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Making Noise: How Twitter is Revolutionizing the Art of Communication

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Making Noise: How Twitter is Revolutionizing the Art of Communication

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Abstract

Making Noise: How Twitter is Revolutionizing the Art of Communication

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This paper seeks to understand how the micro-blogging tool, Twitter, can be used effectively by marketers and advertisers by incorporating the attributes of information quality, information usefulness and source credibility into their tweets. Case analyses of five of the most popular Twitter accounts were conducted with regards to the appearance of each account and the content of their tweets. Recommendations for improving the quality of each Twitter account were also provided.

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INTRODUCTION

If a marketing director, new entrepreneur and public relations head from the 1990s were pitched the question of whether their businesses utilized social networking, they would have conceded, “Of course we do.” Press releases, television commercials, and print media, among other outlets, all embrace variant forms of outreach. Pitch the same question 10 years later, and the response would be the same. However, how professionals today define the concept of social networking has taken on a whole new set of nuances in the 2000s.

Twitter, Facebook, and Google AdSense have revolutionized social and business communications in today’s marketplace. Using the Internet as an infinite platform for connecting with an ocean of consumers, colleagues and online social forums have rushed to the forefront as effective, affordable and global solutions to the challenge of brand promotion. The scale and scope of online social media’s efficacy can be gauged by the short-term gold rush of its users and omnipresence in today’s marketing: “Follow us on Twitter!”; “Become a Fan on Facebook!”; “Get Breaking News Sent to Your iPhone!” Businesses are tapping into the addictive qualities that make users check “tweets” on Twitter or status updates on Facebook multiple times a day for the latest info, offers and opportunities. However, the success of brands using social media varies in terms of quality and effectiveness. Businesses large and small, global and local, have struggled with determining the best way to use this unique social media tool. It is important that companies of all sizes understand the implications of ignoring these indispensable tools or using them, conversely, in ways that could potentially harm their company.

Recently, General Mills’ fans with Celiac disease began requesting that the company produce gluten-free version baking products. After receiving feedback from these customers, General Mills realized that traditional media, such as print and television, would not be an effective way to reach those seeking gluten-free items (York, 2009). Instead, the company took advantage of the strong online presence of consumers with Celiac disease to market gluten-free products. Word eventually leaked that General Mills would create a special gluten-free line--effectively resulting in the product’s quick diffusion into the Twitter community (York, 2009).

For many people, Twitter has become the go-to source for new and breaking news of any topic. In January of 2009, a Twitter member broke news of US Airways Flight 1549 crashing into New York’s Hudson River. Before even the mainstream media reported of the accident the crash became the most discussed topic on Twitter after only 15 minutes (Beaumont, 2009). The public platform used Twitter to calm fears of concerned loved ones, share the latest facts and allow the global audience to share its thoughts and feelings to others. A testament to the power of Twitter’s 140-character limit on tweets is the first recorded blog posting of the plane crash which read (**Figure 1**):

Figure 1 – Hudson Plane Crash 1st Tweet

“I just watched a plane crash into the hudson riv [sic] in manhattan”

One short blurb distributed via Twitter enabled an accident to become globally known to millions of people seconds after it occurred. Users of TwitPic, a device that integrates iPhone’s photo-taking abilities with Twitter, were able to upload pictures of the dramatic event unfolding in real time (Beaumont, 2009). TwitPic crashed minutes after links to the

website were circulated through Twitter and the site was flooded with more users than it could handle wanting to view replays of this amazing event.

This investigation aims to focus on the online social media tool, Twitter, and demonstrate how it can be used by companies to increase revenue and brand awareness through tweets that address the attributes of information quality, information usefulness and source credibility. Categories of tweets will be analyzed with consideration to their user. Recommendations for improving practices will be made with regards to other studies of social media tools.

In this report, a literature review of social media will be conducted followed by a history of the development of Twitter. Demographic information of Twitter users will then be discussed as well as an overview of how Twitter is used as a marketing tool. Results of an audit of five Twitter accounts will also be presented. Ending the paper will be a discussion of online marketing opportunities, predictions for Twitter's future, possible areas of future research and concluding thoughts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Overview

Online social media changes and expedites the way word-of-mouth (WOM) is spread and received by consumers. The innovations of social media, especially that of which exists online, make it possible for one person to share thoughts and opinions to thousands in increasingly shorter periods of time. WOM is hardly a new area of discussion but as new social media is developed as web-only or built for the integration of mobile technology some of the dynamics of social interaction between consumers appears to be undergoing a paradigm shift.

In recent years a growing number of consumers have been using different types of social media to conduct information searches that will influence their purchasing decisions (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). If more consumers are using social media to make decisions about how they will spend their money, then it comes as no surprise that some forms of social media are viewed as more trustworthy sources of information than corporate-sponsored communications transmitted via the traditional means of promotion (Foux, 2006). Trusted word-of-mouth has a history of being more influential if it is far removed from corporate influence.

In one study, the distinguishing feature of WOM was that it is "uttered by sources that are assumed by receivers to be independent of corporate influence (Buttle, 1998). Two types of word-of-mouth, "institutional" and "everyday" were defined in one study (Carl, 2006). "Everyday word of mouth" is identified as "informal, evaluative communication (positive or negative) between at least two conversational participants about characteristics of an organization, brand, product, or service which could take place

online or offline” (Carl 2006). Institutional word of mouth is defined as “WOM communication where the institutional identity or corporate affiliation of at least one participant may be salient,” or the object of WOM may be a product or service that is part of a WOM marketing campaign (Carl 2006). New social media is blurring the line between what is considered “institutional” WOM and “everyday” WOM.

Studies that have examined how to retain members in online social networks are important to review to better understand these networks’ long-term prospects for growth and potential profitability. In order to understand how to keep users, one must first understand why people use online social networks in the first place. It has been proven that although altruism and reciprocity plays a role in communication between members of an online community, many members of online social networks share information as a way of seeking status (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007).

Research looking at information adoption as one of the main reasons users engage in computer-supported social networks has also been conducted (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). Examples of information adoption include online social network members who read opinions and comments posted by others before making a purchasing decision (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Bhattacharjee’s Internet systems continuance mode depicts how Internet systems work in the post-adoption period of different Internet-based IS systems (2001). Based on the model, “IS continuance intention is determined by user satisfaction with prior IS use and post-adoption performance – perceived information usefulness” (Bhattacharjee 2001). Information usefulness refers to the degree to which information is perceived to be valuable, informative and helpful (Sussman & Siegel, 2003). The degree to which Twitter members consider information as useful could be a determining factor

of Twitter's lifespan which will impact whether or not a company should invest money time and effort in creating and maintaining a Twitter account.

One study of professional virtual communities found that an individual's intention to continue participating in a professional virtual community is largely determined by their satisfaction with prior usage of that virtual community (Chen 2007). Another study showed that user satisfaction is a significant fact determining the intention to continue using an expertise-sharing network (Tiwana and Bush, 2005). Research supports the notion that perceived usefulness is positively associated with satisfaction and IS continuance intention (Limayan et al., 2007).

The information adoption model indicates that information quality captures the characteristics (e.g., timeliness, completeness, and correctness) of content in an information system (Sussman & Siegel, 2003). The information adoption model has been used to show that information quality is an essential determinant of information usefulness (Sussman & Siegel, 2003). Thus, if people perceive higher information quality they are more likely to consider the information as useful. The results of a study by Saeed and Abdinnour-Helm, found that information quality has a strong relationship with information usefulness (2008). Twitter lacks a built-in feature that allows users to rate the helpfulness or quality of information in a Tweet which could hurt its growth in the long-run if users are dissatisfied with unhelpful tweets.

Some studies have also looked at the relationship between source credibility and the validity of information. Source credibility is defined as the recipient's perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise of the information provider (Grewal, Gotlieb, & Marmorstein, 1994). The information adoption model depicts source credibility as

another determinant of information usefulness (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Information that comes from a highly credible source is perceived to be useful and reliable, thereby facilitating knowledge transfer (Ko, Kirsch, & King, 2005). Information that comes from online social networks tends to be viewed as more credible, and thereby, more useful when that information is provided by a group of trustworthy experts (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). This notion begs the question: How does a group become trustworthy and how is expertise defined?

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is fundamentally similar to traditional WOM. Both describe the “process of conveying information from person to person” which influences a consumer’s purchase decision (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). However, eWOM differs in that the person-to-person interaction comes quite often from people outside a consumer’s most personal and immediate network, such as in the form of Twitter or from customer reviews posted on an online retail store, like Amazon.com (Duan, Gub & Whinton, 2008). Other studies have defined eWOM as “communication [that] refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

A study of usergenerated content (UGC) looked at how broadband Internet users spread eWOM its subsequent effect on purchase decisions (Riegner, 2007). A survey of 4,000 broadband Internet users found that regular users of online tools use email (95%) more than any other online tool. Of those regular users who use online tools daily, 67% use forums, blogs and discussion boards (Riegner, 2007). Based on the responses from broadband Internet users, it was found that online purchases were twice as likely to be

influenced by UGC as those that were purchased in retail stores or offline (Riegner, 2007). Online purchases were also found to undergo more scrutiny and as a result there was greater chance that potential buyers would use UGC as an information source (Riegner, 2007). Products that were deemed as more expensive were shown to receive greater scrutiny from potential buyers than products that were seen as less expensive. Thus, potential buyers were more likely to consider the views of others before making a high priced purchase (Riegner, 2007).

A recent study looking of Twitter found that 20% of tweets that mentioned a brand “expressed a sentiment or opinion concerning that company, product, or service” (Jansen, 2009). Furthermore, the study found that 80% of the tweets analyzed mentioned a product or brand in some way although not necessarily expressing a positive or negative opinion (Jansen, 2009). The research showed that micro-blogging was a viable avenue for companies to pursue if they wanted to “monitor brand community discussions” or convey important information to their target audience” (Jansen, 2009).

Some social networks, such as Ratemyprofessor.com, which allows students to rate the quality of college professors, have struggled to maintain high levels or participation. A study of the website Ratemyprofessors.com found in their survey of college students that 96% of the respondents were aware of the website and that 94% of those surveyed had visited the website (Steffes, 2008). Although the site had a high degree of awareness only 36% of respondents had actually rated a professor (Steffes, 2008). Preliminary expectations were that a higher percentage of students would participate and rate a professor than what was actually reported because researchers believed that students had as much to gain as they had to lose by giving a professor a

positive or negative review (Steffes, 2008). Turning passive members of social networks into active users is a problem many social networks must address even if a social network explicitly presents an appealing value proposition that one would assume would result in engaged users.

Other studies have shown that source credibility does not play a significant role in influencing informational usefulness (Cheung, 2007). A study of the site Openrice.com, an online community for evaluating food and restaurants in Hong Kong, found that comments about restaurants were more effective if a user had an indication of the identity of the commenter, or if the reader of a comment had visited, the restaurant that was the subject of the review (Cheung, 2007). This study proves that because real-life experience can influence positive eWOM that there is reason for companies to help their target audience develop online interactions with one another.

History of Twitter

Twitter launched in 2006 as a free micro-blogging social network that enables users to post messages on their profile that can be viewed by other subscribers, more commonly referred to as “followers” (Farhi, 2009). These short messages known as “tweets” can be no more than 140 characters (McFedries, 2009). Tweets can be sent from and received by almost any kind of electronic device including, desktop PCs, laptops, BlackBerrys, iPhones and other mobile devices (Farhi, 2009).

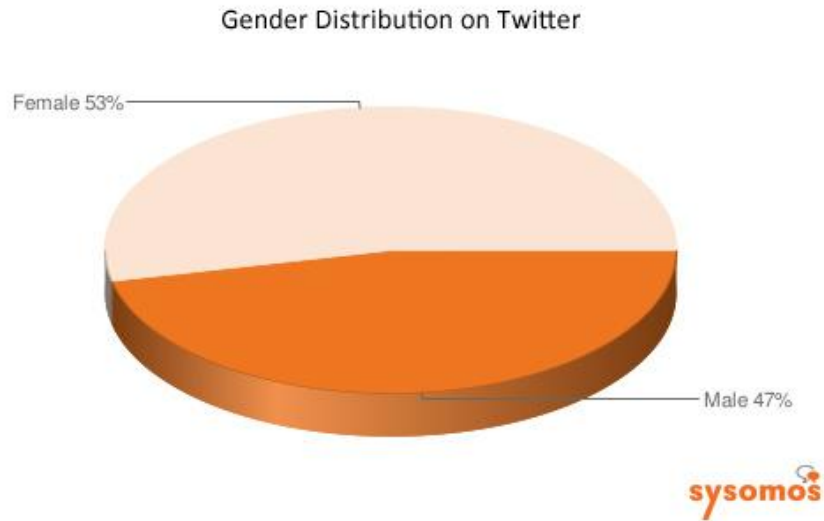
Twitter exploded in popularity after it won the “Blog” category in the 10th Annual Web Awards at the 2007 South by Southwest Festival (SXSW) (2007.swsx.com, 2009). During the weeklong interactive conference, Twitter employees placed two 60-inch, high-definition televisions in the conference hallways, streaming only Twitter messages

(Levy, 2008). South by Southwest attendees that viewed these monitors were updated on Twitter users' activities and thoughts via real-time tweets. It allowed one person to communicate with thousands quickly and easily, about what they were doing, thinking, or anything that caught their interest (Levy, 2008). The instant-messaging-blogging hybrid was the most talked item at the 2007 SXSW conference and subsequently helped catapult into the international spotlight.

Who is Using Twitter?

Demographic information about Twitter allows for one to create a portrait of the typical Twitter user. Twitter users, by and large, are overwhelmingly young but not the youngest of young adults (Lenhart, 2009). The median age of a Twitter user is 31. Median age of a MySpace user is 27, Facebook user is 26 and LinkedIn user is 40 (Lenhart, 2009). Females account for 53% of Twitter users and males account for 47% of all Twitter users (**Figure 2**) (Cheng and Evans, 2009). Twitter users tend to come from more racially-and-ethnically-diverse backgrounds than the full U.S. population because of their young age (Lenhart, 2009). 35% of Twitter users live in urban areas (compared with 29% of all Internet users) and only 9% of Twitter users live in rural areas, compared with 17% of Internet users (Lenhart, 2009).

Figure 2 – Gender Distribution on Twitter

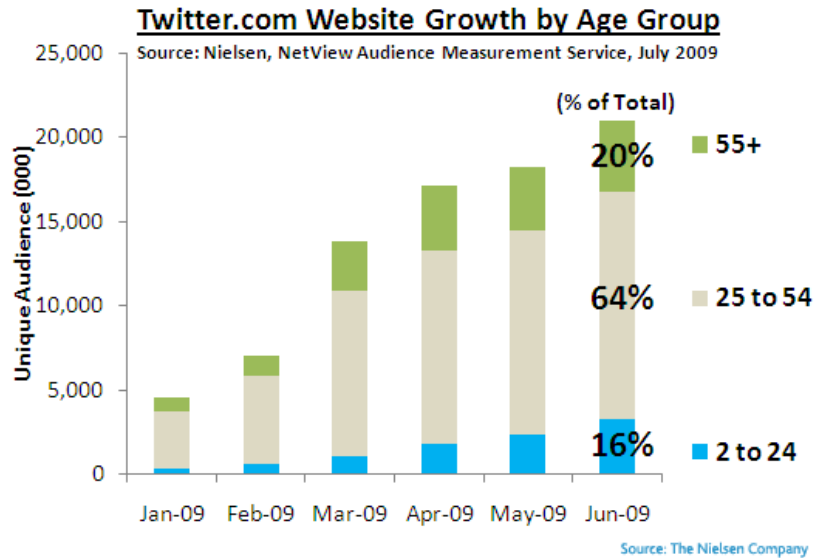


Not surprisingly, Twitter users are more likely to use wireless technologies – laptops, handhelds and cell phones – Internet access, or cell phones for text messaging. More than three-quarters (76%) of Twitter users use the Internet wirelessly, either on a laptop with a wireless connection, or via PDA, handheld or cell phone (Lenhart, 2009). Twitter users are more likely to use their cell phone to text and go online than the general population of Internet users (Lenhart, 2009). 82% of Twitter users have a cell phone and use it to send text messages, while 59% of those who go online, but do not use Twitter, own a cell phone and use it to send text messages (Lenhart, 2009).

A Nielsen Research report published in July 2009 found that Twitter’s growth was not fueled by teen users, which is striking information to some. 64% of Twitter’s growth from January 2009 to June 2009 is attributed to the 25-54 age demographic (**Figure 3**) (Martin, 2009). 20% of Twitter’s growth is due to the 55+ demographic and just 16% of Twitter’s growth is attributed to the age demographic 2-24 (Martin, 2009). In a response to a question posted by a reader in the comment section on the Nielsen blog

regarding the age demographic 2-24, Martin further elaborated that the 2-24 demographic is comprised of three different age demographics (Age 2-11: 1.9%, Age 12-17: 6.1% and Age 18-24: 11.3%) (2009).

Figure 3 – Twitter Demographic Growth Rate by Age Group



If the number of Twitter users is increasing, then one can assume that there is steady activity amongst a large number of Twitter users. This assumption could not be further from the truth. Data (**Figure 4**) shows that 10% of the top Twitter population account for 85% of all Tweets (Cheng and Evans, 2009). In fact, 21% of Twitter users that have created an account have never actually Tweeted (**Figure 5**) (Cheng and Evans, 2009).

Figure 4 – Tweet Distribution

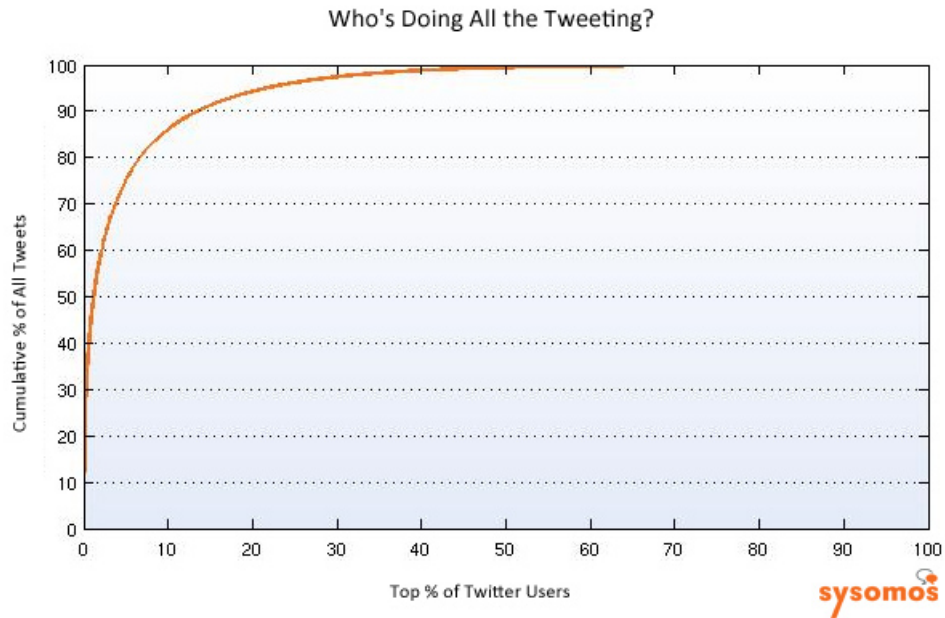
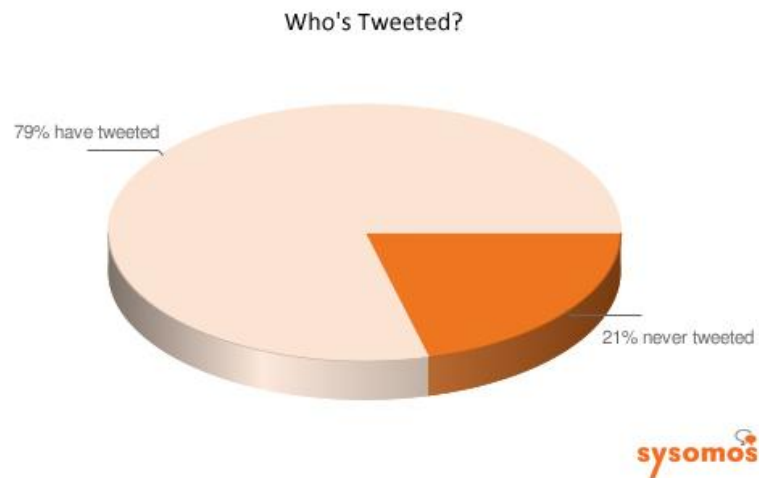


Figure 5. – Twitter Participation by Registered Users



It is forecasted that by the end of 2009, there will be 18 million US adults that use Twitter on various platforms on a monthly basis, an astounding 200% increase from 2008 levels (emarketer.com, 2009). By 2010, these numbers are projected to rise another

44.4% and adult usage is expected to reach 26 million U.S. adults (emarketer.com, 2009). Although these numbers are remarkable, there are some troubling signs for Twitter's future. One analyst found that "large numbers of users are abandoning Twitter after a short period of experimentation, and another sizable contingent seems to use the service only sporadically" (emarketer.com, 2009).

Twitter as a Marketing Tool

There is no doubt that Twitter is indeed a popular social network. However, it still remains to be seen if the micro-blogging tool will be viable in the long-term as a marketing instrument for companies. A number of different industries have had success using Twitter. The variety of different companies that use Twitter speaks to its elasticity and gives positive indication that Twitter could be around for quite some time.

There are a number of ways that Twitter can be used as a marketing tool for a business that affect both a company's internal and external structure. A niche blog for car dealership search engine optimization discusses lists some of these possibilities which include: brand building, feedback enabler, hiring and networking, increasing traffic to a dealership's website, increasing employee productivity, special event notifications and up to date industry news (topdealerseo.com, 2009). Looking at this long list of different Twitter topics shows the potential for a business to harness Twitter as a marketing tool, but it is important to remember that since markets differ, so too should the topic of their tweets.

Some companies that have used Twitter creatively have experienced worldwide acclaim, and others have earned sharp criticism. A small bakery in London named Albion was lucky to be the first business to use Baker Tweet. Designed by Poke Digital, a digital

ad firm, Baker Tweet is a small box that allows bakers to let their followers on Twitter know when their goods come fresh out of the oven by sending out real-time inventory tweets (Sorrel, 2009). Baker Tweet communicates a clear call to action to consumers and promotes a sense of urgency both of which create the sense of “Get it now or all your favorite fresh baked goods will be gone!” to Albion’s customers that follow the bakery on Twitter. The concept and execution is creative and easy-to-use, but best of all it is useful.

As good as Twitter can be for some companies it can also result in some very bad exposure if used carelessly, as Skittles brand candy found out. The brand, owned by Mars, tried to increase WOM and attention to the brand by having the site Skittles.com redirect people to a Twitter page that featured Skittles-only content. One tweet read, “Skittles got stuck in my mouth while I was driving, forced me to slam into an orphanage, killing hundreds. I’ll never eat them again” (computerweekly.com, 2009). Several comments were even harsher and as you can imagine no other company has tried to make use of Skittle’s marketing tactic.

Both Albion and Skittles took creative risks with how each company uses Twitter. However, only Albion, a little bakery in London, had success. How could two companies, differing in size and name recognition, achieve such divergent results? While further analysis of five different brands will clarify this more thoroughly, in short, Albion was successful in recognizing that its loyal customers wanted up-to-date news of when fresh goods were hot-off the oven. Albion utilized Twitter to communicate these features which subsequently led to an increased customer and profit base. Unlike Albion’s friendly engagement, Mars tried to force fans of Skittles into discussions about its famous candy brand on Twitter – an aggressive tactic that infuriated consumers.

Building a brand positively can be done without seeming disingenuous or invasive, as Home Depot, the nationwide retailer of home improvement products, has shown with its helpful tweets. In late 2008, the path of Hurricane Gustav threatened the lives of numerous homeowners in southeast region of the U.S. and the lives of their families. Home Depot used its Twitter page to keep its followers up to date about the path of the hurricane and provided safety tips for people that chose to remain in their homes rather than evacuate (socialmedia.org, 2009). Home Depot avoided a hard-sell approach of its products and instead chose to help out citizens which communicated a compassionate and trusting image Home Depot's brand.

Computer manufacturer Dell has used one of its Twitter accounts, "DellOutlet", to sell discounted laptops and various other Dell products. The account currently has a following of over a million Twitter users (twitter.com/dellOutlet, 2009). At the end of 2008 Dell had earned more than \$1 million in revenue and by mid-2009 those sales had risen to \$2 million (Parr, 2009). Dell's outlet Twitter account enables customers to get great deals on products quickly and directly from the manufacturer. While the sales may never reach the billions in revenue that the global corporation reaches annually, it is a positive sign for Twitter and other businesses that money can be made from corporate blogging with integrity.

CASE ANALYSES

1. Zappos

Twitter Profile:

Twitter profile: zappos

Followers: 1,561,038

Following: 395,434

Bio: www.zappos.com, blogs.zappos.com, twitter.zappos.com

Zappos is world's largest online footwear retailer. The company was founded in 1999 and current forecasts predict that the company will reach over a billion dollars in sales in 2008 (Campanelli, 2007). Zappos' name is rooted in the Spanish word *zapatos*, which means shoes. The company has grown primarily through word-of-mouth about its offerings of free shipping which includes both delivery and returns, its 365-day return policy and a 24/7 call center (Campanelli, 2007). The company works very hard to place emphasis on its customer care and service. This is evident in their core values statement which lists ten of their business practices and cultural views:

1) Deliver WOW Through Service, 2) Embrace and Drive Change, 3) Create Fun and A Little Weirdness, 4) Be Adventurous, Creative, and Open-Minded, 5) Pursue Growth and Learning, 6) Build Open and Honest Relationships with Communication, 7) Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit, 8) Do More With Less, 9) Be Passionate and Determined, and 10) Be Humble (about.zappos.com, 2009).

Zappos' Twitter account is maintained personally by the company's current CEO, Tony Hsieh. The layout of his Twitter page is simple but effective in terms of integrating the company's off-beat culture and the customer-care focus with the website (**Figure 6**). On the top left-hand side of the page is a candid photo of Tony Hsieh texting on his cell phone. Below his picture is a list of Zappos contact information which includes –

customer service, interviews, marketing, sponsorships, donation and charity requests, merchandising and job inquiries. For a company of Zappos' size and scale, its Twitter account does an excellent job of giving consumers access to a wide variety useful links in a clear and easy to locate area. Twitter can be a valuable tool for building customer relationships outside of a brand's main website, especially for companies like Zappos that exist with a purely online presence.

Figure 6 – Zappos' Twitter Homepage



The topics Zappos' Twitter accounts are unique in that it does not take provide information about sales on Zappos.com like one might expect. Instead, CEO Tony Hsieh tweets about the following topics: inspirational quotes, news links, ZapposTV, travel/personal updates. The tweets are funny, insightful personal and feel genuine. Followers of the Zappos' Twitter account often post their own favorite quotes to share with Tony and other followers of his account which shows that Tony has established a comfortable relationship with his Twitter followers.

News items that Tony posts range from the serious to the comical. For example, a recent post linked to a website about “14 Weird and Unusual Shoes” (twitter.com/Zappos, 2009). A post like this might seem too offbeat but in actuality it is rather quite clever. If people are in the frame of mind to shop for shoes, which is most likely why they were using Zappos in the first place, then it makes sense that they would want to read an interesting article about shoes. A post such as this informs and entertains customers who are likely to associate a fun opinion with Zappos because of these interesting posts.

Zappos’ fun culture is shown by video posts of office pranks at Zappos headquarters in Henderson, Nevada. Various comic-minded employees filmed office pranks which are then shared on Tony’s Twitter account. The videos are funny and again do a nice job of associating a fun experience with Zappos. In addition to videos of office pranks, Tony also posts satirical videos written and performed by Zappos employees. A recent video posted by Tony depicted what was supposed to be a Zappos-exclusive interview with pop star Lady Gaga, but instead was an interview with a Zappos employee wearing a piñata over her head and talking as if she were Lady Gaga.

Key to Zappos’ successful use of Twitter is the leadership transparency and reach through. Followers of Zappos’ Twitter account are treated to a very personal look at Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh. Along with the inspirational quotes, Tony frequently posts funny updates about his daily routine (**Figure 7**):

Figure 7 – Zappos Tweet

“Dropped glass, shattered all over floor. I usually try to be positive, but pretty sure there's no way this glass is half full.” (posted October 11, 2009)

Tony also posts pictures of his business travels which are often at interesting locales around the country. He also posts about times when he is meeting with other executives from companies such as AOL. A post about Tony's business activities gives his followers a look at his more serious side.

Zappos' Twitter account has taken a unique path towards establishing good customer relations. Rather than trying to promote the website through special offers, Zappos gives its followers an intimate portrayal of their behind-the-scenes atmosphere. It is a risky move but appears to be paying off. The videos are funny and the news articles are engaging. The inspirational quotes help balance out Tony's sardonic comments.

Followers of Zappos' Twitter account associate the fun tweets with the company itself. This makes for a positive brand association. Zappos success came in part from positive word-of-mouth that was spread organically. It is not hard to imagine a Twitter follower of Zappos recommending its Twitter account to another fan of the Zappos brand.

2. **Whole Foods Market**

Whole Foods Market is one of leading retailers of health and organic products. Started in Austin, Texas in 1980, Whole Foods has grown from a locally-owned grocery store into a national symbol of ethical retailing (wholefoodsmarket.com, 2009). Whole Foods offers a variety of products that meet the company's strict adherence to quality organic products that are produced with a global sense of social responsibility. Product categories include meat and poultry, baked goods, produce, wine and beer, and pet and household products.

Twitter Profile:

Twitter profile: WholeFoods

Followers: 1,623,487

Following: 556,799

Bio: Fresh organic tweets from WholeFoodsMarket HQ in Austin, TX

Whole Foods main Twitter account is “wholefoods” which is indicated on its Twitter account homepage with the tagline, “This is the primary Whole Foods Market account, tweeting from our Global HQ in Austin, TX” (twitter.com/wholefoods). Whole Foods has 172 different Twitter accounts which are categorized by Topical Tweets, Metro Areas and Stores by State. Each of these Twitter accounts is managed by a different user from the company.

The look of the Whole Foods primary account is very simple and straightforward. The design incorporates the company’s trademark forest green color as the background with leaves in the top-left hand corner of the page. Also on the top-left hand side of the page is the company’s Twitter identification, a link to all of Whole Foods’ Twitter accounts and a link to suggest a new store location (**Figure 8**).

Figure 8 – Whole Foods’ Twitter Homepage



Whole Foods primary account has Tweeted 5,412 times. It has eight different categories of Tweets: customer support, returns, new store information, recipes, specials/promotions, branding information, interview links, news, and iPhone application questions. The category of Customer Support receives the most personalized Tweets. Whole Foods makes a great effort to respond to customer complaints, even in those expressed in particularly harsh terms.

In the tweet below, an annoyed customer vents their frustration to Whole Foods’ main Twitter account via a tweet (**Figure 9**). After two hours a response from Whole Foods is tweeted directly to the customer with an offer for a full refund (**Figure 10**).

Figure 9 – Whole Foods Customer Complaint

@wholefoods Could W.F. Park City suck anyhowse! My chai tastes like lukewarm soy milk then anything chai like. Do it right or dont offer it. about 8 hours ago from Ping.fm

-fragilecow (10/9/09)

Figure 10 – Whole Foods Employee Response to Customer Complaint

@fragilecow Sorry to hear; please feel free to bring your receipt back to a full on anything you're unsatisfied with.about 6 hours ago from CoTweet in reply to fragilecow

The mutual benefits gained from immediate customer response are invaluable to a company looking to open clear channels of communication with its customer base. Twitter gives the customer a new and effective way to voice their dissatisfaction with a product in a public forum as seen in the example of the Chai complaint. The Whole Foods market in Park City is now aware of a problem with one of their products and also the company is able to relay to the dissatisfied customer that they will be fix the customer’s problem in a timely manner. With a simple Tweet, Whole Foods can publicly express a very personal problem with thousands of customers. Whole Foods is able to demonstrate that they are committed to giving customers a great experience with its brand.

With almost 200 Twitter accounts that are city-specific, Whole Foods has introduced a solution to increase the number of replies that customers receive in response to their direct questions that they send. In the example below, a customer from Austin, TX sent a direct tweet (Figure 11) to Whole Foods Austin’s Twitter account (Figure 12) regarding the availability of a brand of bread.

Figure 11 – Austin Whole Foods Customer Inquiry

@wholefoodsatx was the Arnolds Bakery account cut? lets see what we can do to get them back on the shelves. best bread ever
3:31 PM Nov 17th from txt

Figure 12 – Austin Whole Foods Employee Response to Customer Inquiry

@wholefoodsathx was the Arnolds Bakery account cut? lets see
what we can do to get them back on the shelves. best bread ever
3:31 PM Nov 17th from txt

The customer received a friendly tweet from the Austin Twitter account in under a minute, a much quicker response than the more frequented and main Whole Food's Twitter account would have released. Through its smaller city-specific Twitter accounts, Whole Foods is gradually improving its customer interaction as it can more efficiently answer questions. Other companies can benefit from these smaller accounts as long as they can ensure that city-specific Twitter accounts are necessary and that the accounts will be properly maintained.

Whole Foods is using Twitter to communicate with customers in niche markets. The company has two topical Twitter accounts which include WFMCheese and WholeRecipes. While these accounts have a much smaller number of followers than the Whole Foods' main account, it does not necessarily mean that these accounts are any less important. In fact, one could argue that because these are smaller accounts the relationship between the followers and the Twitter account has the potential to be much more personal than Whole Foods' main account.

WFMCheese is run by a Cathy Strange, a global buyer of cheese for Whole Foods. A link to her biography and an interview on the Whole Foods website is provided in the Twitter account. Tweets range from topics such as cheese regulation information, general news about cheese themed events and a weekly "Guess the cheese contest." The

WFMCheese account has 1,352 followers. The account does a good job of keeping customers with an interest in cheese informed and engaged with interesting news but the overall presentation of the account is lacking. The account is using a default layout and no effort is made to connect the account with the brand.

The WholeRecipes account is interesting because its tweets are exclusively recipes. It is easily maintained but a better effort could be made to drive Whole Foods customers to the page. The recipes tweeted are random and have no connection with one another. Whole Foods should consider the idea of tweeting recipes with ingredients that are on sale or for new brands. Another avenue would be for the account to have themed recipes. Although the random recipes are a nice idea providing a schedule of sorts for the recipes could encourage people to come back to the account if they know that particular recipes of interest will be featured.

3. 50 Cent

50 Cent (real name Curtis Jackson) is an American multi-platinum selling hip-hop artist. Since his debut in 2003, he has become one of the most polarizing figures in the music industry both for the lyrical content of his music and his cocky off-stage persona. 50 Cent earned \$100 million in 2008 after VitaminWater was sold to Coca-Cola, of which he was a major stakeholder (Greenburg, 2009). He has sold over 20 million albums worldwide. In 2009, 50 Cent ranked 4th on *Forbes*'s list of "Hip-Hop Cash Kings," earning \$20 million despite not releasing an album (Greenburg, 2009). The rap artist has diversified his income into a number of lucrative ventures which include: G-Unit clothing line, a record label, films, video games, cologne and books (Greenburg, 2009).

Twitter Profile:

Username: 50cent

Followers: 2,012,990

Tweets: 460

Bio: The Real 50 Cent

50 Cent's main Twitter account is "50cent." He has three different Twitter profiles that he uses to promote his various business ventures. Other accounts that 50 Cent uses include: "The50thLaw," "thisis50" and "boobootv." "The50thLaw" was an account used to promote 50 Cent's *New York Times* best-selling book, *The 50th Law*, although the account has not been updated since mid-September 2009 (Langhorne, 2009). The "thisis50" is an account that links content to 50 Cent's popular blog thisis50.com and "boobootv" is an account used to promote "mature" video content not allowed on 50 Cent's primary blog.

50 Cent has taken an already financially-lucrative recording career and used it as a jumping point to branch off into other money-making ventures. It is no surprise that he has taken full advantage of Twitter to connect with his fans. Since December of 2008, 50 Cent has tweeted 460 times. His account has one of the most diverse categories of tweets which include: behind-the-scenes videos, interviews, concert footage, contests, photos, new songs, downloadable Twitter Content, 50 Cent merchandise and live chats. 50 Cent has also tweeted about auditions for professional and non-professional actors to audition for roles in his music videos, links to fan-created music, Facebook content, concert updates and press statements.

50 Cent has not had an official album released since 2007's *Curtis* but has consistently released independent mixtape CDs with hundreds of exclusive songs. With each release of a mixtape, 50 Cent tweets a link to where fans can download the mixtape free of charge. 50 Cent frequently tweets links to mixtapes released by artists signed to his G-Unit record label. In age of dwindling record sales due to illegal downloads, 50 Cent has taken a unique response and released a plethora of free downloadable music for his fans in the hopes that they will pay for his official studio albums as a sign of gratitude and loyalty. Fans that follow the artist on Twitter have instant access and spread the links to other fans or potential fans of 50 Cent. There is a significant liability in giving fans access to free music. Negative word-of-mouth about bad music can spread just as fast as positive word-of-mouth.

50 Cent is known for his larger-than-life persona and has used Twitter to give fans access to tons of video content of the rapper. The videos are frequently behind-the-scenes making of music videos, interviews and even comedic sketches starring the rapper. These videos are often featured on the artist's blog thisis50.com which results in quite a bit of cross-promotion between the "50cent" account and the "thisis50" account. The tweets give fans an intimate look at the persona that 50 Cent has carefully crafted. It's not likely that a fan will learn about Curtis Jackson outside of his rap alter ego 50 Cent, but followers of his Twitter accounts will get tons of insight into a lavish lifestyle that relishes in inciting controversy – which appears to be the way the rapper (and his fans) like it.

The laundry list of merchandise and products that 50 Cent has linked himself to is one of the key reasons that the artist has managed to quickly establish himself as one of

the most commercially-successful rappers of all-time, in spite of the critical drubbing that his music often takes from critics and hip-hop fans. A recent tweet about VitaminWater invited 50 Cent's followers to participate in a promotion to create their own VitaminWater flavor (**Figure 13**).

Figure 13 – 50 Cent Vitamin Water Tweet

vitaminwater is lettin u create your own flavor. Can do better than my formula 50?? check it out at <http://apps.facebook.com/fl...>4:36 PM
[Sep 11th](#) from web

The artist also has tweeted about downloadable Twitter wallpapers that let followers use the same wallpaper as the rapper. The most current background features artwork promoting the release of 50 Cent's soon-to-be released fourth album, *Before I Self Destruct*, as well as a link to company that designed the wallpaper (**Figure 14**). Another tweet offered fans a chance to buy costumes worn by the rapper in one of his most recent music videos. Only fifteen of the costumes were up for sale and sold out soon after the tweet went live.

Figure 14 – 50 Cent’s Twitter Homepage



Although 50 Cent has used Twitter creatively he has made a few missteps as well. Before the release of his book, “The 50th Law,” 50 Cent aggressively promoted the book with select quotes, but there have been no updates to the “The50thLaw” book since its release. A lack of updates makes the account look poorly managed and hurts the image of the book, suggesting that there is nothing important or interesting to say about it. It might be in the best interest for the artist to close the “The50thLaw” account. There have also been instances when some of the links to videos do not work.

4. NFL (National Football League)

The NFL (National Football League) is the most popular professional sports league in the United States. A Harris poll conducted in 2007 that asked Americans to name their favorite sport revealed that Americans prefer football (29%) over the second –

most popular sport, basketball (14%) (Lopresti, 2007). It is estimated that three out of four Americans watch football each season (Lopresti, 2007). The league's popularity shows no signs of slowing down. Ratings mid-way through the 2009-2010 football season are the highest in 20 years (sports.yahoo.com, 2009)

Twitter Profile

Username: NFL

Following: 41

Followers: 1,393,208

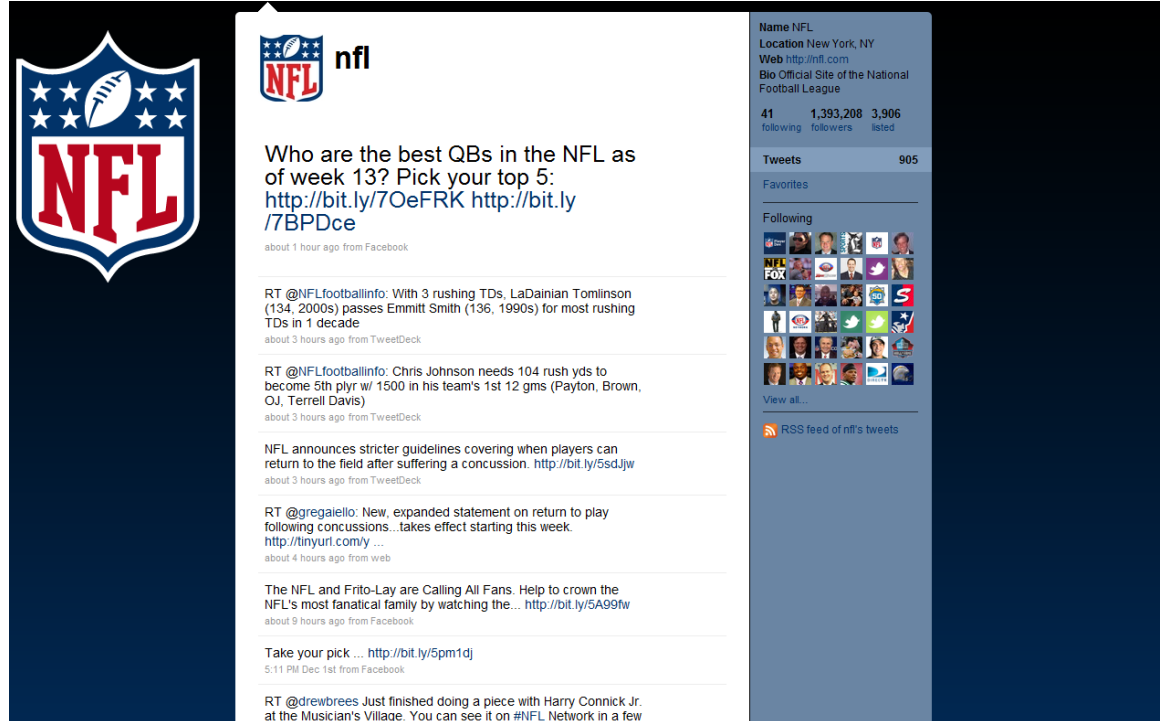
Tweets: 905

Bio: Official Site of the National Football League

The NFL has two accounts, one for the league itself (NFL) and one for its cable channel, NFL Network (nflnetwork). An account for NFL Redzone was created (nflredzone) to promote the league's website featuring game recaps, but there has been only one tweet since the account launched.

The layout of the NFL's main account (**Figure 15**) is very simple. In the upper left-hand corner is the NFL logo set-off by a dark blue background. Interestingly, more females watch the Super Bowl than the Academy Awards, but it is apparent that the NFL aims to convey a masculine tone to a core audience of males (Lopresti, 2007).

Figure 15 – NFL’s Twitter Homepage



The NFL has tweeted 905 times. There are around 12 different categories of tweets which are: best plays of the week, NFL Gamecenter, news links, celebrity game picks, TV links, special articles, week previews, select press conferences, NFL Network promotion, player chat, single game recaps and downloadable Facebook applications. All of these categories are relevant but there does not seem to be much originality or variance in the tweets. Understandably, the NFL is a billion dollar league with a lot of pressure to control its image but there is a severe lack of brand personality on the NFL’s Twitter account.

The NFL Twitter account follows 39 Twitter accounts but is only following two NFL teams: the New England Patriots (realpatriots) and the San Diego Chargers (chargers). Every NFL team has an active Twitter account and it would be in the best interest for the NFL to follow all 32 NFL teams. This would give fans easy access to all

teams and could help spur interest in teams for the casual NFL fan. The NFL's main account also follows a limited amount of active players which include Terrell Owens, Mark Sanchez, Chad Ochocinco and Kerry Rhodes. The NFL is missing a big opportunity to connect fans with their favorite teams and players by linking to each NFL team.

The NFL has a sub-account for promoting NFL Redzone (nflredzone) but there has been only one tweet since the launch of the account. Although the Twitter account cannot control the content of the NFL Redzone, the sparse number of updates on the account implicitly suggests that quality of NFL Redzone is lacking. The NFL Redzone account has 1,031 followers which pales in comparison the 1,393,208 followers that the main NFL account boasts. The lack of followers also seems to suggest that both the NFL Redzone Twitter account and the website itself are not worth following. If the NFL has no plans to maintain the NFL Redzone account, then it would be a good decision to disable the account and promote the NFL Redzone on the NFL's main account.

There does not seem to be much incentive for NFL fans to return and follow the NFL's Twitter account. The NFL should consider holding Twitter-exclusive contests for followers. These contests could work in tandem with news stories or other Twitter categories that the NFL account tweets about. This would drive more followers to read content or watch content that is being tweeted and would reward them for doing such.

5. Barack Obama

Barack Obama is the 44th President of the United States. He was elected to the presidency on Nov. 5th 2008 and became the first African-American to hold this office.

Most recently, he was awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. President Obama's use of Twitter in conjunction with other social media such as Facebook and YouTube helped drive early fund-raising during his campaign for presidency (Boutin, 2009).

Twitter Profile:

Username: BarackObama

Bio: 44th President of the United States

Following: 747,808

Followers: 2,787,426

President Barack Obama is the most popular politician currently using Twitter. The President's account currently ranks eighth out of Twitter users by number of popularity with 2,787,426 followers (twitterholic.com, 2009). The only other politicians that rank in the top 100 by number of followers are former Vice-President Al Gore (1,943,653 followers), Sen. John McCain (1,620,784 followers) and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (1,466,219 followers) (twitterholic.com, 2009). President Obama has a significant lead over other politicians using Twitter but it is unlikely that this is only the result of holding the highest public office in the United States.

The layout of the President Obama's Twitter account page is simple and clean. A light blue background with a grey-tone head shot of the President in the upper left-hand corner (**Figure 16**). Next to the President Obama's Twitter account name is his presidential campaign's official logo. The blue on the logo matches the light blue background of the account which keeps a nice consistency, especially considering some of the louder and obnoxious Twitter account designs.

Figure 16 – President Barack Obama’s Twitter Homepage



In many regards, President Obama has the most difficult Twitter account to maintain. The account has to have a balance of voter intimacy with respect for the office, lest it be the scorn of political detractors (which it has been quite often). President Obama first activated his Twitter account 32 months ago. Clearly, Mr. Obama was a trailblazer of sorts for taking a bold risk and incorporating Twitter as a major way to spread his campaign messages. Of the three other politicians that have Twitter accounts ranked in the top 100 users based on followers, Gov. Schwarzenegger’s has the next oldest account at 22 months, which is nearly a fully year after the President Obama created his account. Sen. John McCain, who ran against President Obama in the 2008 Presidential election, created his account only 9 months ago.

It should be noted that not all of President Obama’s tweets are made by the President himself. It was reported by *The New York Times* that during President Obama’s

campaign for the presidency, the then-senator gave staffers tweeting privileges when he was unable to do so himself (Boutin, 2009). Understandably, now that President Obama is president he will have even less time to tweet personally, if at all. Still, because the account is in his name and commands significant attention, President Obama's account is important to analyze.

The type of topics that President Obama or one of his staffers tweet about include links to speeches by President Obama, legislation news, one-line blurbs from President Obama's speeches, Op-ed links, notable news stories, live webcasts, political cause sign-ups and voter registration information. Other tweets include challenges to followers to create a 30-second video that speaks in favor of passing healthcare reform, voter registration alerts and messages of gratitude to President Obama's supporters.

Leading up to the 2008 Presidential election, President Obama made great use of Twitter in terms of spreading campaign messages and informing citizens of voter rallies. An example of the campaign tweeting follows (**Figure 17**):

Figure 17 – Barack Obama Town Hall Meeting Tweet

Holding a town hall meeting In Lynchburg, VA. Watch it live at http://my.barackobama.com/1...3:48 PM Aug 20th, 2008 from web
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This tweet is a great example of how Twitter can be used to bring like-minded individuals together in a more intimate and personal way. First, the tweet identifies the location of the speech giving followers of the sense that they too are on the campaign trail. Second, the tweet links to a live video feed of the speech. During the campaign trail President Obama's speeches were wildly popular so the live feeds gave voters an opportunity to see him deliver speeches regarding his platform and plans.

With each passing year, politicians are coming under heavier scrutiny and face considerable pressures to avoid public flubs that could harm their image and hurt campaign momentum. 24-hour cable news channels and new social media such as Facebook, and now Twitter, expedite the rate at which public faux pas spread. On January 6, 2009, *CNN* reported that President Obama's Twitter account had been hacked, along with several other notable Twitter users (Heussner, 2009). The matter was resolved quickly but it does raise a serious security issues regarding President Obama's use of Twitter.

Some critics of President Obama feel that he has more pressing matters and should not time to tweet messages to the public (Singel, 2009). Others have complained that since being elected, President Obama has failed to keep channels open with Twitter followers that believed they were an integral part of his ascendancy to the highest public office (Boutin, 2007). One possible solution to this problem would be for President Obama to be more forthcoming and simply state that he has staffers that tweet for him, but that he maintains a firm grasp of control over the content of the tweets. Other notable politicians such as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown use a team of staffers that are solely responsible for tweeting and responding to followers tweets (Herzog, 2009).

If President Obama were follow Prime Minister Brown's Twitter use strategy, it would reduce criticism from those in favor of President Obama tweeting and those against the President using his little free time to tweet. President Obama could still devote time to critical matters and still free up channels of communication with his dedicated Twitter followers. In a way it is more personal to admit that President Obama is using

staffers to run his Twitter account than to have automatic tweets for every press release under the auspice of being by the President himself.

Another possible option for President Obama's Twitter account would be to create issue-specific Twitter accounts that range from topics such as healthcare to foreign affairs. Issue-specific Twitter accounts would be promoted on President Obama's main Twitter account. Single-issue accounts could create a more focused discussion of important issues amongst followers of each account and could increase the response rate of direct tweets. Issue-specific Twitter accounts could also be used by the owners of the account to promote causes and awareness to people that are more likely to drive discussion of the issue. Increasing awareness of important issues would be particularly useful if a topic was currently in the midst of increased media coverage, such as the current debate regarding the overhaul of the U.S. healthcare system.

In spite of some minor critiques of President Obama's use of Twitter, his popularity amongst other Twitter users shows that many people are excited about the idea of a world leader engaging with citizens in new and emerging media. If used intelligently, President Obama could inspire other politician to embrace new media and form new connections with people.

DISCUSSION

Twitter: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Twitter has the potential to be one of the most important innovations in social media for businesses if used properly. In early 2009, a contest between actor Ashton Kutcher and news network CNN to see whose Twitter account could reach one million followers gained national attention (Heussner, 2009). Twitter is already a well-known brand in which companies would be able to access an already populated tool, making diffusion of Twitter into a company quicker, easier, and more adoptable.

One of the most appealing aspects of Twitter is that it is extremely easy to use. Simply create an account and start micro-blogging away. Estimates of the number of Twitter users vary because Twitter does not release the official number of users. One estimate the number of global Twitter users to be around 70 million (tommie.nu, 2009). Twitter accounts are also free to create so companies do not have to worry about a high upfront cost.

With millions of users tweeting each day, the potential for information overload is very high. Twitter's searchable database makes it easy for tweeters to find the topic or brand they are looking for. The most popular stories or "trending topics" are listed on the site's homepage providing a simple way to find out what topic is hot. A company can establish its presence on Twitter simply by creating an account.

Twitter is not perfect and there are several inherent flaws that have resulted in barriers of entry for many potential users. Twitter still has several site maintenance issues that result in the entire site to be shut down. The Twitter display interface does not lend itself to much customization. Several companies have Twitter pages that are nearly

indistinguishable from one another. A lack of an intuitive ranking system hurts those curious about which tweeters to follow or those who feel they cannot trust the information coming from other tweeters. A company must hire an employee to maintain that its Twitter page is updated frequently with reliable and accurate content. This employee would also have to ensure that false information about a company is not being spread.

A Nielsen study found that Twitter has a 40% retention rate which is surprising given that Twitter has garnered a large amount of media exposure that has resulted in millions of people signing up for accounts (Martin, 2009). What is troubling about this statistic is that it includes third-party Twitter applications in its data set. Across the board 60% of Tweepsters are abandoning the micro-blogging application after only one month of use. Twitter must find a way to convince users excited enough to continue use (Martin, 2009). Several forecasts point to a bright future for Twitter in terms of the number of users, but there is that slight possibility that the micro-blogging tool could disappear just as quickly as it appeared.

Twitter: One Year Later (Maybe Even Sooner)

Innovations in social media occur at such fast rate that it is difficult to speak of what Twitter will be like in five years. In the interest of speculating on how the micro-blogging site will improve upon its weaknesses, a more constricted timeline must be used. Twitter is incredibly popular, the rate at which it attracts new users and its media attention both attest to that fact, but it is also losing new users shortly after the creation of new accounts seems to indicate that the Twitter experience is underwhelming.

It is likely that in the next year Twitter will introduce an intuitive ranking system for quantifying the usefulness of users' Tweets. Data that only ranks Twitter users by the number of followers is not useful for Twitter users interested in finding helpful information about topics of interest to them. Twitter has not communicated a clear value statement and while a ranking system based on usefulness does not solve this problem, it will certainly help attract skeptics that believe Twitter to be a waste of their time. If Twitter can present itself as both trustworthy and useful, a much improved retention could be one of several positive results.

Several companies, such as Whole Foods, have tapped into Twitter as a way to connect their target audience to their brand. Whole Foods has wisely maintained several city-specific Twitter accounts for news updates and for responding to customer complaints and, to a lesser degree, compliments. A ranking system based on usefulness will give companies quantitative data to measure grade their Twitter accounts. In the case of Whole Foods, stores could be measured against one another to rate performance.

Twitter has had several high-profile security breaches and although those problems were resolved quickly they nonetheless resulted in bad publicity. It is foreseeable that Twitter will offer premium subscriptions that offer increased security protection and even some more advanced customizable features to personalize Twitter accounts. On one hand, these premium accounts will appeal to celebrities that value the positive media exposure that a good Twitter account can garner them but are afraid of potential security risks that hackers present.

Twitter recently raised \$100 million dollars that will bring its valuation to \$1 billion (Frommer, 2009). It is possible that Twitter could simply attempt buyouts of other

micro-blogging sites that have features that Twitter lacks. The company has been very successful at raising money even without a strong revenue plan so logic says that it could raise enough money for beneficial acquisitions.

There are around 15 micro-blogging sites with features similar to Twitter, including Dailybooth, FriendFeed, Tumblr, Identi.ca, Jaiku and Hictu. Most recently a new micro-blogging site called TipDrop has been attracting significant media attention since it launched in late July 2009 (articlbase.com, 2009). TipDrop excels in one of Twitter's main weaknesses by incorporating a ranking system to measure credibility (articlbase.com, 2009). Any of these sites is prime for acquisition by Twitter if the company does not want to invest much into research and development.

Twitter has yet to provide a compelling value statement. Many people are unsure why they should sign up for yet another social networking platform. The potential for Twitter of being useful for brands is has been shown through various highly publicized events but a lack of a clear vision statement is preventing many from adopting the tool into their lives.

Twitter's biggest problem is that the micro-blogging site does not have a revenue plan. In an interview with *The New York Times*, one investor in Twitter stated, "We are not worried about growing users, we're not worried about monetization, we're just worried about making a fantastic product" (Miller, 2009). Twitter co-founder, Biz Stone, discussed the possibility of offering analytic reports of traffic to businesses' Twitter profile (Miller, 2009). Further details of implementing analytic technology remain vague.

A strong possibility for generating revenue for Twitter would be the introduction of paid tweets. According to PQ Media, a media econometrics provider, WOM marketing

grew 14.2% to \$1.54 billion in 2008 (pqmedia.com, 2009). WOM marketing is projected to grow another 10.2% in 2009 (pqmedia.com, 2009). Paid tweets would have Twitter users send ads to their friends and followers. Users would command prices per tweets based on their number of followers. Thus, the more followers a paid Twitter user has the higher the price of a tweet.

Before implementation, Twitter should consider the following caveats of paid tweets. If Twitter users are paid to tweet, they must disclose so to their followers as a consumer interest protection. Paid tweets can avoid unflattering comparisons to “spam” email by limiting the number of times a tweet is sent to a Twitter user. Twitter’s intuitive search engine could be used to direct paid tweets to the most appropriate user. Twitter cannot last if its investors are not making money. Advertisers and marketer should be cautious of integrating Twitter into any campaign until the micro-blogging tool presents a sound revenue plan.

Future Research

Several companies and celebrities have realized the potential of Twitter. The micro-blogging site can be a powerful tool for connecting a brand with its target audience. From an environmentally-conscious grocery store to a brash East coast rapper and even the President of the United States, there are no limitations to who can tap into Twitter’s growing network of Tweepers. The result of this study provides some insight into the type of content that to keep Tweepers using the micro-blogging service.

Above all, Twitter must be useful if it wants to maintain steady growth. Useful can be defined in many ways, but simply put if there is no clear intention for using the service then people will leave for similar sites that have a much more refined value

statement. A future study could measure Twitter users' opinions of the micro-blogging tool's brand personality and level of usefulness. Another study could use the Nielsen study regarding the high retention rate of Twitter as stepping stone for understanding the reasons so many people are discontinuing use of the service. At some point the retention rate could become so high that Twitter will be phased out.

To be useful, Twitter must be trusted by its members. A future study could examine the factors that could make Twitter a more trustworthy social tool. Because there is a level of anonymity and there have been some well-publicized incidences of profile hacking it is important for the site to understand how it can improve its brand image by fixing its trust problems.

Another study could look into ways of measuring information credibility. Currently Tweeters only have word-of-mouth as a gauge for credibility which is a serious limitation. A future study could do a comparison of Twitter against its competitors to look into information credibility.

Conclusion

If you were to tell someone five years ago that a micro-blogging site that limited posts to 140-characters or less could be the key to advertising, they probably would have given you a perplexed look. Twitter has changed the way many companies and brands connect with their target audiences. Twitter has many great features that make it an ideal tool for connecting a brand to consumers, but it also lacks features that would help improve information quality, information usefulness, and source credibility. Research in eWOM has shown that each of these three attributes is vital to building effective eWOM in virtual communities like Twitter. Twitter's lack of a revenue model compromises the

company's image of long-term viability. The companies and brand analyzed in this report have each succeeded by addressing at least one of the three attributes – information quality, information usefulness, and source credibility – in tweets to their followers.

Whole Foods provides customers with Twitter accounts that are city-specific so as to increase response time to direct tweets from customers and to ensure that the tweets are helpful and accurate. Zappos' Twitter account, which is maintained by CEO Tony Hsieh, takes a unique approach to source credibility by creating a sense of managerial transparency and a strong feeling of reach through endorsing candid and funny tweets. Rapper 50 Cent's Twitter account excels at putting fans in touch with the artist via links to live chats as well as providing them with free music that can be shared among followers. President Barack Obama's Twitter account has shown how the micro-blogging tool can be used to build strong grassroots movements within a politician's circle. Only the NFL's Twitter account seems to be lacking features that address three important attributes creatively or effectively. If a company truly understands its target audience and accurately targets them, Twitter can be a powerful and profitable marketing tool.

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