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Introducing Twitter

By J. Eddie Smith, IV

By now, you have likely heard about the latest social media darling known as Twitter. Maybe you even have friends and colleagues that have jumped on the bandwagon. What's all the fuss about? And for that matter, why would any rational individual, already choking on the unrelenting torrent of information streaming from the Web, care about investing more energy into yet another nascent social media platform that will surely be dubbed "so 2009" once 2010 arrives?

I would say that, well … Twitter is different. Yes, its development is immature, and yes, it is unstable at times, but I think it has firmly staked its flag in the Web 2.0 landscape. Today's online experience is about accessing information not only from Web sites, but from people—real time. Twitter delivers the people element in spades.

Created in 1996 as a "side project," Twitter's initial mission was to provide a simple, free, text-based service that allowed people to tell the world what they were doing—in 140 characters or less. No pictures, no audio, no video, not even color; just text-only fragments of human consciousness flitting about cyberspace. Roughly three years later, there is little doubt that the idea is catching on. As of February 2009, the number of people on Twitter had approached 10 million, representing 700 percent-plus, year-over-year growth.

If you are familiar with other online social media sites like Facebook, MySpace or LinkedIn, you may wonder what makes Twitter so special. After all, it only has one aspect of the other social media titans: the status update. Why would you want to only be able to read that your friend just got back from their Caribbean vacation when you could also see pictures and video of it?

The best explanation of why Twitter represents a unique, stand-alone service is the quality of information contained in those 140-character messages. Also different is the fact that Twitter updates are public by default, unlike other social media sites. Twitter does give you the option of restricting who sees your updates. However, doing so can really take away from Twitter's value, which increases every time someone contributes another bit of public information to the Twittersphere. Over time, people who have interests similar to yours will begin to follow you based on what you have to say. Twitter is best viewed as a completely open forum, and the more you contribute to it, the more you tend to get out of it.

TWITTER BASICS

The essential basics of Twitter are:
1. Tweeting,
2. URL shortening,
3. Following,
4. Replying,
5. Retweeting,
6. Sending private messages, and
7. Using hashtags.

Tweeting

Messages sent through Twitter are called "tweets," which are somewhat similar to SMS text messages—only without the usage charges. Verbose a tweet is not. There is only so much you can say 140 characters at a time, and this can take some getting used to. However, since so many people use text messaging already on their mobile phones, the concept of sending succinct electronic messages is probably not all that foreign to those new to Twitter. The act of tweeting is simple: enter your message, and hit the update button on your Twitter home page. Your tweet will be visible to anyone who happens across your home page. In no time, you will have created your own micro-blog.

URL Shortening

It's not just for baking anymore. But seriously, you may have wondered by now how you could ever include a Web address in a tweet if you only have 140 characters? The clever solution has been the advent of URL shortening. A number of Web sites are dedicated to making URLs of any length into much smaller URLs by associating the original (long) URL with a shorter version. When someone clicks on the shortened URL, they are routed to the original address. A very well-known URL shortening service is offered by tinyurl.com. To make a "tiny URL," simply copy the URL of the page you want to share, paste it into a field on the tinyurl.com site, click the "Make TinyURL" button, and then copy the new, compact URL into your

J. Eddie Smith, IV, FSA, MAAA is an assistant actuary with RBC Insurance. He is also an exam instructor with The Infinite Actuary. He can be reached at j.eddie. smith.iv@gmail.com

tweet. As an example, I converted the SOA Technology Section Web address into http://tinyurl.com/cxkbvy, which is only 25 characters long.

Following
The first priority for most people who have just created their first Twitter account should be to find other users, or "tweeps," to follow. When you follow someone on Twitter, you will see their tweets in your friends' time line on your Twitter home page. Following someone does not require their approval—unlike other social media sites like Facebook where approval is required to complete the connection.

Following is easy, and perhaps in this way, Twitter mirrors real life. To find people to follow, you can use the Twitter site to search by name, e-mail address, Twitter handle, location, and other criteria. There are also several directories that you can use to find people (e.g., WeFollow, Localtweeps, and Twellow). For most people new to Twitter, the natural instinct is to look for people you already know. Others may want to search for celebrities, bloggers, news organizations, even the president of the United States. However, as you begin to use Twitter more, you will probably find that the majority of tweeps that you follow are complete strangers that simply tweet about things that are interesting to you.

Replying and Retweeting
It probably will not be long before you see a tweet that contains something interesting. Maybe a friend just finished watching a movie that you liked, or maybe someone just gave a useful computer tip, or maybe you just saw a bit of breaking news. There are two constructive ways you can react: replying and retweeting.

A Twitter reply is essentially just a public tweet directed at one or more Twitter usernames. Replies to other Twitter users should begin with the @ symbol and include the username of the Twitter user(s) to whom you are replying. For example: "@TheirUserName I love that movie too - I have watched it 100 times."

While replies are useful for making direct (albeit it public) contact with another tweep, they do not add value to Twitter in the way that retweeting does. A retweet is simply a reposted tweet. Retweeting is unique to Twitter

and serves to accelerate the flow of information to others. The syntax for retweeting involves putting "RT" in front of the original author's username and their tweet. For example: "RT @BreakingNews Pope makes unexpected visit to Baghdad." Obviously, the more a tweet is retweeted, the more exposure it gets in Twitter.

Retweeting is generally encouraged in the Twitter community. It is seen as both complimentary to the original tweet author, and it is an important tool for propagating information. Retweeting is also an excellent way to attract followers because they recognize that you "get it," and they also might hope that you follow back, thereby growing their follower count and giving them more voice in Twitter. In other words, they want you to retweet them too.

Direct Messages
Twitter also allows private, or direct, messaging. Direct messages can only be sent to your followers. When a direct message is sent, it shows up in the recipient's Twitter inbox, and only they see it. A direct message must start with the letter D. For example: "D @TheirUserName Meet for lunch?" This aspect of Twitter is the most similar to SMS text messaging because it is a closed one-way communication between two users. Care should be taken when sending private messages through Twitter, however. As with e-mail or any other form of electronic communication, "privacy" is a luxury afforded only in the short-term. Additionally, there have been reports that certain Twitter clients have, on occasion, incorrectly posted direct messages publicly because of program error. I would not recommend sending any truly sensitive information as a direct message.

#Hashtags
Hashtags provide a convenient way to tag or categorize tweets so that others can find information on specific topics. Hashtags are preceded by the # symbol. Examples include #politics, #BreakingNews, #actuary. Some Web sites even track hashtag use and identify trends as the general conversation on various items changes. One of the more famous hashtags is #FollowFriday, which is part of a Twitter tradition to promote the usernames of other tweeps that you follow on Friday.

TWITTER: THE NEW SEARCH ENGINE

No matter what information you choose to tweet, you can always utilize Twitter as a huge searchable pot of information. In fact, I would argue that search is where Twitter really separates itself from its Web 2.0 counterparts.

The information spewing from all those gregarious tweeters and retweeters represents a resource unlike any offered by the Web so far. While Google has come to represent the gold standard of Web searching, it cannot query the one repository that Twitter can: people's brains. But don't worry; you do not need little wires dangling from your scalp to use Twitter. Rather, the human element of Twitter coupled with its openness provides a convenient way to tap the collective knowledge of other tweeps. You cannot really "ask" a conventional search engine a question in a way that will elicit a human response, and you cannot "thank" and interact with Google in a manner that fosters an ongoing, mutually beneficial relationship. Indeed, a conventional search engine's smarts are limited only to the fetching algorithms that probe its electronic archives.

But with Twitter, you can ask questions and get human responses.
• "Where's the best place to get a cup of coffee on Michigan Ave in Chicago?"
• "Are Google Docs reliable?"
• "Does anyone have an Amazon coupon code?"
• "Anyone heard rumors that Company ABC is buying Company XYZ?"

Of course, searching Twitter goes far beyond finding good cups of coffee and shopping discounts, and you do not necessarily have to wait for a response to get your questions answered in many cases. In fact, you are often likely to find answers and information simply by searching existing tweets. There is no better source of real-time information than Twitter on breaking news and current events. If you search for keywords on a breaking news topic, you are likely to see tweets that are only seconds old. Such timeliness is not even offered by Google. If you search Google for breaking news, you are likely to see a mixture of results on the first page that will vary in age. Twitter, on the other hand, will show you what is happening now.

HOW MIGHT TWITTER FIT INTO YOUR DIGITAL LIFE?

Twitter's uses are probably as varied as the tweeps that compose the Twitterverse, and unlike other advice you might hear, you really don't need a "mission statement" before you start. Some people enjoy being able to tell the world they just ate a bologna sandwich. Others see it as a platform for promoting their business. Some organizations see it as a way to communicate to their members as well as promote the organization's interests. Local news stations are using it to send out weather alerts.

Marketers are becoming very interested in what people are saying on Twitter. Suppose someone is thinking of moving to Miami and says so in a tweet. A realtor in Miami would be very interested in finding that person. Perhaps more relevant to the actuarial profession, if you visit sellyourterm.net, you will see a running archive of tweets containing references to insurance.

It is difficult understand the Twitter experience without trying it yourself, and as such, its benefits to you will not come into focus until you actually try it. A few more examples of how people are using Twitter are given below:
• *Self-promotion and advertisement.* Tell the world who you are or about your business and why they should care.
• *Conversation.* Use Twitter like an open chat room in which you discuss any and everything that interests you.
• *Collaboration.* Create an open forum to discuss ideas, update project status, and invite ideas from outside.
• *Meet new people.* Who knows what relationships you may forge in Twitter.
• *Micro-blogging.* Don't want to spend the time writing a full blog? Just use Twitter.
• *Share information.* Maybe you are a do-it-yourselfer with a lot of information to share with others.
• *Communication at conventions and trade shows.* Use hashtags to instantly create groups and give attendees a way to find and communicate with each other while at the event.

- *Announcements*. Examples include new blog posts, updates to your Web site, or just general announcements about your life.
- *Stay in the know*. Follow your favorite organizations, celebrities and other prominent people; follow breaking news and identify news trends.

While I have generally extolled Twitter, some words of caution are in order.

- Twitter is still a fairly immature platform. It is not at all unusual for Twitter's main site to go down, and sometimes it can be downright quirky and unstable (e.g., tweets disappear).
- Twitter's owners have not really figured out how to make it generate revenue, so its future is uncertain.
- Some might argue that so much openness is not such a good thing. Only time will tell if what we say today will cause frustrations tomorrow.
- Spam has been on the rise, and as more people flock to Twitter, we should expect the spam war to escalate.
- You cannot (and should not) believe everything you read on Twitter, and it does provide a medium in which rumors, misinformation, and untruths can spread like wildfire. The eruption of tweets containing the term "swine flu" earlier this year is an example of how quickly something can become overblown in Twitter.
- It is difficult to convey context in 140 characters. Tweets can easily be misinterpreted.
- Is there such thing as too many tweeps? Does Twitter's value decline if too many people join?
- Processing Twitter's information can be like drinking from the firehose. Users would benefit from more tools that allow them to be more selective and filter the information.
- Worms have started invading Twitter. Clicking on links in tweets could foster the spread of worms and viruses.

The best way to learn more about Twitter is to sign up and start tweeting, following and getting followed. Online resources for Twitter abound. Not only are there a multitude of articles, there are also several blogs devoted entirely to using Twitter. A few examples are:
- The Official Twitter Blog: http://blog.twitter.com/
- TwiTip: http://www.twitip.com/

- Twittercism: http://twittercism.com/
- Mashable — The Social Media Guide: http://mashable.com/

REFERENCES AND OTHER SOURCES FOR TWITTER NEWCOMERS

- Twitter.com
- "Twitter Traffic Explodes...And Not Being Driven by the Usual Suspects!": http://www.comscore.com/blog/2009/04/twitter_traffic_explodes.html
- "Profile Twitter founders: Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone and Evan Williams" http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science-andtechnology/technology/twitter/4388880/Profile-Twitter-founders-Jack-Dorsey-Biz-Stone-and-Evan-Williams.htm
- "Swine flu: Twitter's power to misinform": http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/25/swine_flu_twitters_power_to_misinform
- Directories:
  - WeFollow: http://wefollow.com/
  - Localtweeps: http://localtweeps.com/
  - Twellow: http://www.twellow.com/
- URL Shorteners:
  - http://tinyurl.com
  - http://tr.im
  - http://bit.ly
- "Twitter: Why You Should Care": http://www.thisistrue.com/blog-twitter_why_you_should_care.htm
- "5 stages you will go through on Twitter": http://ianbarnett.wordpress.com/2009/04/12/6-stages-you-will-go-through-on-twitter
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