The Role of Twitter in the World of Business

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the services people seek out on Twitter and the integration of Twitter into businesses. Twitter has experienced tremendous growth in users over the past few years, from users sharing to the world what they had for lunch to their opinions on world events. As a social media website, Twitter has become the third most popular behind only Facebook and YouTube. Its user base statistics ensure a wide audience for business to engage with. However, many find this a daunting prospect as there are no set guidelines as to how business might use the service. The ability to post quick short messages for the whole of the social network to see has encouraged people to use this microblogging platform to comment and share attitudes on company brands and products. The authors present how the business world is using the social network site as a new communication channel to reach customers and examine other possible uses for Twitter in a business context. This paper also discusses how Twitter plans to move forward and evolve with its service, ensuring that personal, business and third party developers’ best interests are catered to.

Keywords: E-Business, E-Marketing, Marketing, Micro-Blogging, Social Networking

INTRODUCTION
Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to follow each other and to post or ‘tweet’ a message with a strict 140 character limit. Twitter differs from other social networking sites in that relationships can be completely one sided. For example, one user can follow another user and there is no obligation for the latter to follow the original. Twitter exploded onto the scene in March 2006 driven by its minimal user interface, which was in stark contrast to its competitors where the trend at the time was to allow users full customisation of their personal page, often resulting in a cluttered, garish design (Experian, 2009). Twitter also embraced third party developers from the beginning, offering a versatile application programming interface (API) and it also enjoys an unprecedented popularity with celebrities (Twitter Counter, 2010).

However interestingly, even with its popularity and substantial mainstream media coverage, Twitter has failed to match the growth of both Google and Facebook after their respective first three years. Google has 18,000,000 users, Facebook 27,000,000 and
Twitter 8,000,000 (Battelle, 2009). As Twitter enters its fifth year in operation, it can no longer be labeled as the new kid on the block, however there are many who still do not know what its purpose is or if it even has a value for them. Twitter have described it as “...for discovering and sharing what’s happening in your life right now”. While this is true and unfortunately by its very nature, results in a lot of the information shared being ‘pointless babble’, it does not highlight the potential Twitter has in business (Java et al., 2007).

The online advertising sector is growing year on year and with technology changing there are now more ways than ever to market products and business. However, it is the ‘people’ who now want control and they have the ‘acute editing skills’ to listen to be exposed to whatever messages they want. With consumers having the power to eliminate media messages been shown to them, marketers need to discover a way of reaching their customers without them knowing it is a method of advertising. Media buying is the process of contacting the owner of a website and purchasing advertising space, usually as a banner placement, on their website. High volume websites such as YouTube and Facebook, all offer media buying placements. Businesses rely on the information provided by these websites to estimate how much of their target audience they will reach. When a business buys a placement on a high volume website, they may have the majority of their demographic seeing it, but they will also be paying a lot of money on users who have next to no interest in what the business has to offer.

Social networking sites such as Facebook now account for one out of every five ads people view online. As the top social media sites can deliver high reach and frequency against target segments at a low cost, it appears that some advertisers are eager to use social networking sites as a new advertising delivery vehicle. A social networking site can be used to gain new customers, keep in touch with current customers and promote new products, sales/offers and events, creating overall high-quality PR that is specific to a company. It was only a matter of time before business associates woke up to the possibilities that lie beneath Social Networking. It seems obvious that they would want to promote their brands to an audience that is continuously growing at such a healthy rate.

There are many different features on each Social Networking website that can be used to promote a business. Users can post links, videos, pictures, fan pages, groups and even ads on some social networking websites. Businesses can create generic pages just like standard user pages. Once the page is, ‘friends’ can be added in the hope they gather more friends via ‘word of mouth’ promotion. Once the initial network of friends is exhausted, events can be created and other friends invited.

Twitter offers a different model however to YouTube and Facebook but it still has enormous potential to support a thriving and innovative ecosystem of users, business and media outlets and to enable them to engage in discussion on topics relevant and important to them. Twitter started out with the tagline “What are you doing?” which suited their model in its infancy. They wanted users to discuss things happening in their life, in real time. As the service grew, it began to evolve organically. Users began to share information on a global scale in real time, businesses got involved and encouraged discussion on their brand and news began to break via the platform quicker and more efficiently than the traditional mainstream media services. For these reasons the Twitter tagline now reads something more befitting and relevant to the service it offers: “The best way to discover what’s new in your world”. The question remains however, just how this potential can be realised and put into practice. Twitters lack of a profitable business model has raised concerns with many, and has perhaps been slightly detrimental in regards to some businesses investing time and financial resources in the service. This lack of a profitable business model also resulted in no clearly defined strategic route for business to embark on, again raising question marks on Twitters relevance and benefit to them (Stutzbach et al., 2006).
Twitter has soared in popularity since its inception in 2006. Two years ago Twitter had 3 million registered users and could boast approximately 1.25 million tweets per day, today that figure has ballooned to 165 million registered users and 90 million tweets per day (Reynolds, 2006). This 5400% growth results in a substantial platform for business to operate within. It is important however that businesses realise that it is not simply follower numbers that brings success but the influence which they wield. Influence is much more difficult and time consuming to obtain and requires posting quality content and actively taking part in discussions and engaging with users (Kumar et al., 2006).

Edison Research in a report, "Twitter usage in America 2010" pulled data obtained from a survey of 2000 Americans carried out in February 2010. The results were combined with similar studies carried out in 2009 and 2008 to provide a comprehensive representation of Twitter related user statistics. One of the noticeable findings was that people are much more aware of Twitter’s existence as a social network service than in the previous two years. Twitter has now roughly acquired the same awareness amongst the population as Facebook. This massive surge in the percentage of Americans that are aware Twitter has likely been driven by traditional media saturation, with many mainstream television, radio and print media outlets prominently highlighting their Twitter accounts throughout the course of their programming (Webster, 2010).

Despite the awareness between the two social networks practically being equal, Facebook has significantly more amount of users with 41% surveyed use Facebook with only 7% using Twitter. A conclusion can be drawn with sites like Facebook and LinkedIn have well-defined use cases and benefits, Twitter has yet to establish a clear value proposition (even as a purely entertainment service) for a majority of the current users of social networking sites and services (Webster, 2010). Perhaps the most interesting outcome from the survey for a business perspective would be the frequency of Twitter users exchanging information about products and services. With 42% of people using Twitter to learn about products and services and 41% using Twitter to give their opinion about products and services this is an area businesses could use to their advantage. People are expressing their opinions here about products and services without being asked by anyone, this data maybe far more prevalent than on other monitored sites and services, which may introduce a bias into the data provided by social media monitoring platforms (Webster, 2010). Companies are receiving honest criticism from their customers on Twitter (Mislove et al., 2007).

Combining these results with the results from asking users if "Twitter were to incorporate targeted advertising into its service, how would this affect your Twitter usage?": here 50% said no effect and 16% saying they would use Twitter more. This shows that this might be the base for the future of Twitter. By commercialising these interactions Twitter will gain revenue for opening the communication channel for businesses advertising to their customers and potential customer base (Webster, 2010).

Word of mouth (WOM) is the process of conveying information from person to person and plays a major role in customer buying decisions (Twitter Blog, 2009). In the business environment this involves consumers sharing attitudes and opinions about a company’s products or services. A company with a positive WOM is a very powerful marketing asset to have. WOM communication relies on social networks. People use their friends, family and other members of their social network as a dependable source of information. Research also indicates that people appear to trust seemingly disinterested opinions from people outside their immediate social network, such as online reviews (Duana et al., 2008). This form is known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This broad reach of eWOM provides consumers tremendous clout to influence brand image and perceptions (Reynolds, 2006).

Twitter opens up a new area of eWOM for businesses as people can describe things of interest and express attitudes that they are willing to share with others in short posts. A
research study carried out investigating Twitter as a form of electronic word-of-mouth for sharing consumer opinions concerning brands show that 19% of tweets mentioned a brand name (Jansen & Zhang, 2009). Of the branding tweets, nearly 20% contained some expression of brand sentiment. Of these, more than 50% were positive and 33% were critical of the company or product (Webster, 2010).

Firstly with 19% of tweets mentioning a brand indicates that Twitter is a viable area for organisations for viral marketing campaigns, customer relationship management and to influence their eWOM branding efforts. Secondly with 20% of branded tweets containing an expression of brand sentiment shows that Twitter can affect brand awareness and brand image. Companies can receive brand exposure from Twitter users who tweet about the company and products. This also leaves 80% of tweets that contain a brand but express no sentiment to the brand. This shows people are using Twitter to seek information and asking/answering questions about companies and their products. Businesses can use Twitter to monitor discussions about their brand and provide information to consumers. There is also an opportunity here to advertise products to the people who are seeking information and commenting on products.

Thirdly 50% of branded tweets were said to be of positive wording, it could be argued that this may have been influenced by commercial viral marketing this being companies hiring persons to post positive tweets about companies or products. Positive comments on Twitter are available for the world to see. If a user does a search on Twitter for a brand these positive comments will be a part of the returned results. This is free advertising and marketing for a company. With the 35% of tweets containing negative comments businesses can use this information to identify consumer preferences and finding out product defects and can then correct such issues.

There is much support around for Twitter, many high profile celebrities see it as an opportunity, which they previously did not have, to interact with their fans. Celebrities on Twitter is a new boom in itself as pop stars like Lady Gaga and Britney Spears have followers well in excess of six million. As you might expect, the business and technology sectors have embraced Twitter with many high profile personalities and companies speaking positively of it. Slightly more surprising is the embracement and uptake of the service by news corporations. As it turns out, Twitter, perhaps by chance, has found that it is one of the most effective tools for breaking news stories. Its real time model is perfect to get news out there quick and built in features like retweet, and its trending service enhance the experience and efficiency of this further. The rapid growth of Twitter and its rise in popularity with celebrities and within the business and current affairs sectors is helping to push it further into the main stream and greatly enhances its popularity and the influence that it has (Gill et al., 2007).

This paper looks at how Twitter as a service can add value to a business. We examine how Twitter plans to provide a viable and stable platform for business to operate from and we look at examples of good practice to date in using Twitter in business.

**TWITTER AND MARKETING**

Until recently, Twitter did not have a defined marketing model in place to directly target its users. As a result of this, a new environment has evolved. As the traditional methods of reaching an audience did not exist, businesses instead had to be as creative and innovative as possible in order to attract an audience. This approach though puts many companies off allocating resources to a dedicated marketing campaign via Twitter, and while it may work for some, it is not suited to every business type. However with careful planning and allocation of resources there have been companies who have reaped the benefits from this unconventional approach. One such company is Old Spice, who ran a hugely successful social media marketing campaign which started in the more traditional format of television but evolved when they
decided to engage with their audience and have the star of the campaign ‘the Old Spice Guy’ film personalised videos to users who requested them via Twitter, Facebook, Reddit or Digg (Halliday, 2010). It was a huge success resulting in Old Spice increasing their followers on Twitter by 2700% and Facebook followers by 800%. The campaign increased sales by 107% over one month, 55% over a three month period and 27% after six months (Creativity-online, 2010). The campaign generated media coverage on a global scale with the star, Isaiah Mustafa, even winning an Emmy. Without question this was a genius campaign and is seen as the benchmark for social media advertising.

For every successful campaign there are of course many failures. Creating a buzz around a campaign is difficult to achieve and many approach the realm of social media marketing unprepared or with a certain naivety, none more so than the Mars confectionary company who would become one of the most high profile casualties of social media marketing with its brand Skittles. Skittles transformed its homepage into a social media experiment; it prominently displayed a feed from Twitter, scraping tweets which mentioned the Skittles brand name. While this started positively enough after a day or two the tweets turned nasty, filling the feed with profanity and abuse. The company quickly had to u-turn on this campaign and pull the feed from its homepage. This campaign was poorly planned and the agency was clearly there are in their assumption of how users would react to and indeed use it. Skittles received a lot of negative publicity over this, and while some say ‘no publicity is bad publicity’, this was a disaster for them. Not all businesses have been using Twitter to facilitate marketing campaigns. Some high profile corporations have begun using it, successfully, to interact with and engage with their customers. The PC manufacturer Dell have a number of Twitter profiles, one of the most popular being the Dell Outlet (Dell, 2010), where users can follow Dell to be updated with the latest offers and competitions. Dell Outlet will often engage with its followers by answering questions directly.

One of the most innovative approaches to using Twitter, and one which many companies are now employing and gaining benefit from is having a dedicated customer relations profile. The profile will usually be named with a more personal approach, for example user@company. Jetblue (2010) are an excellent example of doing this well, answering customer questions, providing flight information and actually daring to have a ‘personality’ by engaging in a social manner with its customers and posting interesting links. Twitter is redefining the concept of breaking news and has arguably become the best suited vehicle for it. Its real-time 140 character messages are perfect to put out a headline or synopsis of what is happening right now. A perfect example of this was the January 19th 2009 New York plane crash. Twitter users broke the news a full fifteen minutes before the mainstream media. Jim Hanrahan, four minutes after the plane went down tweeted: “I just watched a plane crash into the abb[riv[sic] in Manhattan” (Twitter Blog, 2010). Twitter users continued to tweet throughout the course of the event, posting their experiences, what was happening and pictures they had taken on their camera phones. These posts and pictures were picked up by news corporations, blogs and websites as the day and events progressed. This event highlighted the power Twitter can have as the source of a wealth of information for a breaking news story, and as such many news corporations now have their own Twitter profiles.

As yet Twitter has not implemented a native analytics service, however their flexible application programming interface (API) has allowed third party developers to create sophisticated tools to analyse data and provide comprehensive feedback on accounts. Two of the most prominent analytic services are Klout and Twitalyzer. Klout specifically focus on influence on the social web. Each user is allocated their individual graph which tracks the content they create, how others interact with it and the composition of the users network. To measure influence, Klout use what they call ‘The Klout Score’ which scores overall influence using 25
variables broken down into three categories; ‘True Reach’, ‘Amplification Score’ and ‘Network Score’. Twitalyzer is another comprehensive analytics tool available to users of Twitter. Like Klout it provides a dashboard which allows the user to analyse and track their impact and influence by measuring certain statistics such as followers, engagement in conversation, success of links provided and retweet numbers. Using these services, business or personal users can get an excellent visual representation of their influence and use this information to plan and improve how they engage with Twitter going forward. There are many other third party tools available to analyse the influence of an account, most of which provide extremely detailed and thorough analysis. Twitter does have plans to roll out their own set of analytic tools and has acquired analytics company ‘Small Thoughts’, in order to do so.

Prior to the emergence of social media websites and the marketing opportunities which they present, advertising and promoting a brand or service was an expensive undertaking. Television, radio, newspapers and magazines offer a successful, established direct targeting line of communication to the consumer, but they come with a high financial commitment. Reaching a large audience at a national or international scale has until now been beyond the resources of many. Twitter presents the opportunity for anyone to reach an audience of potentially millions for almost zero financial commitment. This of course is difficult, and requires an innovative approach which will engage users, but the fact that the opportunity exists in the first place cannot be ignored. While technically, Twitter is free, it would be incorrect to label it so from a business aspect. Often companies will employ an agency to take care of their marketing campaign, which still comes at a high cost. More recently however, Twitter has introduced a paid model for ‘Promoted Tweets’ (Twitter Blog, 2010) where companies pay to have their product or service promoted to users of Twitter. This is a return to the more traditional approach of marketing and it is much too early to evaluate the success of this new venture. There is no denying that to run a successful marketing campaign or customer service portal, requires a lot of dedication and time. Employing staff to deal with customers will incur a financial commitment and the cost of the time which must be dedicated to running a successful marketing campaign should not be underestimated.

Twitter has been labelled by some as the ‘Wild West’ of marketing; the opportunity to prosper is there for those daring enough to seize it. This is not without risk however. Success is not guaranteed and as demonstrated the incorrect approach can have a detrimental effect. It is unfair though to label Twitter as more risky than a traditional method of advertising, which of course comes with its own problems. It is simply a by-product of the evolution of advertising and its utilisation of technology. Perhaps the most viable way for most businesses to ‘dip their toes’ in Twitter is to use it initially as a customer relations tool. Business must move with the trends of society and as Twitter and other social networks grow, the public will demand the ability to engage with vendors of any variety of products or services via a social networking platform, and Twitter with its robust infrastructure, user model and real time engagement is perhaps best suited to this.

Twitter’s open API has created a goldmine for third party developers to create applications to utilise their service, resulting in a highly distributed, convenience driven ecosystem. It is estimated that ten times the traffic of the Twitter homepage comes via this ecosystem (Benjamin, 2009). Some of the ways to interact and use the Twitter service include a plethora of mobile apps crossing the iOS, Android, Symbian, BlackBerry OS and the soon to be released Windows Phone 7 platforms. These apps mirror the web application in that they allow the user to see their Twitter feed, post updates and follow other users with the user interface (UI) tailored for the mobile device. Twitter also offers a service for those users who do not have access to a smart phone, giving them the functionality to both send and receive updates via SMS. There is also a growing market for desktop clients in
the ‘Twitterverse’. These desktop clients often provide an enhanced UI and provide the ability to integrate other services like Facebook and LinkedIn. This varied ecosystem empowers the user to choose which ever service they prefer and best suits their needs, Twitter has embraced and encouraged this trend which ultimately facilitates their continued growth.

THE TWITTER ECOSYSTEM

Twitter has created great opportunities for existing companies to take part in its service, whether it be in the guise of interacting with their customers or promoting their brands, products, or services. There is another side to the coin however, as Twitter has given new ventures the opportunity to create and focus their business around Twitter.

StockTwits is a real time platform for stock traders and investors to share information. Users are encouraged to eavesdrop on traders and investors and to contribute to the conversation. StockTwits allows its users to track specific stocks in a personal portfolio and view a stream of ongoing relevant discussions. StockTwits hard sell is their lightweight and simplistic approach which allows users to take in information from various sources at a glance.

As Twitter does not directly support image attachments, this has given rise to many third party services. TwitPic is perhaps the most prominent of these services for uploading and sharing photos via Twitter. Users have the option to upload photos from their computer, phone, through a variety of third party clients and through the website itself.

Characters are valuable in Twitter; the aim is to be as concise as possible within the 140 character limit. Naturally lengthy website URLs are not viable in this environment and as such URL shortening services have become an essential tool for users. Bit.ly offer such a service in that they take URLs and shorten them to a format more suited for Twitter, or just about anywhere else on the web. Bit.ly offer other services in line with their core functionality, notably the ability to manage links by searching a personal history, posting links directly from any page to Twitter via a sidebar, and an analytics service which provides a visual representation of clicks, referrals and location data.

Twestival is a social media fundraising initiative which brings people together for events to raise funds to support local charities and organisations. Twestival uses Twitter to spread the word of their upcoming events and to encourage people to come along and help out. Twestival is the largest global grassroots social media fundraising initiative to date, raising over $1.2 million within 14 months for 137 nonprofits (Twestival, 2010).

ExecTweets is the brainchild of Federated Media and operates in partnership with Microsoft. ExecTweets endeavours to make it easier to find and follow ‘smart people’ on Twitter. ExecTweets collates the ‘tweets’ from the world’s top executives. It allows users to vote on the most interesting tweets and users, search easily with the use of hash tags and recommend new execs to follow. The ExecTweets platform can be accessed from Twitter, their website or via a mobile application.

TwitJobSearch is a venture from search specialist Workdigital. Its goal is to provide a job search engine for Twitter which will scrape tweets for job vacancies and information. Workdigital estimate that 25000 jobs are mentioned on Twitter every hour (Kiss, 2009), they take this information and contextualise it. The service allows a user to search a specific job role which they might be interested in and from the results returned they can drill down through the data using options provided such as location, salary and date ‘tweeted’.

THE NEW BUSINESS MODEL

Twitter has been much maligned for not having a stable business model in place, and not providing a clear marketing strategy has put many off using their service. However In April 2010 Twitter announced that it was ready to implement a business model aimed at making a
profit, providing a structured way for business to advertise and to incorporate all their third party partners. Twitter have certainly taken their time in developing such a model but it is important to remember that the epicentre of their ethos is the user, and they wanted their model to be as considerate as possible, not only to keep their current user base but to enable their continued growth. Taking this into account Twitter has planned a two pronged approach to its business model: promoted tweets and commercial accounts.

Promoted Tweets are sponsored messages which will be displayed to the user. Twitter is quick to point out that these are not advertisements but rather normal tweets that can be viewed, retweeted, replied to or marked as a favourite. Twitter’s stance on not deeming these promoted tweets as advertisements is perhaps a ploy to not agitate their existing user base who have become accustomed to an advertising free service. Twitter have stated that these promoted tweets will take up very little actual screen space appearing under trending topics and within the results of relevant searches performed. It is also planned to include location data in future, so for example an independent book store could target users in their city, this functionality is still in its infancy and more will become clear in the coming months.

Twitter is keen to stress that their model is fair and transparent to both advertisers and third party developers who have aided their popularity and success. In regard to advertising Twitter is initially employing the traditional Cost Per Mile (CPM) model, which involves an advertiser paying for their advertisement on a per view basis, so it would cost X per one thousand views. This model is simplistic and fair to the advertiser but perhaps not so much to the user. It is for this reason that Twitter plans to roll out a more complex model which will empower the user and be more organic to their service; this new service is described as ‘resonance’. Resonance is a system which incorporates how many times a tweet is viewed, retweeted, replied to or added as a favourite and in turn assigns it a score. If a user is not interested in a link they simply do what they have always been doing and ignore it. If the resonance score for a tweet is low, it will be dropped from the system and the advertiser will cease to be charged. This in principle seems to be a system which will work well for all parties concerned, the user is not bothered with the ad and the advertiser can rethink their strategy without wasting further money. Only time will tell how successful this will be.

With this new model implemented, Twitter will be under scrutiny as to how they deal with user data and privacy. Twitter is a goldmine of personal data, users tweet a lot of personal information, such as what they are doing, listening to, watching, their location and products they have purchased, all of which is information advertisers would be extremely interested in. It is imperative that Twitter implements this in a way in which users will not fall victim to spam.

The second component of the new model, commercial accounts, are at present still in beta testing with no firm indication of when they will be rolled out for public use. These are paid-for accounts which a business can subscribe to in order to interact with and increase its customer base. Details are somewhat vague at present, Twitter has stated that these accounts will offer statistics and analytic services to gauge how the profile is performing and that a commercial API will be released at some stage during this year. It is thought that these subscription accounts will include a feature similar to the ‘verified’ tag which is currently applied to celebrity accounts. This is critical as Twitter evolves and as more businesses are using it as a base for customer relations. A ‘verified’ account will enable the customer to know that they are in a discussion with a reputable source. A commercial account will also facilitate multiple users to contribute to a single account. An example of this would be a tweet from @company tagged with the author responsible for it.

Two-sided markets, also called two-sided networks, are economic platforms having two distinct user groups that provide each other with network benefits (Caillaud & Jullien, 2003; Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005). People and prod-
ucts often have complementary relationships and we can think of them as forming a network. In networks the more subscribers there are then the more a new participant is willing to pay and social networks such as Twitter are powerful tools that allow for complex interaction on a global scale (Economides, 2008; Economides and Joacim, 2009).

STRATEGIES FOR TWITTER

This paper has established that many high profile businesses have begun to invest in Twitter. Some may be tweeting, some simply listening to gauge what the community is discussing while there are some doing both. There are, essentially four strategies available to take part in a service like Twitter: Direct, Indirect, Internal and Inbound Signalling. We look at each in turn.

The direct approach is perhaps the most widespread and most immediately obvious way to become involved with Twitter. This method is centred on marketing and public relations. There are opportunities available to reach a diverse and global audience. Depending of the type of business involved with this strategy there will be differing ways of promoting their brand. Retail companies may run competitions, post their latest offers and announce forthcoming sales. Alternatively a marketing company may take a different route; posts may be concerned with corporate achievements and awards, blogs, white papers, and press releases. While this is a fantastic way to promote a brand or service it is not without its pitfalls. Twitter is a community first and foremost and much like in a traditional social circle of people, those who only speak of themselves are often thought of as self-serving and not well regarded by others, they can even be perceived as a nuisance. This is a fine line which must be carefully tread. The Twitter users want conversation and the sharing of information and ideas, a brand could easily fall victim to a selfish approach and ultimately find themselves being ignored, so caution is a must.

The indirect approach is where employees engage with the community and build relations. This is in contrast to a corporation being solely responsible for their Twitter ‘personality’. This approach is more suited to some and can be effective for businesses of any size, from a large multinational firm with thousands of employees, right down to a small firm with just a few. The immediate benefit that this strategy gives to these large multinational companies is that it helps to put a face and personality to the brand. Employees are encouraged to build relations with a community of interested parties. The employees are given free range to discuss topics that excite or interest them. Perhaps they may discuss and share information on current projects they are working on and how they excite them. The great thing about this method is that as the employees reputation and influence grows, the businesses does as well. Again like all strategies this one is not without problems. For this to work successfully, employees should, in a perfect world, be happy and enthusiastic about their jobs and be motivated enough to want to spread a positive image of the business. Of course this is not always the case and employees tweeting negatively about the company, whether under an approved scheme or not can be extremely damaging. During a difficult period experienced by Internet giant Yahoo! in 2008, they were forced into laying off a considerable number of employees, 1500 on one specific day. Unfortunately for Yahoo! one employee, Emily West, updated her Twitter account throughout the whole event (Carson, 2008). Emily described the emotional state of the office, of colleagues being taken into rooms to be told the bad news, and even an incident where she broke down in tears as her best friend lost her job. While Yahoo! was only doing what any company would do to ensure survival in difficult times, their image was tarnished as a result of an employee’s use of Twitter.

The Internal strategy ignores the public aspects of Twitter, instead utilising it as a service for internal communication and knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing can be an important factor in many fields of business. It breeds a sense of community within an organisation.
and provides employees with a platform from which they can voice their opinions, ideas and concerns. While this is possible with Twitter, it would involve all employees protecting their tweets from public view, however even with this measure in place, Twitter still does not offer any security guarantees. Perhaps an alternative microblogging service like Yammer, which is purpose built for this type of activity, would be more suitable.

Inbound Signalling is a strategy best suited for the company who does not desire to actively take part in Twitter but acknowledges that there are benefits to be gained from it. Inbound Signalling is an excellent way to monitor a brand, dedicating resources to track brand mentions, trending topics or issues which consumers may be having. With Twitter brand mentions can be tracked in real time, using a variety of tools. It is possible to track standard brand mentions; however the option is also available to track hash tags, responses to tweets and retweets. There key benefits which a company can take from internal signalling are the ability to see what people’s attitude toward their brand is and what they are saying about it and it is also possible to monitor the competition and identify potential problems with a brand and address them before they have the chance to gain large scale media attention. These benefits can help a company improve its products and services and by proxy the consumer also benefits from these improvements.

**TWITTER CASE STUDY**

We have discussed how Twitter provides publishing quick, frequent 140 character messages for businesses to use as a promotion tool but here we deliberate if Twitter can be used by a company as its main form of communication to its customers. The following example relates to an IT services company call Codero based in the US. Codero experienced a power failure at their headquarters and the firm had to recover hundreds of servers for their clients with many customers experiencing additions problems getting back up and running to normal. Codero kept their customers informed of the situation and the progress being made in rectifying issues by using Twitter. Codero was able to interact with customers on a real time basis and as tweets posted are kept on their profile page by default this enabled Codero to keep a log for each customer that was easy to manage. In this respect during the recovery activities Twitter worked well for Codero as the main method to support and communicate with its customers. From this example we can compile some advantages of companies using Twitter in this way:

1. Customers who want to follow a business just need to set up a Twitter account themselves and then opt to follow the business. Therefore the actual company does not have to remember or maintain contact details for each of their customers.

2. Customers following a company’s tweets can also elect to receive updates to an Email address of their choosing or mobile telephone. The company (tweeter) has no need to know where to send the message the receiver chooses the delivery media according to their needs and preference.

3. The direct message facility Twitter offers allows a tweeter and a follower to have a private conversation that’s not on the public message log which is displayed on the tweeters Twitter page.

4. Twitter also maintains a complete history of Tweets and follower responses, so when the dust dies down a company has a log of all of the conversations as a record of their customer conversation via Twitter.

So in the event of a similar incident happening, a company can use Twitter as a basic mass communication tool. To implement a company would have to open an account and decide which individuals within the company will create the Tweets during a crisis. They would also have to advise their customer base first about the setup and have them create their own Twitter accounts.
In the event of an incident a tweet can be posted onto a company’s Twitter page and further updates can be sent to customers to inform them of developments as they occur and be received on the device and channel of their choosing. This example shows Twitter can be used as an effective tool in a corporate incident management situation. It has unique features that are provided by the principle of ‘following’ that support low maintenance communication and interaction with a large audience which make it suitable for many types of organisations such as local government organizations using it to provide community updates for different types of emergency without the need for specialised applications and devices (Dance, 2010).

Using Twitter as a communication channel during a business communication incident can work and might suit some companies but it is unlikely Twitter will spell the end of the incident notification system, for example Everbridge. Twitter is a good communication tool but lacks certain features to be a full replacement for an incident notification system and big companies will demand trust in a system to deal with the safety of their people and continuing operations during a communication failure. On the flip side, for some enterprises the risk may be low and consequences may not be so serious, therefore the level of trust may not be as important as say the cost of the system and let us not forget that Twitter is free.

ALTERNATIVES TO TWITTER

Twitter is a popular and efficient social messaging service but is not without competition. There are alternative services such as Facebook, Yammer, Foursquare and Tumblr.

While not technically a micro blogging service, Facebook cannot be ignored as it is the undisputed goliath of social media websites. Facebook has well in excess of 500 million registered users and continues to grow (Facebook, 2010). Facebook allows its users to create a personal profile, where they can enter topics and activities that interest them, post their photographs and build a social network of friends, relatives and colleagues. Facebook gives a business the opportunity to create a profile page from which they can operate, building a community and interacting with it. They have a clearly defined and effective marketing structure in place, allowing businesses to directly target specific user demographics. Facebook offers a much more complex service than Twitter in that a profile page can contain a feed of posts, photographs, and they have the ability to create apps, start groups and organise events.

Yammer is a service best suited to the business that would prefer to keep their micro blogging in house and use it as a vehicle to transfer knowledge and ideas. Yammer provides a private and secure network to operate in, and has the option to facilitate the local storage of all data submitted, further enhancing security. Yammer sells itself not only on the basis of sharing knowledge throughout an organisation but also as a service that can improve communication, collaboration; as document sharing is possible, and efficiency by negating the need for so many internal meetings. Some further key features of Yammer are the options for employees to create profiles, create smaller private groups within an organisation, administration features and the versatility of integrating third party applications with use of their API.

Foursquare is a totally new social networking service which builds on the trend of consumer access to smart phones and their location tracking ability. A truly innovative service and one which is perhaps much more engaging to the user, it allows them to ‘check-in’ into a venue using a mobile application, text message or website. Users are then awarded points based on where they are and how many times they have been there previously. The value to the user is that they are awarded points and badges when they check in and can even become ‘mayor’ of the venue availing of prizes and special discounts. Foursquare is most suited to, although not restricted to, the retail sector. The benefit for a business is that they can increase traffic to their store by offering prizes and discounts.
to their most loyal customers and while this has obvious monetary benefits it also creates good feeling and a fun buzz around the business.

Tumblr resembles something akin to a hybrid of Twitter and more traditional blogs. Tumblr allows users to follow other users, sharing information, links, photos, video, and provides a platform to voice their opinions. It supplies an excellent foundation for business to keep cliental informed on products and services, to promote themselves and expand. A major selling point of Tumblr is the versatility available to create a new blog post; users can do so via text message, email or even with a telephone call. Businesses also have the option of being listed in the Tumblr Directory making them more accessible to potential clients. This highlights just a few of the services currently on offer which can be utilised successfully if used correctly by business. It also highlights the diverse opportunities that social networks present to business to increase awareness of their brands and services.

**TWITTER RELIABILITY**

Twitter is well known for its reliability issues, the popularity of this fast growing network site has often lead to the website unable to handle the amount of traffic created by its users. In the year 2007 on the whole it was estimated that Twitter was offline for 6 days in total (Ryan, 2009). Vast improvements to the architecture of the website have been made over the years and continue on in order to cope with the vast growth of the service but Twitter have also experienced their fair share of security problems. Twice in 2009 Twitter were on the end of two separate hacking attacks causing the website to go offline for several hours. Another recorded issue are old tweets disappearing off of a profile page (Parr, 2010). The availability and reliability of Twitter would be a cause for concern for businesses if used in the way described in the previous section. Companies would not want to rely too heavily on Twitter as an emergency form of communication if they cannot guarantee Twitter being online. A ‘fail whale’ appears to some users when the service is unavailable during heavy usage periods. The image notifies the user that Twitter is over capacity, this is most likely seen around a prominent event when Twitter usage is at a peak such as big sporting occasion like a World Cup.

Another security concern companies may have with entering the Twitter network has been the widely reported phishing scams aimed at tricking Twitter users. During the first weekend in January 2009, 33 Twitter accounts had been hacked including some accounts with the largest ‘followers’ on the network, names such as Barack Obama, Rick Sanchez and Britney Spears. These accounts were compromised by a hacker who posted lewd tweets and links to pornography sites. A Company in this situation would have its brand name tarnished and known and associated for the wrong reasons amongst the world with such tweets being posted through their account. It is clear that Twitter lack security and standards when it comes to the user authentication but are endeavouring to tighten up these issues by releasing OAuth, allowing users to protect their account credentials when using third party applications (Webster, 2010).

Security is a concern for companies who have brands to protect and cannot afford to have sensitive information leaked for all to see. There is a need for companies to have a mass communication platform but the service Twitter offers does not meet strict security and administration standards that can be provided by business-oriented mass communication services such as services like Everbridge (http://www.everbridge.com). However it must be noted that current services like this do not adopt the social networking model like Twitter. Perhaps there is a niche here where a separate ‘Twitter for Business’ service could be developed combining features from both area. This is something that requires further investigation.

**CONCLUSION**

Twitter has established itself as a platform for sharing instant update. It is now proving that it is a robust platform for business to deploy.
Twitter opens up new opportunities to reach a global audience for a small cost or even in some scenarios for free. It has also demonstrated loyalty to its users and third party developers in a cautious approach to implementing a self-sustaining business model. The early signs are that one half of the business model, promoted tweets, is a success. Time and the implementation of the second part of the business model, commercial accounts, will give a clearer indication of its acceptance by the community. Twitter must ensure that their tactic of promoted tweets remains sympathetic to the user and does not enter the realm of spam. As the majority of Twitter users have a public profile, it is difficult to protect external entities from analysing information posted. It is however within their control to monitor how individual profiles interact with the community. An example of this would be a profile sending out a large set of direct spam messages to users.

Twitter provides an excellent service to promote and sell brands. Twitter enables powerful communities. A loyal community can make a brand. It is important that businesses engage socially with the community and empathise with their needs and concerns. There is also the option for businesses to learn from their competitors and their industry as a whole. Success is not always driven from building the longest list of followers but by learning from others, taking part in discussions and engaging with consumers. It terms of businesses engaging with customers, Twitter is fantastic for real time communication and feedback. If a business does decide however to allow employees to use Twitter, they must ensure that employees are aware that the same guidelines apply as to interaction with any other type of online service, if such guidelines do not exist within a business, it is recommended that they be drafted.

Twitter provides a platform for businesses to see what customers really feel about their own brand and also their competitors and in near real time. In addition to this Twitter allows businesses to connect directly in near real time with customers, which gives them the opportunity to build and enhance customer relationships. More businesses are using Twitter as a research, marketing and customer support tool. Companies can discover more about their customers and receive feedback. Marketing a business on Twitter requires considerable amount of effort and time. Profiles must be kept up to date with interesting content and fresh ideas or followers will quickly lose interest. A balanced Twitter strategy is the key to the success of a brands reputation on Twitter. Striking the right balance with promoting the product and other company news is vital. No follower of a brand will want to be inundated with tweets regarding special offers and discounts every hour or even every day. Twitter allows companies to become friends with their customers; the interaction of short messages gives an informal feel to the relationship. Businesses can show off their character and connect with real people who use or potential might use their products. Most importantly, they can listen and react in real time as Twitter brings the customer and the business closer together. Twitter does have shortcomings with reliability issues and security.

Perhaps the most effective use for Twitter in recent times has been for breaking news. Twitter must continue to ensure its service remains easily accessible and retains its core functionality of short real time messaging. It is easy to get waylaid with unnecessary and bloated feature set. To ensure this ease of access, third party developers will be imperative to the growth and sustained use of Twitter. The immediate signs are good and that the new business model incorporates third party developers fully and offers them a percentage of profits from traffic originating from their application, it would be an unwise move to cut them out of the equation. The future certainly looks prosperous for Twitter, its clean simplistic approach, robust infrastructure and user centric business model will ensure its popularity continues to grow, offering an exciting and vibrant community to share information, promote ideas and meet like minded people for both personal and business users.
REFERENCES


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