

Community as Twitter as Community

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Twitter seems weird and useless until you get it. And getting it is something that when you don't, seems like a mystery. Do I twit or tweet or do a tweet? Funny language.

A tweet is a message. People tweet about random thoughts, news, images, articles, and snippets to add to the community conversation. They do so with 140 characters, URL shorteners, and #hashtags.

Okay, people are building communities and conversations online with twitter. I know. "Er, what?" It's weird and hard to picture. But let's go through a few levels to see if you can jump start your understanding.

Level 1. It's about you.

When you first get a twitter account, and write your first tweet, the experience is awkward. "Okay I did it. Now what happens?"

Your tweet is out there. It's on your screen. Now the natural thing to do is to get people to read it. So you want followers. And the way you get followers? Start following people so that they will follow you back.

This is self-centered tweeting. Your goal is about you. Other people hearing you.

The truth though, is some people read their twitter feed and some people don't. Do you think the people who follow 10,000 people actually keep up with the tweets?

We are in our own bubble in Level 1. And we stroke our inner narcissist. Until we see something. That brings us to...

Level 2: It's about relationships.

Someone retweets something you said. Woah! Now what you say is spreading. Okay, the concept is clear. So I can retweet other's tweets to my followers. Cool! It's a whole budding center of people tweeting and retweeting each other. The word is spreading. My cool thoughts can bounce from person to person and take of virally. And I'll spread yours too.

Retweets are important. It's social validation that a message is accepted by more and more people. That puts those tweets above the crowd.

Great, we're building relationships. But wait, there's more in...

Level 3: It's about conversations.

We use this thing called a #hashtag. It's a word with a "#" in front of it. It doesn't do anything special, but help it to stand out in the crowd. #syrup stands out differently than syrup.

Why? Twitter has a search box where you can type in a word and see all of the recent tweets on that word. A #hashtag is a word that you can search for.

What people end up doing is using the same #hashtag to talk about something in common, and then follow that conversation by searching for that #hashtag, retweeting messages with that hashtag, or writing additional messages that expand or add to or divert the conversation.

An example.

Say you are at a conference. The conference says they are using the hashtag #foo123. So everyone at the conference types in #foo123 into the search box on their twitter app or website. A bunch of people already tweeted (that is, sent messages) with that hashtag, so you see those tweets and read them.

You notice that a dozen people tweeted hours before the conference started to welcome people, offer to go to lunch and talk business, start an informal discussion, and tease you about their speech later in the conference.

What you do is type a message with the hashtag #foo123 somewhere in your message, and it appears to all of the people (dozens or hundreds) who are following that hashtag in their twitter search box.

So now you have lots of people talking with no email addresses, no friending, no meeting, and nothing in common other than they are using the hashtag #foo123!

And people who aren't even at the conference physically are participating in the conversation about the conference! How dare they! Really, the conference has now extended into the virtual world beyond the confines of the physical location and face-to-face meeting. Twitter allows for a meta-conference!

Back to the conversation part.

Groups of people have conversations around events based on a #hashtag and a search engine! It's great. Now we're feeling the power of twitter. And millions of people can watch the conversation, use it to inform the news, or get a pulse on what's happening in the moment.

You almost feel like you're physically there, without the possibility of hugs (I'm sure twitter is working on that.)

We have the hang of conversations. And we head on to...

Level 4: It's about communities.

Some conversations around a #hashtag will surround an event and then die out. Some will ebb and flow. Some will continue to grow and evolve over time. Some will expand and cause a massive shift in a community.

And some... will create a community out of nothing more than a #hashtag, a little inspiration, and a lot of willing people.

Creating a community requires leaders who are going to tweet with a purpose, and tweet ongoingly, and grab the attention of new people who want to join the conversation. Signposts are on websites, conferences, emails, and in widgets that display the conversation in dozens or thousands of places at once on the web.

The idea takes on a life of its own, and people tweet ongoingly, creating a history, a conversation to follow, and a zeitgeist all of its own.

How does twitter have the capacity to transform a community? Simple. Conversations take place that wouldn't have happened before between people who would have never meet and form

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communities that would have never existed, changing lives and opening up new possibilities that would have never been seen.

The end of hunger.

A healthy planet.

Support during a natural disaster.

We haven't yet seen the full power of twitter. And no, you don't have to read all the tweets or spend all day on there. You participate in whatever capacity you can.

Do you spend all day with your church community? Or social group? No. You join up with them, participate for a few hours, and then go on to other parts of your life.

Twitter is just another place to join up with a conversation for a few hours of your life and then get what you get, contribute what you can contribute, and then go on to another area of your life.

It's about you joining the conversation today.

Don't over think it. Just get a twitter account today, and write your first message with the hashtag #iamnewtotwitter and watch your name appear in the box on the side of this article. You're now part of the conversation!

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