



The early bird catches the news: Nine things you should know about micro-blogging

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KEYWORDS

Web 2.0;
User-generated content;
Social media;
Micro-blogging;
Twitter;
Ambient awareness

Abstract Micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk, Tumblr) are starting to become an established category within the general group of social media. Yet, while they rapidly gain interest among consumers and companies alike, there is no evidence to explain why anybody should be interested in an application that is limited to the exchange of short, 140-character text messages. To this end, our article intends to provide some insight. First, we demonstrate that the success of micro-blogs is due to the specific set of characteristics they possess: the creation of ambient awareness; a unique form of push-push-pull communication; and the ability to serve as a platform for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism. We then discuss how applications such as Twitter can generate value for companies along all three stages of the marketing process: pre-purchase (i.e., marketing research); purchase (i.e., marketing communications); and post-purchase (i.e., customer services). Finally, we present a set of rules—The Three Rs of Micro-Blogging: Relevance; Respect; Return—which companies should consider when relying on this type of application.

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1. The hare and the hedgehog: When Twitter's 'already here'

At 2:26 p.m. on June 25th, 2009, the world stood still for a split second when word spread that Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, might have died at the UCLA Medical Center from cardiac arrest. Naturally, millions of people rushed to Google News to verify whether this rumor was true, only to read: "We're sorry, but your query looks similar to automated

requests from a computer virus or spyware application. To protect our users, we can't process your request right now." What happened? It turns out that the algorithms of the California-based search engine giant interpreted the flood of searches for the same keyword as a brute-force attack, and reacted according to standard protocols. Just 25 minutes later, Google realized that the queries were legitimate. In parallel, Google itself correctly reported that indeed Michael Jackson had died—on August 30th, 2009, roughly 2 years earlier, making reference to a Wikipedia article about a British author of the same name.

It seems fair to say that Michael Jackson's death was not the best day in the history of Google, a firm

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that has built its reputation on providing results of outstanding relevance, maximum accuracy, and impressive timeliness. June 25th, 2009, was a great day for the micro-blogging application Twitter, though: short messages dealing with the breaking news started to appear only minutes after the event actually happened, and tweets were exchanged at a rate of 100,000 per hour. According to the Twitter tracking tool Trendistic, by 12 a.m. the next day, an impressive 22.6% of all posts included the term 'Michael Jackson.' Add to this the 8.7% including 'MJ' and some share of the 25.8% including 'Michael,' and it implies that roughly one-third of all tweets of that day dealt in one way or another with the death of the pop icon.

But Twitter is not only used to exchange recent 'yellow press' news or to speak about trivialities. It is also an important channel for more serious matters, such as politics. On June 12th, 2009, Iran's tenth presidential election took place with incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad running against reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. To prevent protesters from sharing footage of related police violence in the streets of Tehran, the authorities decided to interrupt mobile phone communications and block popular social media applications such as Facebook and YouTube. Yet, they forgot about Twitter, the vehicle which subsequently facilitated global sharing of hundreds of photos of demonstrations and protesters. The resulting traffic was so important that Twitter even decided to reschedule a long-planned maintenance shut-down in order to preserve access to the application; rumor has it that the U.S. State Department played a role in this decision.

These examples illustrate the wild popularity and potential of an application that few of us may have heard of 6 months ago, but which today is one of the most up-to-date dinner conversation topics: Twitter. Twitter is undoubtedly the most popular member of a larger group of Internet-based applications called *micro-blogs*, which allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links. Micro-blogs in turn belong to the big family of *social media*, which can be defined as the "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). On the continuum of social media classification, micro-blogs stand halfway between traditional blogs and social networking sites, and are characterized by a high degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a medium to low degree of social presence/media richness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Other well-known micro-blogging sites include the Finnish

Jaiku, Plurk (particularly popular in Taiwan and Southeast Asia), and the New York-based Tumblr.

Although only a few years old, Twitter—founded in October 2006, roughly 2½ years after Facebook—has become one of the major players in the social media industry. The number of Twitter accounts reached 75 million by the end of 2009, with a growth rate of approximately 6.2 million new users per month, or 2-3 per second. Even though 80% of accounts should be considered inactive, these numbers are still impressive. Moreover, despite what one might expect, Twitter users are not primarily teens or college students. According to Forrester Research, more than one-third of all Tweepers are 35 years and older, with an average household income of \$85,000 per year. Coupled with the medium's focus on up-to-date information, this interesting demographic profile has resulted in more companies utilizing Twitter, including publishing houses (e.g., *The New York Times*), grocery retailers (e.g., Whole Foods Market), and even Google itself.

2. Nine things you should know about micro-blogging

2.1. Going once—Characteristics

At first glance, it probably seems counterintuitive that an application limited to the exchange of text-based messages of 140 characters or less should be of interest to anyone. After all, even the 160 signs of a traditional SMS give more room for personal self-expression. Yet still, micro-blogs are growing at a rate that makes most other industries look tiny in comparison. Based on our research, we have identified three factors that can explain this apparent contradiction: the concept of ambient awareness that implies being updated about even the most trivial matters in other peoples' lives; the unique type of push—push—pull communication that applications like Twitter allow; and the platform for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism they provide for both active contributors and passive observers. Let's look at each of these three factors in more detail.

2.1.1. Ambient awareness

The first reason that accounts for the huge success of micro-blogging can be related back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who wrote in his book *Metaphysics* that sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While the messages "Need to rush to the drug store" or "Have to get some crackers and soda from Wal-Mart" may be completely insignificant on their own, they become important pieces

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