



Engaging stakeholders through Twitter: How nonprofit organizations are getting more out of 140 characters or less

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ABSTRACT

While it may seem difficult to communicate in a meaningful manner with 140 characters or less, Twitter users have found creative ways to get the most out of each Tweet by using different communication tools. This paper looks into how 73 nonprofit organizations use Twitter to engage stakeholders not only through their tweets, but also through other various communication methods. Specifically it looks into the organizations utilization of tweet frequency, following behavior, hyperlinks, hashtags, public messages, retweets, and multimedia files. After analyzing 4655 tweets, the study found that the nation's largest nonprofits are not using Twitter to maximize stakeholder involvement. Instead, they continue to use social media as a one-way communication channel as less than 20% of their total tweets demonstrate conversations and roughly 16% demonstrate indirect connections to specific users.

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1. Introduction

Launched in October, 2006, Twitter is a short message service, or “micro-blogging” application, that allows users to broadcast real-time messages of 140 characters or less. Since then, Twitter has become the largest micro-blogging site on the Internet. About 19% of all Internet users use Twitter, and strategic communicators recognize its ability to reach a large number of stakeholders, making it the most used social media application in official public relations, advertising, and marketing campaigns (Stelzner, 2009).

Social media sites allow for the rapid dissemination of information as well as the rapid exchange of information. Twitter amplifies the rapidity of the information exchange by limiting the size of the messages to easily digestible information pieces. Some feel that 140 characters is too brief for meaningful information; however, organizations are using it for much bigger purposes. The purpose of this paper is to examine how organizations on the *Nonprofit Times 100* use Twitter to engage stakeholders by examining their use of various communication tools specific to Twitter, including following behavior, hyperlinks, hashtags, public messages, and retweets.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and stakeholder engagement

Social media have opened up new possibilities for organizations to connect with their stakeholders by allowing them to receive real-time feedback about organizational announcements and engage in conversations. Most research has focused on

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the interpersonal implications of social networking; however, the few organizational-level studies point to a great variance in relationship cultivation behaviors. Research has found that although some environmental organizations are fully utilizing the dialogic capacity of social media, most use their sites to simply broadcast one-way messages (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). Similar results across a broad cross-section of the nonprofit sector were found by examining the relationship-building features of their Facebook pages (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). These studies concluded that organizations were losing opportunities to engage with key supporters on Facebook.

Organizational research specific to Twitter is scarce, but evidence points to continued findings of lost opportunities. Twitter is only used by 35% of *Fortune 500* companies with only 24% of those being actively involved (Barnes & Mattson, 2010). Another analysis of corporate tweeting found that these accounts blended customer testimony, complaints, and product/service inquiries (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). Organizations frequently sent out informational messages to attempt engagement with their followers, but rarely succeeded. One-way communication is still the most pronounced form of messaging strategy used by organizations on Twitter (Waters & Jamal, 2011; Xifra & Grau, 2010), and attempts to secure followers to receive the one-way messages is the most common non-communication strategy (Rybako & Seltzer, 2010).

2.2. Communication tools on Twitter

While an organization's updates, or tweets, serve as the organization's principal communication tool on Twitter, there are other aspects specific to Twitter that can aid in stakeholder engagement and organizational research. Organizations can communicate on Twitter through the use of the "@" symbol. Posting a tweet with the "@" symbol before the username of a Twitter user directs the message to that user. For example, an individual in the study's dataset asked the March of Dimes, "@marchofdimes Do preemies tend to have higher chances of allergies and sensitivities to food, allergens?" The organization would see that a user mentioned them and have the ability to respond to the inquiry. Through these public messages, a dialog is created between the organization and the user, but it is also viewable by anyone following the organization's or the individual's account.

Sending public messages demonstrates responsiveness and establishes a dialog between users and the organization. Users direct questions and comments to the organization using a public message, and organizations should acknowledge and respond to these messages. Ignoring a tweeted question or comment is the equivalent of not responding to an. Some public messages are simply mentions of the organization that do not warrant a response; however, many still acknowledge users for mentioning the organization. Public messages also reduce the redundancy of answering the same questions repeatedly in direct, private messages.

The number of tweets that are public messages has varied in studies from between 12.5% and 22%. Research has found that the percentage of public messages drops significantly when one-way information sharing activities increase, such as during major events and crises. Public messages accounted for less than 10% of tweets during such events (Hughes & Palen, 2009).

Another common feature used on Twitter is the retweet (RT), a function of the Twitter service that allows one user to repost a tweet from another user while giving acknowledgement of the user by adding "RT@[username]" to the beginning of the message. For example, the Make-A-Wish Foundation retweeted the following message from MacysInc: "RT @MacysInc: Our Believe stations are overflowing – 314,000 letters to Santa so far! Don't forget to add yours & help grant WISHES!" Retweets can be used to highlight involvement with another organization or to share information that the organization finds pertinent. Retweets can also be used when answering public messages, so as to keep the full dialog together.

The use of hashtags, represented by the pound sign (#), denotes that a message is relevant to a particular topic. Hashtags make searching for information easier. For example, if a user wanted to find information about healthcare, a search for the term healthcare would yield results, but a search for #healthcare would ensure that all results were relevant to the topic. Hashtags works best when they have been established and agreed upon, which usually happens when an organization recommends a specific hashtag to be used by those interested in an event or conversation. After the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the American Red Cross encouraged individuals to use the #Haiti hashtag to ask questions and spread news about their relief efforts.

2.3. Another tool used within tweets are hyperlinks

Third-party websites have been created to help users share information as hyperlinks on Twitter. Two of the more popular media storage sites are Twitpic.com, which allows users to link to photos, and TwitVid.com, which allows users to link to videos. These sites allow individuals to upload the picture to their sites and then tweet the picture or video in link form to their followers.

Sharing informative links can get followers interested in the story with their tweets in the same way newspapers use headlines. Organizations encourage followers to read the whole story by following links to non-Twitter websites. To share hyperlinks, many organizations take advantage of URL-shortening services. Shortened URLs are often used to share these hyperlinks within Twitter's 140-character restriction. URL-shortening services can turn lengthy URLs, such as the Nature Conservancy's <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjg1kMhVvKU> (42 characters), into <http://bit.ly/3xuuku> (20 characters). Character reduction helps conserve space for more pertinent information and attention-seeking headlines. URL-shortening services are beneficial to researchers because they provide metrics, such as the number of times the link has been viewed

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