't. Twitter is about sharing ideas and building credibility. There is no room for sales or automation on Twitter.

Automation is GREAT!

The second point of view – the one held by the owners of millions of pages promoting Twitter automation – is that a business can earn millions of dollars by fully automating a Twitter profile. This means that follows, unfollows, direct messages upon following, and even tweets throughout the day are automated. In some cases, a human being rarely, if ever contributes to the profile.

All that said, as true in many other aspects of business, often the middle ground is where reason lies.

The Middle Ground

While fully automated Twitter profiles really do defeat the purpose of Twitter, it's completely unreasonable to expect a successful and busy entrepreneur to spend 10 hours a day researching, following and posting on Twitter. While it's true that businesses can hire someone to handle their Twitter profiles, this can sometimes cause an even bigger mess. The compromise: Automate some tasks, but make sure you participate as well.

Here are some tips for balancing automation verses human interaction in your profile:

Automatically DM those who follow you – but not with a sales message. Ask them a question, simply welcome them to your Twitter universe – but don't sell!

Automatically tweet a great blog post, an inspirational quote, or a survey question – but only a 2 or 3 times in one day. And balance that with 5 to 10 spontaneous tweets.

Use software or assistants to “listen” for mentions of you, your company or your product, but always respond to comments or inquiries personally. This will show your followers that you care.

Plug your blog into your Twitter feed, but blog about topics of interest that provide value to your followers.

Why the middle ground?

People on Twitter tend to be socially savvy – at least online. They can sniff out a spammer or automated profile from a mile away. When you attach inauthentic profiles to your company name, you immediately tell potential followers something about your business. You’re sending a message that you care more about numbers or money than about what they think or feel.

On the other hand, spontaneous interactions with your followers will build your credibility and show them that you are interested in who they are, not just what they can do for you. This goes a long way, especially on the Internet where everyone’s guard is up automatically.

While excessive automation can damage your businesses’ credibility, no automation at all can leave your potential connections on the table. It’s best to take the middle ground and balance your automation with spontaneous interactions to get the most out of your Twitter experience.

Putting These Ideas into Action

When used correctly, Twitter can be a HUGE advertising venue, but it’s so much more than just a way to advertise your business. You can literally interact with your customers and other businesses in ways that even just a few short years ago you probably would have never thought possible.

It’s time to start taking action on the things you’ve just read.

Best Wishes and I’ll see you on Twitter.

Kelly McCausey
FreshNets.com
[@freshnets](https://twitter.com/freshnets)