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StreetSavvy Marketersm

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I'm not an early adopter. I only got an iTouch last year because it was a gift and my kids thought I'd want one. Until recently, I took great pride in the fact that I had never used an ATM machine. Remember 8-track stereos? Guess who was the first on his block to buy a 4-track player. So I admit, I have been slow to embrace some "new" things - things like "Twitter," for instance - for fear of making a leap into the unknown and being washed away with the flotsam of too-soon-popular, but short-lived fads and ideas of little lasting consequence.

For those of you who don't know or haven't yet participated in the "Twittersphere" or "Twitterverse," Twitter is the latest social media networking phenomenon. A free service, Twitter allows users to publish "tweets" or updates of what they are doing at any given time. Updates are limited to 140 characters or less (that's characters, not words) that "followers" can subscribe to and have instantly delivered to their own Twitter addresses. That means the people who "follow" you in the Twittersphere - the Twitterati - can hang on your every word 24/7/365. And, of course, you can do the same, for everyone that you, in turn, follow.

Although Twitter bills itself "as a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: 'What are you doing?'" it's quickly going "mainstream." In fact, once Twitter sorts out its business model, it may want to think about crafting a new mission statement.

Used by Congressmen, celebrities, Uncle Mike and Aunt Pat, businessmen and women, marketers, PR professionals, journalists, CEOs, (President Obama is Twitterati-in-Chief), the ranks of the Twitterati promise to grow exponentially with as many as 10,000 new accounts being opened on a single day.

And why not? As I said, it's free, and it only takes a few minutes to sign up for an account. Plus, there's something appealing about having your "virtual" finger on the pulse of what the great, near great, not-so-great and just plain ordinary, may be thinking at any given time, assuming it has a bit more substance than a mashed banana.

And there, lies the rub. In my brief experience using Twitter, I think some people may be taking the "What are you doing?" question a bit too literally. I really don't want or need to know that a highpowered Wall Street investment banker "had an English muffin this morning that's exactly half the calories of two slices of whole wheat toast." Thanks for sharing, Jack, that's very compelling.

Aside from keeping in touch with friends, the real value of Twitter lies in its potential as a business tool. And the potential is awesome.

Twitter gives you the opportunity to engage in a conversation with your clients and prospects without the influence or interference associated with third parties. It also gives you the opportunity to “follow” people who may be important to your business success, among them, competitors.

Because it is searchable, (search.twitter.com), you can use it to identify trends that might be important to your business or industry, mine market intelligence, or survey industry leaders or clients. It also provides an instant “feedback loop” in terms of learning what your stakeholders, clients and others really think about your products, performance, client service, etc.

Twitter can also be effective in crisis communications. Remember that YouTube video featuring a Domino’s Pizza employee doing things to a sandwich that might have made the guys in “Animal House” blush? One of the first things Domino’s did was to launch a Twitter site, twitter.com/dpzinfo. Company officials were quick to realize that if they were going to win back the trust of their customers, they had to communicate with them in real time.

You can even include website links to information in your posts - as well as streaming video - that you think is important enough to share or even debate. Because your tweets can be “re-tweeted,” i.e., passed on to your followers’ followers, the potential for spreading your message virally is extraordinary. Want to promote your blog? Use Twitter.

Want to drive more traffic to your website and make it more interactive? Use Twitter.

But... and, yes, there’s always a “but.” Use your common sense. Be careful. Be discreet. Twitter is not about promoting you - or your business - to the exclusion of everyone else. It’s also about sharing and engaging in a conversation with your followers and your Twittersphere community.

If the best you can do is bray about how wonderful you are, you’ll soon find yourself abandoned and “un-followed.” The line between spam and acceptable self-promotion in social media is much finer than you might think. So ease into it gently.

You should also be mindful that your tweets can easily get picked up by Google or other search engines. What you say in a 140-character tweet can be cause for future and lasting embarrassment if you’re flippant or sarcastic. Just ask the PR executive who tweeted disparaging comments about Memphis at the same time he was calling on FedEx, which happens to be headquartered there. Not good.

If you’re one of those people who tends to have a 9-to-5 business persona that is sharply different from the after 5 p.m. guy or gal who lets their hair down and runs through the neighborhood with a beer in hand and a lamp shade on your head, do yourself a favor and get a corporate and a personal Twitter account.

So, is Twitter worth it? Absolutely. Try it. Then, if you like, you can tweet me at www.twitter.com/BillBlase.

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