

Digital diary: How I learned to Twitter in 7 weeks

I stumbled onto Twitter as a marketing tool completely by accident. I was looking for a way to promote a book I'm working on, and a friend suggested that I do two things: Start a blog and get on Twitter.



ONLINE NETWORKING

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"What is Twitter? I don't get how will it help me promote my book to tell people what I am having for breakfast," I replied.

"It would take me too long to explain, just try it out," he said.

What follows here is a week-by-week review of how I learned that Twitter can be an important business-development tool for lawyers and law firms.

Week 1: Signing up

The sign-up at Twitter.com was just like everything else. I needed to add a picture — luckily, I was still holding on to the picture used for my attorney bio, so I uploaded that.

A bio. Usually I leave them blank, but this one was limited to 150 characters, so I wrote: "Father, husband, attorney, and aspiring author. Follow me as I work to get published."

I was pretty happy with myself — perfect bio for someone trying to get published. After I finished my profile, Twitter suggested that I start following a bunch of famous people like Ashton Krutcher and Shaquille O'Neal. Was it the real Shaq?

Turns out it was. These famous people have almost 80,000 people following them, and the truth is I just didn't get it.

Week 2: I start following people

I needed help finding some publishers to submit my manuscript to, so I used the Twitter search function. I searched using the term "publisher" and turned up about 50 results. So I started following all 50 of them.

Some were small publishers, some were big, but the cool part was that they were all posting stories and links all about writing and publishing — one of the articles was "10 Things Every Author Should Do Before Submitting a Manuscript." This was good stuff, exactly the types of things I needed to learn in my situation. I also realized that, as I started following people, the majority of them followed me back.

Now I had more than 30 followers. I was feeling pretty good.

Week 3: A fortuitous connection

Some total stranger was asking about my book — this was great. So I explained my book to him, and we chatted back and forth using Twitter's Direct Messages, which are kind of like an e-mail message or private messages on Facebook.

He was an author who has self-published in the past, and he gave me the phone number of one of the gurus of self-publishing. Out of the blue, I call this guy up, and he takes an hour and talks to me. He gives me advice and shares a few contacts with me.

Week 4: Spreading the message

When someone shares an interesting link to an article on Twitter or shares a good quote, it gets repeated. This is called a "retweet."

I noticed that whenever I posted articles, they never got retweeted. Why not? Because they weren't interesting enough.

So I started paying attention to the types of articles that were retweeted. Usually they announced breaking news or shared really interesting content on blogs, so I started trying to think of something to post on my blog that might garner some interest.

I posted a satirical response to an article one of my buddies from law school posted, and it spread like wildfire — or at least like a small brush fire.

I had 170 unique visitors to my blog in just an hour or two in response to that one post. That was fun but, more importantly, it made me realize the power of Twitter. Here I was with fewer than 100 followers, and my message spread well beyond that circle.

Week 5: My first corporate client

"Does anybody know an attorney that practices contract law?"

"Yeah, that's what actually what I do, what do you need?" I replied suspiciously.

"My friend needs some legal advice about a contract, could you talk to her?"

"Sure, send me a direct message with her contact info." After exchanging e-mail addresses and a few phone conversations, my firm had a new client. All our communication was exchanged over the phone and e-mail, and the retainer and payment were paid by credit card.

It was so easy, it made me realize that maybe there was more to Twitter than just promoting books. Maybe I could use Twitter to find clients.

You see, Twitter functions like a giant cocktail party where thousands of conversations are going on simultaneously. You can listen in on any conversation you please, you just

simply need to "follow" the individuals having the conversation. Unlike two other social-networking sites, Facebook and Myspace, you don't need to be accepted as someone's "friend" to listen in on their conversation. For example, if MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice (both of whom are on Twitter) are having a Twitter conversation, then you may listen in if you have a Twitter account — you can even try to add your own clever enough comment or question to be included in their discussion.

Week 6: Automated searches

Using the free program Tweetdeck, I set up searches so that every time someone mentioned "contract law" on Twitter, from anywhere in the world, their post was filtered through a search that arrived instantly on my computer. I soon learned how to create an alert that would send me an e-mail or text message any time the term "contract law" was mentioned in a Twitter post. That allowed me to respond in real time.

Return for a second to our cocktail-party analogy. Here you are at this gigantic cocktail party, and you overhear a conversation about contract law. "Excuse me, I couldn't help but overhear you are looking for a corporate attorney. Could I recommend someone?" And like that, a new relationship is created that is specifically targeted.

Here are a few of the comments I saw posted on Twitter after setting up my search:

- "I urgently need an immigration attorney, can anybody recommend one?"
- "My friend is getting a divorce, can anybody recommend an attorney?"
- "Does anybody know a NY attorney I can ask a malpractice question to?"

Week 7 & beyond: A world of opportunity

I have been on Twitter for 14 weeks. I have a large following now, but more importantly, I have learned some amazing tools that are helping me to expand my zone of influence beyond just Western New York. Every day I see potential leads — some of which I pass on or have to ignore because they are outside of my area of expertise.

There are some 12 million users of Twitter now, mostly highly educated people in urban centers, and they are talking about every single legal topic imaginable.

My recommendation for any lawyer? You just need to jump in and give it a try.

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