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How to Use Twitter

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

Entertainment mogul Oprah Winfrey is doing it. So are husband-wife actors Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore. Ditto for CNN interviewer Larry King. Talk show host Jay Leno and I are not. I speak of using Twitter, the latest electronic communications craze sweeping the world.

Founded by Evan Williams and Biz Stone, the high-tech phenomenon now claims an estimated 25 million users in the United States alone. Note to readers: "Biz" is not a typo; that's the guy's name. Now instead of talking to the person standing next to you in the line in the company cafeteria or at the office copier, you can compose messages to individuals thousands of miles away whom you have never laid eyes on.

So how does Twitter differ from email and text messaging? For one thing, you have to limit your words of wisdom to 140 characters. For another, your messages go instantaneously to a mailing list composed of people called followers. Lastly, twittering – or tweeting as the verb is used by the cognizanti -- is the closest thing to real-time communication devised yet in the computer industry.

So why are Leno and I holding out? "I don't get Twitter," Leno recently said on NBC's The Tonight Show. "Considering all the ways we can actually talk to each other, isn't writing going a step backwards?" My sentiments exactly, with the add-on that my contacts want less, not more, to read and I want less, not more, to write. I'm happy to report that a few other people – some who signed on back in the early days in 2006 – are starting to have second thoughts about the time and effort involved in tweeting.

An article in the New York Times magazine: "Where once it was hypnotic and mesmerizing to read about a friend's fever or a cousin's job complaints, today the same kind of posts, from broader and broader audiences, seem threatening. Encroaching. Suffocating. Twitter may now be like a jam-packed, polluted city . . ." A quote from nouveau tweeter Winfrey from Associated Press: "I'm not sure I get it yet." A headline in USA Today: "Relationships are in a twist over Twitter. Glued to your gadget? You may be losing human links."

At some point, when I have a break in a heavy workload, I suspect I'll take a whirl at Twitter. I think it's probably a fun diversion, maybe like playing solitaire. But, as egotistical as I can be, I'm unable to imagine anyone other than my three dogs – who can't read -- being even remotely interested in banal transmissions such as "I'm working on my book today" or "I'm checking out the sales at King of Prussia Mall." Heck, even I'm not that interested in what I'm doing. Yet, according to people who have studied Twitter in depth, the practice appears to be a growing and useful business tool.

Just take a look at this passage from Joel Comm's new book "Twitter Power: How to Dominate Your Market One Tweet at a Time." "Twitter is both incredibly basic and incredibly powerful. Tweeters are using the service to network and have fun, but corporations, too, have found that microblogging can have a huge impact on the closeness of their communities, on the traffic they



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pick up on their Web sites, on their relationships with their customers, and on the reach of their brands.”

Having researched the need for in-person contact in a book I wrote a few years ago called “Face to Face Communication: Making Human Connections in a Technology-Driven World,” I offer you a few suggestions on your embrace of this new communications vehicle:

Avoid tweeting during conversations. If one of my friends or colleagues started tweeting instead of eating while we were supposedly engaged in serious conversation, I would get up and leave without a moment’s hesitation. I refuse to play second fiddle to someone who could be half way around the globe.

Turn off electronics at meetings. During President Barack Obama’s recent State of the Union speech, the news media observed several congressional members tweeting rather than listening. The culprits were held up to ridicule for bad manners, not praise for good technical skills.

Realize the super-public nature of Twitter. More than any other kind of electronic communication, stream-of-consciousness tweets instantly reach huge numbers of people. If you’re currently looking for a job, for example, I suggest you refrain from sending messages such as “The interviewer was a dope” or “How dare that company offer me such a pitiful salary.”

Beware of possible addiction. According to the highly respected tabloid National Enquirer – or was it the equally revered Globe – actress Jennifer Aniston broke up with singer John Mayer because he was too busy using Twitter to take her phone calls. Now that’s obsession – tweeting instead of talking to your sweetie.

Face the multitasking facts. Contrary to popular thinking, doing two equally important tasks at the same time slows you down, rather than speeds you up. Recent studies have shown this negative impact to be true among subjects of all ages and technological ability. So avoid falling into the trap that you can effectively analyze a strategic plan and tweet to your golfing buddies at the same time.

Regard the activity as a fun extra. Just like instant messaging and email, tweeting is a poor replacement for actual conversation – especially if you’re dealing with an issue involving a large amount of emotion, conflict, money, or power. If you hide behind electronics to avoid people, you might consider training in so-called soft skills such as overcoming shyness or handling conflict.

Create a Twitter free time zone. Years ago, I set Sunday as a day when I would try to avoid turning on my computer. Considering that I’m probably sorting e-mail even as you read this blogletter, I’ve been less than 100 percent successful. But at least I’m not frittering away all my time today with Twitter.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training outside Philadelphia. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody. If you feel you’ve become too busy to ever read this free, opt-in blogletter, please tell us to remove you from our mailing list. We’ll cheerfully delete you.