

Twitter, Dodgeball and Plurk: Are You Ready to Microblog?

by steve o'leary & kim sheehan

Do you think about blogging, but think it might be too much work? Do you think the idea of posting a thoughtful written piece on a regular basis is just not your style? But do you want to be part of the online conversation? Then maybe microblogging is for you. Microblogging is a way to keep in touch in real time with customers who want to keep in touch with you. More than that, though, microblogging provides a unique way to learn more about what your customers are doing. Is microblogging for your store? Keep reading to find out!

What is Microblogging?:

Microblogging is writing very, very short messages that are sent to your friends and acquaintances. If you've heard of something called Twitter, you've heard of microblogging. It is sort of a hot topic that many people are talking about these days. Is microblogging something you should look at that?

People of all ages microblog, but the demographic does skew in a few interesting directions. Of the microblogging population, about two thirds are men and a third are women. Thus, microblogging can be a great way to reach the male portion of your target audience. People under 44 tend to use Twitter more than people over 44 years old, and the heaviest users are in the 18-24 group. Microblogging is a natural extension of texting via cell phones, and so has the potential to reach people out of their homes, virtually 234/7.

There are many microblogging services out there, including:

- Twitter (www.twitter.com)
- Dodgeball (www.dodgeball.com)
- identi.ca (identi.ca)
- Jaiku (www.jaiku.com)
- Plurk (plurk.com)
- Pownce (www.pownce.com)
- Spoink (spoink.com)
- Friendfeed (friendfeed.com)

Twitter is the biggest and most popular of these sites, so we'll focus here specifically on Twitter. Many of these other sites work in a similar way; the only difference would be the interface (i.e. what the site looks like) and, more importantly, the number of people who are signed up for the service.

Getting Started Microblogging:

Twitter is a free micro-blogging service that allows you to send text-based posts of up to 140 characters in length. That's about 15-20 words. These posts are called 'tweets'.

To get started, users register at the Twitter site (www.twitter.com) and register for an account with an email address and a password. Then, you can start posting 'tweets' to twitter right there from the website (you can also use other methods, such as through texts on your cell phone).

These tweets are then displayed on the user's profile page and delivered to other users who have signed up to receive them. The sender can restrict delivery to those in his or her circle of friends (delivery to everyone being the default). Users can receive updates via the Twitter website, instant messaging, SMS, RSS, email or through an application such as Twitterrific or Facebook.

So basically, if you want to have a Twitter network, you'll need to invite people to be part of your twitter network who will want to receive these quick little updates throughout the day. You'll need to find out if your customers use Twitter...you can ask them for this information when they sign up for your email newsletters, or you can have a separate sign up sheet for your Twitter network. If you've read our book, "Building Buzz to Beat the Big Boys", you should think about inviting your 'family' to be part of your Twitter Network first, and then asking those individuals to invite others to be part of the network down the line.

Used in this way, twitter is all about frequency...lots of little messages on a regular basis. For some, it may be overwhelming. For others, it might just be their cup of tea.

Twitter as a Research Tool:

In addition to the microblogging feature, you can use twitter to 'listen in' on various conversations happening online. Twitter has a search feature found at search.twitter.com that allows you to search through the entire Twitter universe for conversations about any search term. It is a good way to monitor everything that's being said about your store, the products and services you offer, your competitors, and your industry. I entered 'Old Navy' and found what items are on sale right now at Old Navy, and I also learned that Old Navy does not limit the number of items you can take in to the dressing room. I found it interesting that many people seem to like to twitter from Old Navy Dressing Rooms.

Another great use of this feature is that it allows you to potentially follow and connect with people who are talking about the same things you are interested in. So, if you set-up a search for "recession marketing" you will find out where Recession Marketing workshops are being offered, and what types of other promotions are being offered by others. I learned, for example, that Bennigans is offering a "Cash Crunch Lunch" special.

Business Uses of Twitter:

Several companies create their own Twitter networks and participate in the online microblogiverse successfully. Here are some examples:

Whole Foods has a twitter network that allows people to interact with WholeFoods employees who answer questions about store locations and currently available products. Whole Foods customers can also comment about anything they like. recently people requested certain products be added and questioned some out-of line prices. One random 'tweet' is awarded the 'tweet of the day' prize and the winner gets a gift card to Whole Foods.

HR Block, the tax professionals, have people online monitoring the twitter conversation all the time. If people are looking for tax help, a local professional, a quick answer on a tax question, the HR people are there to provide it. They also post quick tax news...I learned, for example, that several states will have 'sales tax relief' days during the summer and a link to a list of states was provided at the HR Block Twitter feed.

Southwest Airlines is using Twitter in similar ways. You can find recent press releases and whether advisories posted in their Twitter network. In addition, Southwest also uses search.twitter.com to monitor Twitter feeds for people posting bad customer service stories (such as delayed or damaged luggage), and customer service reps respond to these tweets with messages of apology and requests for customers to give the airline a second change. This, of course, often results in another tweet...changing a negative perception to a positive one.

Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, has his own twitter network. The head of this online shoe store conducts quick and dirty consumer research by asking for feedback about products, customer service, and the store's website. Here is one of my favorite Tweets from him:

“We are at Tengo sed Cantina at 4th Street Live in Louisville. I’m wearing a Zappos tshirt. Find me and I’ll buy you a drink!”

Is Microblogging for you?:

So is microblogging for you? It seems that if you want to have a network like Whole Foods or Tony Hsieh’s Zappos Network, you would have to:

- Be online much of the day
- Be open to posting every few hours or so, with something to say
- Be able to read and respond to messages from others on the network, or have someone working for you that does
- Just enjoy online conversations.

It might be easier for you to use Twitter selectively as a research tool to learn about what people think and feel about your store or the products and services you offer.....sort of like an ongoing, really big focus group.

Do you use Twitter? We’d love to hear how. Come tell us about it in our forums. And for more small business ideas, come visit our site www.grabbinggreen.com.

Learn More: There are more ideas in our book, *Building Buzz to Beat the Big Boys*, available at the www.grabbinggreen.com website.

Discuss with us: We’d love to hear how you’ve used these suggestions and how successful they were for your business. Come participate in our community forum at www.grabbinggreen.com and share your experiences with other small businesses!

Free Resources: Links identified in this mini guide as well as other resources are available in the Resources section on the www.grabbinggreen.com website.

Additional Mini-Guides: More mini-guides will be added every month to the Resources section. Some may relate to this topic and provide helpful information. Each guide will cross reference other guides you might want to look at as well.