

## **Why Twitter, anyways?**

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I'm tapping away furiously on my Blackberry as a friend arrives to join me for coffee. "Whatcha working on?" he asks.

"Just updating my Twitter," I say. "Two secs."

"Twitter, huh? I just don't *get it*, I guess."

"Oh, my. Allow me to get you to 'get' it, my friend."

This is a conversation I have often, and while it might make some diehard Twitterers cringe, I relish this moment to expound and explain this little phenomenon that's happening around Twitter and services like it. I've clearly drunk the Kool-Aid of the micro-blogging revolution, and I'd love to walk you through some of the ways people are enjoying it.

### **Wait, what is it?**

[Twitter](#) is a service that functions like a giant bulletin board where anyone can stick a short note — 140 characters or less. These posts are called "tweets." You can choose to read other people's tweets (called "following" them), and other people can choose to read yours (these are your "followers"). Some people choose to keep their tweets private, and approve each request to be "followed."

The most basic way to use Twitter is via the [website](#), where a list of everyone's tweets appears once you log in. If you belong to Facebook, it's similar to the home screen there (aka, the "news feed")— which features a list of your friends' recent activities. The main difference between the two services is that while all your friends' activities appear in your news feed (though this is tweakable; another post on that another day), only people you choose to follow appear in your Twitter feed.



## How do people use it?

There are two main groups of twitterers, and I want to address them separately — individuals tweeting on their own behalf, and organizations and business who are on Twitter. There's some overlap, for sure, but have their own ends for which Twitter is the means.

### Individuals: I am tweeting, hear me roar

Or purr, if that's the case. Many people are on Twitter for some pretty basic reasons:

- **Conversations.** Twitter, as I [mentioned in my beginner's guide](#), is a two-way street with many lanes going in both directions. Everyone has the opportunity not just to express what they're thinking/feeling/doing at any given moment, but to *respond* to what others are thinking/feeling/doing. I like to think of it as a water cooler in the break room, where I stop in periodically and see what people are talking about. This is especially helpful for freelancers, web workers and other folks who aren't in traditional work environments. It gives us support and creates community.
- **Expertise.** People love to get and share advice on Twitter. It's a great place to receive quick, immediate feedback on an idea, put out a link to a new blog post or article, or advertise yourself as a leader in your field.
- **News.** Lots of media organizations now have Twitter accounts, and use them to automatically publish links to new stories as they become available. Many people find it convenient to get breaking news there — and to report it themselves. More individuals are now using Twitter to provide eye-witness accounts and to point out what's missing from the news coverage. Both the Hudson River landing and the Dutch crash were



first reported by everyday people on Twitter.

- **Stay connected with friends.** Our so-called digital lives, yes indeed! Twitter is a great way to peek at what your friends and colleagues are up to. This certainly doesn't mean you have to be responsible for reading every tweet (see [my post on Twitter overload](#)), but it's a great way to casually be aware of what's happening with folks you care about.
- **Share interests & find others who share them.** Are you [locavore](#)? Would you love to share that passion with other locavores? Twitter makes it easy to find and follow others— check out the [search function](#) and use "hash tags" (see [the beginner's guide](#) for the how-to) to track conversations and topics of interest.

## Organizations: It's so much more than outreach

Sure, you can push out information all you want, but there are a lot of other ways for organizations to connect with their constituencies:

- **Spread the word, connect the dots.** There's the obvious — post your own news and events — but there's also huge value in giving your followers related info. If you're an environmental organization, don't just send out press releases from your own group. Use Twitter to link to articles relevant to your work, as well as share links to sister organizations.
- **Have conversations with your community.** Have I mentioned that Twitter is a two-way street? There's a fantastic opportunity for organizations to listen as well as talk, on a very direct level. It's a great tool for organizing as well as providing customer service.
- **Give your work a human voice.** Prior to tools like Facebook and Twitter, it was hard to make the work we all do at the organizational level feel personal and real. Take this opportunity to let your humanity



shine through, and don't sound like a robot when you're tweeting for your org. Twitter is more about connecting humans to humans.

## A little story

This is one of my favorite, illustrative moments in for how Twitter humanizes our digital interactions: Last fall, I was visiting my parents after participating at [amedia symposium at Ithaca College](#). My mother knows I have a thing for shoes, so while we were shopping, she decided to mess with me. We were at a store with rows and rows of discounted awesomeness, and she called across several aisles, "Come look at these! Should I get them?"

I was greeted by a blinding set of cream-colored, bejeweled, pointy-toed, gold-stiltoed boots on my fashion-conservative mother. We fell over with laughter, and I sent this picture to Twitter with the question, "[Should my mom buy these boots?](#)" (Best response came from [@rit](#), who said, "That depends. Is your mother Dolly Parton?")

A few days later, I was on the phone with [Pete Leyden](#) to discuss a potential project. We played phone tag for a few days while I was traveling, and I was excited to finally hear what the project was about. "Before I get into it, though," Pete said, "I need to know: Did your mom buy the boots?"

It was one of those moments that allowed this entirely personal — but not necessarily intimate or vulnerable — connection between me and a potential client. We had a great laugh over it. Following me on Twitter gave him a fairly rounded picture of the type of person I am, and it let me know that he's appreciative of the level of [silliness](#) that often invades my brain. It humanized each of us in what otherwise is a connection governed entirely by ones and zeros.



## What else to say?

Two great resources that I'd like to share before we go:

- There's [a great video from Common Craft](#) that explains Twitter in a jiff.
- Tara Hunt has a [great post on tweeting for companies](#). It focuses on for-profits selling things, but I think much of it is applicable to non-profits, and maybe even individuals, as well.

