

Twitter

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

Shortly after its debut in 2007, social networking and microblogging tool Twitter took the online community by storm. With a whopping 2.5 million visitors each month, Twitter is one of the most popular Internet trends of 2008 and a subject of discussion for professionals everywhere.

The Twitter community is made up of Twitterers. Thousands log on daily to answer Twitter's ponderous question, "What are you doing?" Twitterers share their lives through 140-character "tweets," bite-size messages that can be updated through the Web or by text with a mobile phone. Twitter folk, or Tweeples, "follow" one another and receive alerts when others update status.

Twitter is no different than other popular tools of Web 2.0. The more popular the tool, the more businesses will seek to mine its marketing potential. But what does it really mean for businesses, especially nonprofits, whose time and resources are already in constant demand?

Joining Twitter is joining a conversation, and it will only yield fruit with time, commitment and genuine involvement. Consider a few things before entering into the Twitter-sphere.

1) Can you connect with your audience?

Always consider how the tools of social media fit into your media toolbox. For example, a national labor union in Washington D.C. uses Twitter to mobilize young union workers and guide them to resources on the Web. While perfect for some audiences, tech tools like Twitter can be a shot in the dark for others. If your audience is older and less tech-savvy, there's no shame in applying more traditional techniques.

2) Can you make it personal?

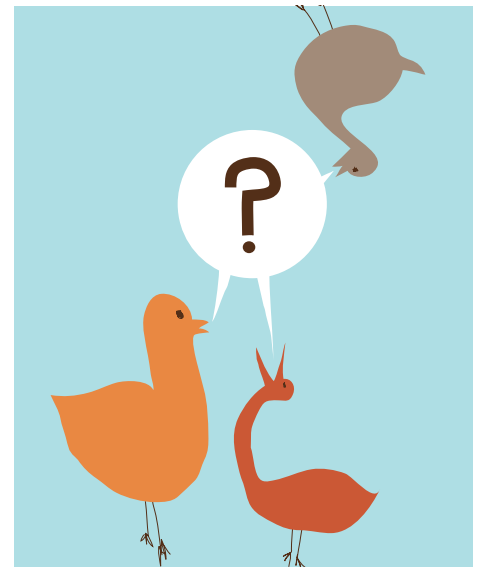
Twitterers have a sixth sense for shameless self-promotion. Imagine your friendships: People would probably get pretty sick of you if you only talked about yourself. Twitter works much the same – it requires making an effort to engage in other people's lives. For example, a nonprofit in Philadelphia uses Twitter as a tool to connect and support cancer patients. Success with Twitter depends on making these interpersonal connections.

3) Can you make the investment?

The Twitter-verse is dynamic, fast-paced and constantly changing. Thousands of Tweets mark the minute details of peoples' lives -- in real time. Make sure that someone on your staff can commit the time, energy and passion to make and maintain real connections within the Twitter community. Even the best-laid plans fail without proper follow-through.

4) Can you face the heat?

Twitter is not a professional marketing tool. Engaging in conversation with thousands of strangers is unpredictable. You open your organization up to scrutiny and potentially negative feedback, so you may want to think twice if managing image is a large concern.



If you think you are up to the challenge of this "build-it-yourself" community, give Twitter a try. There are lots of resources online that can help you get started. Just remember to approach Twitter as if it's a new relationship: A little time, love and understanding goes a long way.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Log on to www.twitter.com and click "Join Now" to sign up for a free account. Fill in your information, and click "Create my Account!" The next screen allows you to check if anyone you know uses Twitter. Search by e-mail to start forming your Twitter community. Then, update your status or follow others to see what they're doing.