

How to Get Your Messages Retweeted

Many companies are trying to leverage the power of Twitter. New research identifies factors that increase the odds that a company's tweets will be shared with recipients' networks.

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COMPANIES SMALL AND LARGE have taken to using Twitter, the global microblogging service, to connect with customers and promote their brands and products. Some 77% of the Fortune Global 100,¹ for example, have at least one Twitter account, and the average is 5.8 Twitter accounts, since accounts can be set up at the corporate level as well as for specific brands and events. With a user base of more than 100 million, Twitter offers marketers access to a very loyal group of customers. Twenty-seven percent of Twitter users log in every day, and 25% say they follow a brand and receive marketing messages from that brand. What's more, 67% percent of brand followers indicate that they purchase the brand they follow on Twitter.²

Twitter's marketing potential is best indicated by the brands with the greatest number of followers on Twitter, including Google with over three million followers, Whole Foods Market with over two million and Dell Outlet and Southwest Airlines with over one million followers each. Not only do these companies have a wide reach via Twitter, but they also have the ability to frequently push messages (several times a day if they wish) to self-selected followers. For all these reasons marketers should consider Twitter an important brand building resource — and many do. But is there a way to leverage that resource?

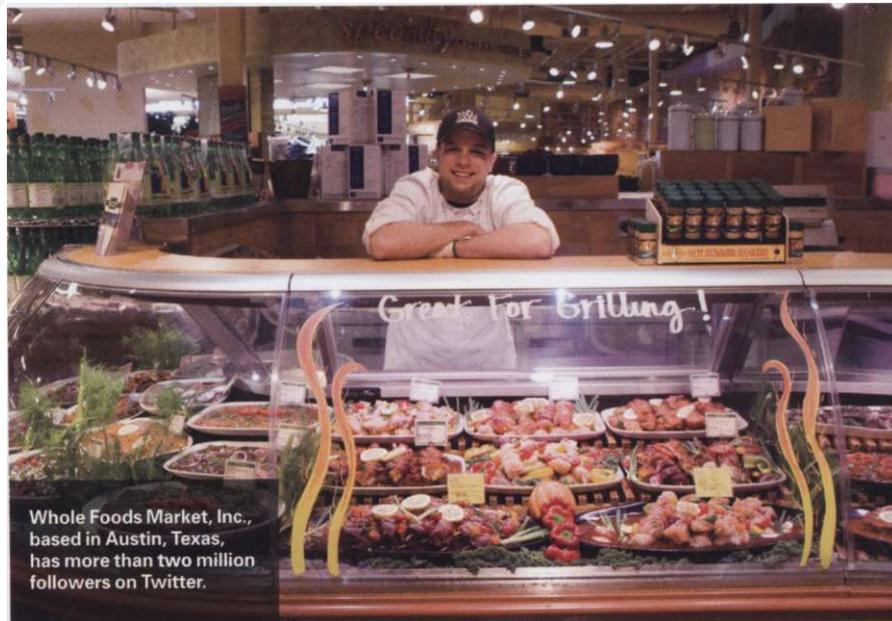
True, the cost of sending out tweets is remarkably low. But the impact of a company's tweet is somewhat muted by the fact that the people receiving the message know that it comes from a company whose ultimate goal — no matter what form the tweet takes — is to sell them something. However, an intriguing aspect of Twitter is that in addition to serving as a direct channel of communication with consumers, it also can impact electronic word of mouth through the Twitter function called "retweeting."³

Retweeting is the practice of forwarding others' messages to one's own network of followers. We believe retweeting holds great potential for marketers, for two reasons. First is the simple fact that, if retweeted, your tweet reaches more people. Second, and more importantly, a retweet comes with an implicit, and often explicit, endorsement. It is one thing for a restaurant to send you a message saying it is the best in town, but it is quite another to receive that same message in the form of a retweet

? **THE LEADING QUESTION**
How can marketers increase the likelihood that their tweets will be retweeted by their target audience?

FINDINGS

- ▶ **Humanize your brand.** Show that you are about more than just selling products.
- ▶ **Keep your message short,** so the retweeter has room to add to what you have to say.
- ▶ **Ask (politely) for the recipient to retweet.** It might seem tacky, but it can work, providing your message isn't crassly commercial.



Whole Foods Market, Inc., based in Austin, Texas, has more than two million followers on Twitter.

from your friend, who has added to the tweet: "It really is; try the fish."

Retweeting 101

The easiest form of retweeting is to forward the message in its original form, without modification, much the way you might send along an e-mail without comment. Another common retweeting practice is to add a comment in front of the original tweet. This can be difficult with some longer tweets because of Twitter's 140-character length limit.

But no matter how the retweet is sent, the person passing it along is often not only amplifying the message (by sending it to more people) but also validating it by passing it along. Retweeting thus can be a form of social advocacy in which followers become advocates of the brand within their own personal social networks. Of course, retweeters may also be motivated to retweet brand messages to gain others' attention and establish their own Twitter credibility within their own social network.⁴ Either way, each Twitter user who retweets the original tweet acts as an influencer.

The sophistication of Twitter as a social network is not only apparent in the number of people who can be reached but also in the speed of diffusion, making Twitter an attractive information dissemination tool with great potential for brand building. By focusing on the number of times a marketing message is retweeted, we can gain a better understanding of factors that influence electronic word of mouth.

Through intensive manual data collection analysis of the objective and subjective content of tweets from leading companies, we identified certain characteristics that produce a higher number of retweets. (See "About the Research.") We were also able to determine practices that are not effective. As a result, we are able to offer some best practices to marketers to help them craft tweets that have a greater chance of being retweeted. These best practices will help companies leverage Twitter's full marketing potential. Although our practices are in the context of Twitter, they may be more broadly applicable in the realm of all forms of social media, especially where brand followers are saturated with marketing messages and have very limited attention spans.

What Works and What Doesn't

With that background established, let's talk about what you can do — and what you shouldn't do — to increase the odds of your message being retweeted. The average number of retweets for a tweet in our sample was about 25. The best practices we will outline can increase the number of times the original brand tweet is retweeted by up to 70%, depending on the practice. (On the negative end, some practices can result in as much as a 32% *decrease* in the number of retweets, compared with the tweets that avoid those practices.) Let's begin by discussing what is not effective.

What Not to Do

Avoid tweeting "in-your-face" content. Marketers are always on the lookout for ways they can use different media to push their offerings — especially new product or service introductions and rollouts. However, our results indicate that using highly personal social media for such purposes may not be the most prudent approach. The more blatant and overt the attempt at pushing offerings, the fewer the followers who retweet the content to their own networks. Hard sells decrease retweets by 32% on average.

Even more dangerously, such tweets may be a turn-off for a brand's followers. By following a brand on Twitter, followers are giving permission to brands to push informational messages to them. In light of this, blatant product-promoting tweets can be construed as a violation of a tacit agreement to improve the recipient's life in some way. The takeaway here: Twitter may be better suited for building brands than for building markets for new offerings.

Asking questions doesn't help. A common practice on Twitter is to provoke a response by asking followers questions. These questions may be designed to encourage followers to reply to the account manager.

 **Example Tweet (Wendy's):** Who's tried dipping french fries in a Frosty? #yum

Regardless of whether followers reply to the account manager, the use of questions to provoke a response may create a sense of engagement and cause direct communication between the brand

and individual follower. However, we found that such tweets are retweeted 30% less than those that do not have an interaction component. Brand followers do not see the value in propagating these types of tweets within their network.

Hashtags don't help, either. In Twitter, a hashtag (#) is a common marker used to help organize content, facilitate searches about a particular topic and archive all related messages in a central location. Prior research examining retweets has found that 18% of retweeted messages include a hashtag.⁵ Even though hashtags are often used, we did not find that including them had any effect on retweetability.

Embedding a link does not increase retweets.

Clicking an embedded URL directs followers to websites (company home pages, Facebook pages, etc.), photos (e.g., Lockerz) or video content (e.g., YouTube). However, as popular as including a link may be, we found that it did not have a statistically significant impact on the likelihood that a message will be retweeted. With a finer-grain analysis, we explored whether different types of links (i.e., general links vs. photo links vs. video links) had unique effects on retweetability—and found no differences. We therefore suggest caution with including links; the practice does not increase retweetability, and it has an opportunity cost, given Twitter's strict 140-character limit for messages.

Contests don't add retweet value. Promotional techniques such as sweepstakes and games are fun ways to encourage participation and may result in a greater engagement with the brand. Companies are using Twitter as another communication channel to announce these types of promotions.

 **Example Tweet (Wendy's):** Keep playing Wendy's #Fry4All for a chance to win a Nintendo Wii, an Xbox360 with Kinect and other great prizes! <http://bit.ly/fy5YoN>

However, our research found that these promotional messages announcing contests did not increase retweetability. It could be the case that followers see self-gain but not a network gain. In other words, brand followers would be decreasing their own chances of winning these contests by retweet-

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Much of the current understanding about Twitter use has been gained by studying individuals' communication. In our research, we solely focus on the marketing communication between companies and their followers. Our sample consisted of 47 companies spanning diverse business areas — retail (such as Whole Foods, Best Buy and CVS), restaurants (such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut and Starbucks), vehicle manufacturers (such as Audi, Chevrolet and Harley-Davidson), electronics (such as Sony, Nokia and Samsung), luxury goods (such as Gucci), consumer products (such as Pepsi, Coca-Cola and Kraft), computer equipment (such as Dell and Microsoft), airlines (such as Southwest, JetBlue and Virgin Atlantic), telecommunications (such as AT&T), apparel (such as Gap and Nike) and entertainment (such as ESPN, MTV, Disney and Carnival Cruise Lines). In selecting the companies, we consulted various lists of the top brands using Twitter for marketing purposes. Given the high volume of tweets of some of these companies, we selected a date range (January 26, 2011, to April 18, 2011) that would allow us to capture a variety of tweets within a manageable length of time.

Following this approach, we manually collected 1,150 tweets that were a random sampling of tweets within the chosen time period. We did not include tweets that were just replies to Twitter followers' tweets (in other words, tweets that began with @<follower name>), as these were brand-to-individual communication, not more general brand messages. Next, two researchers separately coded the subjective characteristics of tweets through the process of content analysis. The coding was compared to measure the inter-rater reliability (which was found to be 0.93). The codes on which the raters' codes disagreed were then resolved through a process of discussion. The main and interaction effect were tested using two-stage OLS regression, and the number of retweets was the dependent variable in each of the stages.

ing. It may be better if brands designed these contests in a way that followers are incentivized to participate themselves and also to engage others in their network to participate.

Nine Practices That Work

We were able to identify nine ways to increase retweetability — often by a substantial percentage.

1 Size matters: Leave room. Tweets can be up to 140 characters in length. However, restricting tweet length may be beneficial. Our findings show that the number of characters in a company's tweet has a negative relationship to the number of times the message is retweeted. Shorter tweets of 70 characters or less were retweeted nearly twice as often as longer tweets, defined as those with more than 100 characters. It is imperative for brand marketers to grab the attention of followers as pithily as possible.

Perhaps more importantly, restricting original tweets to no more than 100 to 120 characters leaves followers room for retweeting with their username and comments (such as "so true" or "interesting") that they might want to add. An ability to personal-

ize the message increases the likelihood of followers retweeting the messages.

2 Grab their attention: Make them read your message. Messages should begin with attention words, such as WOW, LOOK, or TODAY ONLY! Such attention words are short and often are capitalized to gain more attention. In our analysis of tweets, tweets with attention words may be retweeted as much as 40% more than those that don't use that approach. Attention is a tougher currency to come by in this medium than in other media, given the millions of tweets sent and received each day. Therefore, the simple act of attracting attention continues to be an important element of success in tweeting and retweeting. It is imperative for companies to get their brand message noticed in such an environment. This is a tricky proposition because only 140 characters are available to get your message across, so devoting a few characters to get the attention of the followers means less space for the actual message. Nevertheless, it is a trade-off well worth making.

 **Example Tweet (Whole Foods):** DAILY TIP! Substitute popped amaranth 4 popcorn: add 2 Tbs amaranth to dry skillet over high heat. Cover/shake the pan. Pops within seconds!

Just ask to be retweeted: There is nothing simpler. It might seem tacky, but asking politely for a retweet actually works. In our study, it increased retweeting by 34% on average.

 **Example Tweet (Travel Channel):** Follow us on @foursquare to get travel tips from our hosts and TravelChannel.com: <http://4sq.com/fkbOP4>. Please RT!

 **Example Tweet (eBay):** RT for a chance to win a \$100 eBay Gift Card! On Mother's Day diamonds can be mom's best friend. #eBayMomHeroes <http://bit.ly/ic3wzD>

Both examples directly ask followers to retweet the original message, using the Twitter shorthand "RT." Direct requests for a retweet may be granted for a variety of reasons, including attention seeking and future retweet reciprocity.⁶ Asking to be retweeted is a smart business practice. Our data suggest that direct

retweet requests are granted, and granted often. One caveat would be not to overuse this power; companies should directly ask for a retweet only when needed, and followers will honor their request.

4 Make it personal: Humanize your brand. Companies can make their brand appear to be a "living thing" and signal that there is more to the brand than just making and selling products or services. This content can be in the form of humor, a historical view of the brand or even an inspirational message such as a quote. Followers want to advocate their brand preference, and humanizing content gives them a platform to do just that. Therefore, humanizing messages are highly likely to be retweeted. Our research shows that content that humanizes a brand has the highest likelihood of all the content characteristics we explored of driving retweetability, increasing the odds of retweeting by as much as 70%. These messages deliver the most impact and exploit Twitter as a social network medium to the fullest extent. For example, the humor McDonald's used in the following tweet earned them a large number of retweets.

 **Example Tweet (McDonald's):** Despite all the rumors there r no plans 2 bring #mclobster or mcsushi 2 the US menu. We r working on a new menu item called McWinning

5 Share: Validate yourself. Sharing accomplishments with customers is welcome and builds brand relationships. Consumers want to be informed of success and achievements of the brands they follow. Further, they want to advocate their preferred brands to others; validation tweets are retweeted 29% more than average. Retweeting also can earn followers cachet by demonstrating their preference for and following of successful brands.

We observed two different Twitter forms of communication of brand success, which we identified as self-validation and external validation. In self-validation, companies would craft their own message to communicate brand achievements to followers directly.

 **Example Tweet (HP):** HP meets goal to increase product energy efficiency by 50 percent <http://bit.ly/h888nD>



Companies such as Gap Inc. have used tweets to offer consumers money-saving deals — a practice that increases the likelihood of retweeting.

In external validation, the messages tweeted by the company refer to external third parties who have praised the achievements of the brand.

 **Example Tweet (Toyota):** Vehicle Dependability Study: Toyota Motor Corporation models receive 7 awards; models from Ford Motor Company receive 4 <http://bit.ly/hU8cuE>

We found that a company's Twitter followers were likely to retweet messages with both external validation and self-validation content. Managers therefore should from time to time tweet validation content highlighting brand accomplishments.

6 Make it practical: Provide news people can use. Information exchange is the primary reason that people use Twitter. Educating followers is therefore critical. Information that is valued, and not perceived solely to be pushing the brand offerings, is 51% more likely to be retweeted than the standard tweet. The inescapable conclusion: If followers find the information delivered by a brand to be useful, then they are more likely to share it with their network to educate others. By doing so, they enhance their own identity in their network and provide value to others.

 **Example Tweet (REI):** Magnetic North Is on the Move. Looks like updated charts, for compass navigation, may be in order. <http://bit.ly/g1Pfp6>

7 Save people money: Offer a deal. Everybody loves to save money, especially in a tough economy. Unlike contests, where there may only be a few winners, deals are attractive for retweeting in that they are available to everyone who is aware of them. As a result, messages containing attractive offers for consumers are highly retweeted. To build goodwill within a social network, Twitter users are very likely to retweet deal messages from brands to their own followers. Tweets with deals are retweeted 16% more than those without.

 **Example Tweet (Gap):** A sweet treat: 25% off your next Gap purchase! Online only. Enter code GAPSAVE25. Ends 2/26 <http://gap.us/gd3HqQ>



8 Engagement matters: Make it relevant and topical. In the hypertransient environment of social media, it is imperative to associate brand messages with what is top in followers' minds. Tweeting on a current topic, either a holiday or event, is a quick way to build rapport and communicate the relevancy of the content of the tweet. Topical content tweets are retweeted 41% more often than tweets that do not have topical content.

 **Example Tweet (BlackBerry):** Support Earth Day all wk! Get Kobo & start eReading. Get top selling eBook "House Secrets" 4 FREE w/ DL! #appoftheweek <http://bbry.lv/BBkobo>

Tweets highlighting social causes also resonate with followers and are more likely to be retweeted than the average tweet. Consumers want to align themselves with social causes they believe in and with the companies that support those causes. Through retweeting, Twitter users can draw more attention and support for the causes they believe in. The brands themselves can express their corporate social awareness by supporting causes with which their followers' networks identify.

 **Example Tweet (AT&T):** To help the Red Cross with support efforts in Japan, text "redcross" to 90999 to give a \$10 donation. No text message fees apply!

9 Act now: Create a sense of anticipation. Tweets that create a sense of anticipation are 24% more likely to be retweeted, according to our research.

 **Example Tweet (Chick-Fil-A):** Like our waffle fries? Then, you're REALLY going to love Friday, March 4. Stay tuned for details....

Using humor in a tweet earned McDonald's a large number of retweets. More generally, messages that humanize a brand are highly likely to be retweeted.

Combining Best Practices

Best practices are good, but you can do even more. Our data shows that smart marketers use combinations of these strategies to increase the potency of individual characteristics. In the following message, Gap uses an attention phrase, creating a sense of urgency around a deal.

 **Example Tweet (Gap):** 1 DAY ONLY! Extra 25% off sale styles. Online only. Enter code GAPSALE at checkout <http://gap.us/eVt1Zr>

The following tweet exemplifies Starbucks' effort to be topical, highlighting a social cause and offering a deal.

 **Example Tweet (Starbucks):** Tomorrow is #EarthDay! Bring your own mug and reduce the use of disposable cups. Tomorrow, we'll fill your reusable cup with Free Coffee!

In a similar vein, Nokia's call-to-action tweet marries a contest to a cause.

 **Example Tweet (Nokia):** Can you come up with an app that could #helpjapan? Join <http://ideasproject.com>, share your idea and win \$10k for charity of your choice.

Combining characteristics can decrease the effects of characteristics that decrease retweetability, such as an "in-your-face" attempt at pushing a company's offering. In the following tweet, Whole Foods blatantly draws attention to its tulips product but presents it as a deal while creating a sense of anticipation.

 **Example Tweet (Whole Foods):** Bring spring inside with a vase full of tulips. This Friday only — March 25th — get three bunches of tulips for just \$12! <http://cot.ag/ewca1D>

Maximizing Your Tweets' Reach

Knowing how to craft original tweets to increase their retweetability and propagate the message among the Twitter network is critically important, in order for companies to maximize the reach of their communication. If even a few additional fol-

lowers retweet the message, its audience can increase by thousands. Another important aspect of retweeting is that the follower who retweets adds credibility to the original tweet. In effect, a retweet can be considered prescreened, and the recipient may more likely to read the message because it was sent by someone familiar. Ideally, someone not following the brand on Twitter may like the content of the retweeted message and may convert into being a direct follower of the brand, thus extending the brand's network.

Given these reasons, we believe these simple best practices for Twitter messages will help companies extract more from their Twitter marketing efforts. Twitter as a marketing platform is in its infancy, and marketers will have to continue to experiment combining various content characteristics to increase the chances of their messages being retweeted (and re-retweeted). We hope to have provided the basic ingredients for such experiments.

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