

#SocialMedia Cheat Sheet: Tips for Success on Twitter

Ten General Rules for Twitter:

1. People follow you because you provide value to them, either in the words you write or the content you link to.
2. Most often, you get the most out of Twitter when you interact with people rather than simply broadcast. Broadcast has its place, though, if you're distributing good content. Most feeds are a mix of interaction and broadcast.
3. Most successful feeds focus on a single topic or a related set of topics, unless they belong to a celebrity or someone tweeting purely personal information. Occasional off-topic Tweets are fine, though, since sometimes they'll catch more attention and spread farther. Also, they help keep a feed from getting repetitive or stale.
4. Twitter is an in-the-moment medium -- unlike blog posts, which can have a "shelf life" of years, a Tweet gets buried by newer ones within minutes.
5. Twitter is typically an "influencer" medium rather than a mass medium, though it's becoming more of a mass medium over time. But active people on Twitter tend to be bloggers, journalists and other communicators, so even a small following can be valuable if it consists of the people who can amplify your voice or whom you're otherwise trying to reach.
6. A related point: a relatively small percentage of the community generally puts out the bulk of the content on Twitter, especially the content that gets spread widely, so pay attention to the people who are active on the issues you care about.
7. The big gains on Twitter, both in influence and in growing your following, tend to come when your content is spread by others. Truly "viral" content is rare, since most tweets don't spread widely, but those that do are gold.
8. Mentioning people (i.e., their "handles") in your posts helps bring your content (and you) to their attention. Because of the way Twitter tracks and archives posts for people in which they're mentioned, they'll likely see a post in which they're mentioned long after other Tweets posted at the same time have disappeared from their feeds. A mention is called an "@reply", pronounced "at-reply", for the "@" symbol used to indicate the name of a feed. But only @reply someone if the tweet is relevant to them!

9. Hashtags ("#socialmedia", for example) are bits of text that a bunch of people are using all at once to indicate that they're talking about the same subject. Using hashtags lets you participate in a broader conversation, since people who aren't already following you can see your hashtagged posts if they're following the tag.
10. Keep in mind that Twitter growth is an incremental process -- your following is unlikely to explode overnight. Slow and steadily generally wins the race, and don't be afraid if you occasionally lose followers. As long as the overall trend is positive and people are retweeting your content, your influence is expanding.

Sixteen Tips for Twitter Success:

1. Have a solid base of content -- i.e., a stream of good Tweets -- on your own feed before you start to spread the word. Before people will want to follow you, they need to see the kind of information you'll provide.
2. To start promoting your feed, ask friends and family who are on Twitter to follow you -- that way, you'll avoid the "empty room" effect when new people come to your page. Of course, follow them first.
3. Especially at the beginning, follow most people back who follow you -- if their feed ends up being useless or annoying, you can always unfollow them later.
4. As you spread your wings, follow people whose content interests you -- don't just follow people whose attention you want to catch. Retweet (see below) their posts when you think they're interesting. @reply them with questions or comments to try to start a conversation.
5. Following people who tweet about topics you care about also helps you find other people to follow, since they'll typically be retweeting and @replying other people interested in the same subjects.
6. Use Twitter as consistently as you can, since your following tends to grow as you Tweet. But don't feel obligated to Tweet constantly or even every day -- too many posts can annoy people. If you take a break, your following will still be there when you return.
7. An easy way to generate Twitter content is to Tweet links to news and opinion articles you think are good. Just click the Twitter button on most online articles. If the site doesn't use Share/Tweet buttons, copy/paste the URL into a tweet and be sure to include the headline or other description. Without context, people generally won't click on a link. When possible, include the author's @handle in your tweet about their article.
8. Retweet people regularly, either by using Twitter's retweet button or by copying/pasting a Tweet and adding "RT" followed by the original publisher's @handle. I.e., "RT @epolitics I'm thinking of growing a #hipstermustache" is a retweet of an epolitics post about growing a mustache.

9. Retweeting is beneficial in several ways: you're adding content to your own feed and providing additional value to your readers, you're participating in the ongoing conversation and playing nicely with others, you're giving a little love to the person you've retweeted, and you've quite likely caught their attention. Try to mix retweets and your own original tweets as you go, since a retweet-only feed doesn't add that much to the conversation.
10. To add commentary to a retweet, copy the text of a Tweet you want to retweet, including the original publisher's @handle, and put your commentary in front of the content, followed by "RT" for "ReTweet." For instance: "You're an idiot... RT @epolitics I'm thinking of growing a #hipstermustache". In this case, "You're an idiot..." is your commentary on the original @epolitics post, "I'm thinking of growing a #hipstermustache".
11. Likewise, use the Interactions button on Twitter to see who's @replied or otherwise mentioned you, as well as people who've followed you recently. By default, Twitter will send you an email when you're mentioned or followed, but the Interactions page makes these events easier to track.
12. When possible, contribute to ongoing conversations, particularly around breaking news or big events, by using the appropriate #hashtags. To find good hashtags, just look at what other people are using!
13. Use the Twitter search to follow a hashtagged conversation: for instance, search for #olympics to read the conversation around the Olympics.
14. One-on-one conversations are possible on Twitter, though of course other people are listening in. Just use someone's @handle in your tweet to "send" them a message. If you start the tweet with their handle, only people who follow both of you will see the tweet by default.
15. If you follow someone who also follows you, you can also send them a Direct Message, which is a behind-the-scenes communication not visible to the public. Use DMs sparingly, though -- they're more intrusive than an @reply.
16. Above all, have fun -- if Twitter feels like a chore, you won't put much energy into it. Enjoy the serendipity of stumbling across information or opinion you might not have read on your own. Likewise, if it's obvious that you're in it purely for self-promotion or narcissism, not many people will follow you (unless you're famous and/or hot). Provide value, participate in the conversation, and play well with others -- good rules for life, too.