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A MONTHLY DIGEST OF THE BEST IN LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

## SHOULD THE C-SUITE TWEET?

By Jill Vitiello

Leadership communication, 140 characters at a time: What can light blue do for you?



Jill Vitiello

In the past few weeks, respected news media outlets like *Forbes*, *BusinessWeek* and *The Wall Street Journal* reported on the Twitter phenomenon with an eye toward the business value of the short message service, or SMS. The crescendo of coverage on this quirky start-up company's oddly named online utility has been louder than any I'd encountered in my career as a communications consultant. Here's how I'm advising the senior executives we counsel.

***Twitter is the tool that is tipping a trend***

**Twitter** is a Web-based text messaging tool that allows you to send 140-character updates, called "tweets," from your mobile phone, BlackBerry or computer to many people at one time. Those who choose

to "follow" you on Twitter receive instant messages to their computers and PDAs. They can immediately read what's important to you and pass on your message—or "retweet" it to others who follow them.

Right now, Twitter is riding the momentum of other Web 2.0 utilities that went before it—chat rooms, online bulletin boards, blogs, and social networking services such as MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn. According to Forrester Research, the average Twitter participant is a 31-year-old male with an income of \$78,000. Twitter counts about six million unique visitors to its site each month—triple the amount from last year.

Easy to learn and convenient to use, Twitter is attracting a diverse, upscale user base that includes executives and entrepreneurs, primarily in the technology and communications industries. Twitter is social media distilled to its delightful essence—a micro-blog, a conversation starter, a finger in the wind during the worst economic gale of our time. It gives participants direct access to large, online communities where customers and other stakeholders congregate to share

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information that influences decisions on purchasing and perceptions about brand and reputation.

The reason senior leaders need to pay attention to Twitter is because it represents the tipping point of all social media. In 2009, strategic communication programs that strive to be contemporary and relevant must include some component of social media. Should the C-suite "tweet"? It depends on the organization's objectives and the chief's appetite for personal transparency and disclosure.

***Key messages are morphing into critical conversations***

Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of **Sun Microsystems**, and poster child for

social media in business, recently issued a tweet with a link to the company's quarterly results. John Earnhardt is **Cisco Systems's** self-proclaimed tour guide on the company's official Twitter account. Online shoe merchant **Zappo's CEO, Tony Hsieh**, tweets about his life (see Content Analysis, page 4).

These progressive execs and their companies use Twitter to put a face

on their brands, to promote products and to drive customer loyalty. It remains to be seen whether Twitter can substantially boost profitability, stock price or product quality.

Twitter and other social media enable dialog—a shift from guarding information to sharing it globally. The trend away from carefully controlled key messages to ongoing conversations with people requires senior execs to consider their voice in this conversation. Some industries such as high-techs are a natural for Twitter, while other, more regulated industries such as pharmaceuticals, biotech or food manufacturing, may need to test the waters before incorporating Twitter in their communication strategy.

One specific application for Twitter is customer service. Twitter provides a powerful and immediate “voice of the customer.” For example, **Comcast** uses a search engine to detect complaints its customers make on Twitter. The company responds

in real time, contacting customers proactively—even before a service call is placed. **Public Service of New Hampshire** provided service updates via Twitter when an ice storm knocked out power to customers.

### *Be discreet if you tweet*

In deciding whether and how to use Twitter, keep in mind two basic rules of social media. If you begin the conversation, you must keep it going. Twitter updates must be frequent, pithy and useful. And, be discreet about what you tweet. Twitter content lives on the World Wide Web and is easily searchable and spreadable.

It's simple to open a free Twitter account. Executives who like to look before they leap may want to review a **beginner's guide** written by **Michael Hyatt**, CEO of Thomas Nelson publishers. Or send me a tweet **@JillVitiello** to discuss how Twitter can help you accomplish your communication objectives.

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## HERE ARE SOME LEGITIMATE PURPOSES FOR TWITTER TWEETS:

**To express yourself so that stakeholders understand how you work and think on a more intimate basis.** CEOs especially are shrouded in the mystery of money and status. Those who think they can bond with their organizations' followers by removing that veil and strategically revealing something of their schedules and day-to-day thoughts can use Twitter to do so.

**To sell a new idea.** Warning: There are no new ideas that can fit in 140 characters, though there are lots of Twittering twits who don't understand this. But you can twittilate your followers by provocatively describing the new idea you've expressed on your blog or in your white paper—and then including the link.

**To get feedback on a theory or to ask advice.** Important: Be prepared to receive it—instantly and at high volume. Twitterers have lots of time on their hands and a serious need to express themselves, or they wouldn't be Twittering.

**To spread the truth as you know it, or as your organization would like to have people know it.** For corporate purposes, this may be the most practical reason to tweet: to steer your followers—by definition, people who have an interest in your organization, as a friend or foe—toward credible stories and sources that agree with your point of view.