# The early bird catches the news: Nine things you should know about micro-blogging

**Andreas M. Kaplan***, **Michael Haenlein**

*ESCP Europe, Avenue de la République, F-75011 Paris, France*

**Abstract**    Micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk, Tumblr) are starting to become an established category within the general group of social media. Yet, while they rapidly gain interest among consumers and companies alike, there is no evidence to explain why anybody should be interested in an application that is limited to the exchange of short, 140-character text messages. To this end, our article intends to provide some insight. First, we demonstrate that the success of micro-blogs is due to the specific set of characteristics they possess: the creation of ambient awareness; a unique form of push-push-pull communication; and the ability to serve as a platform for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism. We then discuss how applications such as Twitter can generate value for companies along all three stages of the marketing process: pre-purchase (i.e., marketing research); purchase (i.e., marketing communications); and post-purchase (i.e., customer services). Finally, we present a set of rules—The Three Rs of Micro-Blogging: Relevance; Respect; Return—which companies should consider when relying on this type of application.
© 2010 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. All rights reserved.

## 1. The hare and the hedgehog: When Twitter's 'already here'

At 2:26 p.m. on June 25th, 2009, the world stood still for a split second when word spread that Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, might have died at the UCLA Medical Center from cardiac arrest. Naturally, millions of people rushed to Google News to verify whether this rumor was true, only to read: "We're sorry, but your query looks similar to automated requests from a computer virus or spyware application. To protect our users, we can't process your request right now." What happened? It turns out that the algorithms of the California-based search engine giant interpreted the flood of searches for the same keyword as a brute-force attack, and reacted according to standard protocols. Just 25 minutes later, Google realized that the queries were legitimate. In parallel, Google itself correctly reported that indeed Michael Jackson had died—on August 30th, 2007, roughly 2 years earlier, making reference to a Wikipedia article about a British author of the same name.

It seems fair to say that Michael Jackson's death was not the best day in the history of Google, a firm

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* mail@andreaskaplan.eu (A.M. Kaplan),
haenlein@escpeurope.eu (M. Haenlein).

that has built its reputation on providing results of outstanding relevance, maximum accuracy, and impressive timeliness. June 25th, 2009, was a great day for the micro-blogging application Twitter, though: short messages dealing with the breaking news started to appear only minutes after the event actually happened, and tweets were exchanged at a rate of 100,000 per hour. According to the Twitter tracking tool Trendistic, by 12 a.m. the next day, an impressive 22.6% of all posts included the term 'Michael Jackson.' Add to this the 8.7% including 'MJ' and some share of the 25.8% including 'Michael,' and it implies that roughly one-third of all tweets of that day dealt in one way or another with the death of the pop icon.

But Twitter is not only used to exchange recent 'yellow press' news or to speak about trivialities. It is also an important channel for more serious matters, such as politics. On June 12th, 2009, Iran's tenth presidential election took place with incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad running against reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. To prevent protesters from sharing footage of related police violence in the streets of Tehran, the authorities decided to interrupt mobile phone communications and block popular social media applications such as Facebook and YouTube. Yet, they forgot about Twitter, the vehicle which subsequently facilitated global sharing of hundreds of photos of demonstrations and protesters. The resulting traffic was so important that Twitter even decided to reschedule a long-planned maintenance shut-down in order to preserve access to the application; rumor has it that the U.S. State Department played a role in this decision.

These examples illustrate the wild popularity and potential of an application that few of us may have heard of 6 months ago, but which today is one of the most up-to-date dinner conversation topics: Twitter. Twitter is undoubtedly the most popular member of a larger group of Internet-based applications called *micro-blogs*, which allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links. Micro-blogs in turn belong to the big family of *social media*, which can be defined as the "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). On the continuum of social media classification, micro-blogs stand halfway between traditional blogs and social networking sites, and are characterized by a high degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a medium to low degree of social presence/media richness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Other well-known micro-blogging sites include the Finnish

Jaiku, Plurk (particularly popular in Taiwan and Southeast Asia), and the New York-based Tumblr.

Although only a few years old, Twitter—founded in October 2006, roughly 2½ years after Facebook—has become one of the major players in the social media industry. The number of Twitter accounts reached 75 million by the end of 2009, with a growth rate of approximately 6.2 million new users per month, or 2-3 per second. Even though 80% of accounts should be considered inactive, these numbers are still impressive. Moreover, despite what one might expect, Twitter users are not primarily teens or college students. According to Forrester Research, more than one-third of all Tweeters are 35 years and older, with an average household income of $85,000 per year. Coupled with the medium's focus on up-to-date information, this interesting demographic profile has resulted in more companies utilizing Twitter, including publishing houses (e.g., *The New York Times*), grocery retailers (e.g., Whole Foods Market), and even Google itself.

## 2. Nine things you should know about micro-blogging

### 2.1. Going once—Characteristics

At first glance, it probably seems counterintuitive that an application limited to the exchange of text-based messages of 140 characters or less should be of interest to anyone. After all, even the 160 signs of a traditional SMS give more room for personal self-expression. Yet still, micro-blogs are growing at a rate that makes most other industries look tiny in comparison. Based on our research, we have identified three factors that can explain this apparent contradiction: the concept of ambient awareness that implies being updated about even the most trivial matters in other peoples' lives; the unique type of push—push—pull communication that applications like Twitter allow; and the platform for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism they provide for both active contributors and passive observers. Let's look at each of these three factors in more detail.

### 2.1.1. Ambient awareness

The first reason that accounts for the huge success of micro-blogging can be related back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who wrote in his book *Metaphysics* that sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While the messages "Need to rush to the drug store" or "Have to get some crackers and soda from Wal-Mart" may be completely insignificant on their own, they become important pieces

of information when preceded by "Little Joe is feeling ill this morning." In combination, different tweets sent out over time can paint a very accurate picture of a person's activities, just like the distinct dots in a pointillist painting can collectively create the beautiful images of a Vincent van Gogh, John Roy, or Chuck Close.

From an academic perspective, this concept is called *ambient awareness*. Just as physical proximity allows one's mood to be interpreted through a series of little behaviors (e.g., body language, sighs, stray comments), several tweets together can generate a strong feeling of closeness and intimacy. Due to ambient awareness, applications such as Twitter result in relatively high levels of *social presence*, defined as the acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be achieved between two individuals (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976); and *media richness*, defined as the amount of information that can be transmitted in a given time interval (Daft & Lengel, 1986). This is why micro-blogs should be considered as mid-ground between traditional blogs and social networking sites within the general classification of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Ambient awareness is a far from new concept, having been discussed long before Twitter was invented. It links back to the idea of 'cooperative buildings' (Streitz, Konomi, & Burkhardt, 1998) in which physical devices (e.g., fountains) actively reflect the status of some metric of interest (e.g., how well a computer system is working). More recently, the idea has been extended to other areas, such as cooperative work and romantic relationships. Here, it has been shown that 'awareness systems'—which allow people at different locations to maintain similar levels of awareness of each others' activities and status as can be achieved when physically in the same room—can lead to increased effectiveness, stronger social relationships, and overall improved well-being (Markopoulos, de Ruyter, & Mackay, 2007). In some cases, mobile phone text messages exchanged by couples to give short updates about their activities and whereabouts are considered even more intimate than traditional phone calls (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005). One key characteristic of Twitter is, therefore, the ability to tell the world what you are doing at a particular moment—in the desire to be closely connected to your loved ones, no matter where they may be physically.

### 2.1.2. Push—Push—Pull communication
The second reason behind the popularity of micro-blogs is the unique type of communication they allow. Once a user considers the tweets of another person as particularly relevant or interesting, she can decide to become a 'follower' of that person. Following implies that one author's tweets are automatically pushed onto the Twitter main page of all followers. The average Twitter user appears to follow a dozen others, although official statistics are hard to find. Nevertheless, celebrities such as the American actor Ashton Kutcher can have millions of people following them. All messages exchanged on micro-blogs are public by default, which means that they can be read and commented on by everyone; this represents an important difference as compared to status updates on social networking sites such as Facebook. Nevertheless, following another user creates an additional element of convenience as it reduces the effort associated with accessing this information.

In many cases, the information pushed to a user's followers may be read and immediately forgotten; in other cases, it may not even be read at all. Given that tweets are not directed to one particular user but to the whole world, each individual follower feels a much weaker urge to react than—for example—in the case of a traditional e-mail. But in some cases, the receiver of the message might find the news so interesting and intriguing that they decide to give it an additional push by re-tweeting it to their own followers. The initial tweet can then cascade down from one user's follower network to another's, and on the way transform from a simple bit of information to word-of-mouth. Specifically, when the initial message has been sent out by a company, this transformation of a commercial message into 'buzz' can substantially increase its impact and credibility (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

In a last step, once the message has been pushed and pushed again through the whole network, it may motivate some user to go out and 'pull' additional information on the subject from other sources. Given that 140 characters are often too few to explain a topic in sufficient detail, many tweets include links to web pages or traditional blogs where more information is available. In order to avoid using up too much space by sending out a URL, these tweets usually rely on URL shortening services (whereby a provider makes a web page available under a very short URL in addition to the original address). In this case, micro-blogging messages become similar to traditional banner ads, which equally try to motivate users to click on an embedded link. As shown in several research studies, such 'click-through' can have a favorable impact on consumer behavior (Manchanda, Dube, Goh, & Chintagunta, 2006). Another key characteristic of micro-blogging is, therefore, the unique combination of push—push—pull communication from sender

to followers, from followers to followers, and from receivers to external information sources.

### 2.1.3. Virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism

As mentioned, tweets are public by default unless a user specifically requests that only approved followers can read the messages; this happens very rarely. Additionally, searches conducted through Google since July 2009 automatically include dynamic content streams, such as live updates on micro-blogs or up-to-the-second news headlines. Any message sent through Twitter therefore automatically becomes public knowledge within minutes of its publication. This creates the perfect environment for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism, and it should come as no surprise that these two factors represent the third reason behind growth of micro-blogging applications. Empirical proof for this statement can be found by considering the popularity of reality television programs. Anybody who has spent time watching *Big Brother* or *The Simple Life* will be able to confirm that people are more likely to watch reality programs when they have a higher voyeuristic tendency caused by factors such as the disclosure of personal information, gossip, and private emotions, as well as sexual behavior and nudity. Academic research has confirmed these commonly-held beliefs (Baruh, 2009).

Two different theoretical perspectives can explain such behavior: self-presentation and self-disclosure, and indeterminacy. *Self-presentation and self-disclosure* contends that every individual continuously engages in strategic activities to convey an impression to others which is in his or her self-interest (Goffman, 1959). Self-disclosure is one of the reasons why people create personal web pages (Schau & Gilly, 2003), and it has been shown that computer-mediated environments lead to higher levels of self-disclosure than traditional settings (Joinson, 2001). For its part, *indeterminacy* (Vosgerau, Wertenbroch, & Carmon, 2006) states that indeterminate consumption experiences—such as watching sports competitions live on television or reading real-time micro-blog entries—unfold in ways that are not decided ex ante. This makes them more exciting than equivalent determinate experiences, such as watching the same sports competitions as recorded broadcasts or reading the same messages one day later.

Micro-blogs are therefore the perfect tool for anonymous voyeurism and keeping updated regarding friends and family without feeling an obligation to react or respond—just like the proverbial 'fly on the wall.' The significant attraction that this represents can be illustrated by the fact that most Twitter users observe, rather than contribute. The median number of lifetime messages per Twitter user is one, implying that 50% of all accounts are exclusively used for passive observation. At the same time, the top 10% of active Twitter users account for over 90% of all tweets. This is very different from other social media applications, where usually the top 10% most active users account for 30% or less of all content. To put it differently, Twitter is like a huge one-way mirror which allows millions of people to sit on one side and watch the day-to-day lives of a select few who have decided to share their each and every move with the whole world.

## 2.2. Going twice—Applications

Having explained why micro-blogs are popular, it is now important to discuss how they can be of benefit to companies. To facilitate this discussion, we systematically analyzed the Twitter activities of a selected group of leading firms in various different industries. We started with a ranking of the 100 largest Twitter accounts based on total number of followers as published by Twitterholic. Removal of all accounts that (1) did not represent corporations, but individuals (e.g., Ashton Kutcher, Britney Spears, Ellen DeGeneres); (2) corresponded to traditional media companies that use Twitter mainly as a news ticker (e.g., CNN, *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*); and (3) were maintained by non-profit organizations (e.g., the World Economic Forum) resulted in a total of five companies that we analyzed in more detail: Google, Dell, Whole Foods Market, Zappos.com, and JetBlue Airways. Looking at these firms shows that Twitter can be used for all three stages of the marketing process: pre-purchase (i.e., marketing research); purchase (i.e., marketing communications, especially sales promotions); and post-purchase (i.e., customer services). We will now discuss each of these areas in more detail.

### 2.2.1. Pre-purchase: Marketing research

One obvious way that companies can use micro-blogging is to simply read what clients have to say. Historically, marketing researchers have always struggled to integrate customers into their decision-making processes. At the same time, the concepts of customer knowledge as a source of competitive advantage and the importance of customers as co-producers have become increasingly prominent in the academic literature (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Social media in general and micro-blogs in particular provide the potential to easily obtain customer feedback. In terms of marketing research, they have the potential to take netnography—that is, ethnography adapted to the study of online communities

(Kozinets, 2002)—to the next level. Since they do not rely on the analysis of traditional newsgroups that summarize conversations and comments building up over time, but instead allow investigation of what customers are talking about at that very moment, they provide a unique type of information.

A good example of how this approach can be implemented in real life comes from computer manufacturer Dell. The company has created a team called Communities and Conversations, which involves about 40 employees. Members of this team, who would not normally interact with clients (e.g., Finance, HR, Purchasing, Shipping, Logistics), have the opportunity via this channel to engage in conversations with Dell's end customers. These employees then carry that customer-centered viewpoint back to their departmental colleagues, a feedback cycle that moves the whole organization closer to the market. According to Richard Binhammer, the person behind Dell's social media strategy, Twitter provides a unique forum to hear what customers have to say and to fix customer problems—free of the accusation of digital assault often associated with other types of unsolicited company—customer communication (e.g., phone calls, e-mail spam).

For example, by systematically analyzing what its customers were saying via Twitter and other micro-blogs, Dell realized that the apostrophe and return keys on its newly-launched Inspiron Mini 9 laptop were located too close together. Dell subsequently addressed this problem, which might never have come to light using more traditional marketing research techniques, in its design of the next-generation Inspiron Mini 10. Consider also Starbucks, which closely monitored and managed Twitter during the introduction of its Via instant coffee product in October 2009. By actively listening and participating in conversations about Via, Starbucks helped get samples of the new product into people's hands in order to enable trials. According to Brad Nelson, principal tweeter for the coffeehouse chain, this made it possible for consumers to get over the initial common reaction that instant coffee must necessarily be distasteful.

### 2.2.2. Purchase: Marketing communications

Another form of utilizing micro-blogging entails tweeting advertising and other brand-reinforcing messages, especially ones that need to be acted upon quickly (e.g., sales promotions). The five companies in our study all rely on Twitter in this manner, one way or another. Google maintains separate channels for all of its major products (e.g., iGoogle, Google Calendar, Google Reader) to update followers about new developments. Similarly, Whole Foods Market uses Twitter to broadcast information about special promotions, product recalls, and health tips. It also connects with customers by awarding the Tweet of the Day four times per week—the best tweet made about Whole Foods on any given day receives a $25 gift card—and organizing contests, such as encouraging customers to tweet their "five word food philosophies" and awarding the 10 most creative authors with a $50 Whole Foods voucher and 5 pounds of quinoa.

JetBlue Airways has a more bottom-line oriented approach regarding micro-blogging activities, and uses Twitter as a sales and distribution channel. Every Monday morning, the company sends out its weekly 'cheeps': Twitter messages about special low prices on available seats on flights the following weekend. These promotions are exclusively available on Twitter and typically expire at the end of the day; however, most of these attractive deals are snagged within hours, so potential customers either need to be glued to their screens or have perfect timing—which keeps things interesting. Morgan Johnston, manager of corporate communications at JetBlue, says that in addition to filling empty seats, cheeps represent a great way of introducing new customers to the airline. For its part, United Airlines employs a similar strategy, calling its offerings 'twares.'

Micro-blogging is not only suited to communicate externally with potential or current customers, but also internally with one's employees. Online retailer Zappos.com asks all new recruits to open a Twitter account and post messages throughout the initial training session. According to Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos and himself a big fan of Twitter, this is to empower employees with the understanding that everyone in the company can act as a spokesperson for the firm. Hsieh even wrote a beginner's quick start guide and tutorial to using Twitter, which is published on the company's web page.

### 2.2.3. Post-purchase: Customer services

Finally, firms can rely on micro-blogs to improve their customer service and complaint management processes. The power of word-of-mouth has been discussed widely and regularly in the marketing literature. While research has shown the desirable effects of positive feedback and recommendations (Reichheld, 2003), it has also underlined the devastating impact that negative customer comments can have on a company (Goldenberg, Libai, Moldovan, & Muller, 2007; Richins, 1983). Firms should therefore manage dissatisfied and complaining customers rapidly and professionally. As old industry wisdom dictates, there is nothing better to create a loyal client than an efficiently-managed customer complaint. Also, by handling dissatisfied customers as early as

possible, firms can avoid issues growing out of proportion and evolving into organized forms of customer protest, such as consumer boycotts (Garrett, 1987) or complaint websites (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Whole Foods Market, Dell, and JetBlue Airways all use micro-blogging in this specific fashion.

According to Slaton Carter, online community development manager at Whole Foods, the grocer analyzes Twitter daily to identify issues and negative comments raised by its customers. Followers can send out questions about Whole Foods or the company's products, queries which are answered within 24 hours. Alternatively, if some clients are, for example, referring to Whole Foods as 'Whole Paycheck'—a nickname for the company that makes reference to the firm's upscale positioning and high prices—Carter tries to engage in a conversation with them to better understand the underlying concerns resulting in the negative impression. Similarly, computer manufacturer Dell maintains over 80 separate branded Twitter accounts, most of which are private (i.e., by invitation only) and used for customer service exchanges that require direct and personalized messages that cannot be exchanged using Dell's public channel. Up to 200 Dell employees regularly use these accounts for conversations with their customers.

In a similar manner, JetBlue Airways systematically monitors and scans Twitter to identify customers who might need proactive management and additional information on flight delays or cancellations. Tony Wagner, a JetBlue customer, for example tweeted his request to be able to sit with his wife and 2-year-old daughter on a flight to San Francisco which customer services was unable to fulfill (''Advice to get both parents and 2 yr old seated next to each other on flight later today? Right now only one parent. Full flight.''). Not 20 minutes later, JetBlue sent Wagner a note asking for additional details and subsequently flagged his ticket as a priority concern. As Brad Nelson from Starbucks puts it: ''Don't be afraid of unhappy customers. If you say the wrong thing, don't ignore it or cover it up, admit your mistake and move on. Don't under-estimate the goodwill that can be created by showing you're listening'' (Carter, 2009).

## 2.3. Going three times—Rules

Given the unique characteristics of micro-blogs and the large spectrum of applications they offer for companies, many firms are seriously considering becoming active in this new type of social media. If your company is part of this faction, be aware that Twitter does not come without its own risks and that the power of the system can quickly turn against you. To avoid a situation whereby 'the spirits that you called' treat you in an unexpected way—à la the Sorcerer's Apprentice—we have derived three rules of successful micro-blogging. We call them The Three Rs of Micro-Blogging: Relevance; Respect; and Return.

### 2.3.1. Relevance
The first rule of micro-blogging is to focus on messages that are relevant for the target group. Users are unlikely to read, let alone re-tweet, boring information. Relevance is therefore necessary to leverage the push—push—pull communication characteristics of this type of medium. If firms do not respect this rule and instead flood their followers with off-the-shelf advertising slogans, they will soon see readers leave in droves. In this context, relevance implies two things: (1) listening before tweeting, and (2) finding the right balance between sending out too few messages and tweeting too many of them. One method of increasing relevance involves focusing on information that needs to be reacted upon quickly; for example, the aforementioned case of sales promotions. Another alternative entails relying on highly customized messages; for example, Whole Foods maintains separate Twitter channels for followers with differing interests, including one channel devoted entirely to people interested in cheese.

Many examples illustrate that even prestigious companies fail when they do not follow the simple rule of relevance. Consider online retailer Amazon.com. Rather than using Twitter as a channel to interact with its customers, Amazon employs a 'bot'—an automated software tool—that tweets random excerpts from the firm's U.S. blog. These messages, which add little value beyond that of a standard RSS feed, show no signs of 'listening' to followers and are therefore only of limited effectiveness. Another example is the French reality TV show *Secret Story* (similar in concept to *Big Brother*), which used Twitter to send out status updates on its participants in 30-second intervals; even the most interested spectator might get annoyed by receiving 1,000 tweets per day!

Starbucks, however, has gotten the Twitter equation just right. The coffeehouse chain regularly encourages its roughly 300,000 followers to send out ideas and comments. Using the 'My Starbucks Idea' channel, customers can propose modifications regarding the company's product and service offerings. Other users can then read the ideas and vote in favor of, or against, them. The most popular suggestions are subsequently implemented by Starbucks. ''Many times I've had to inform people within the company that micro-blogging isn't an advertising channel and

they can't just send me 140 characters to post,'' says Brad Nelson, principal tweeter for Starbucks. ''Twitter isn't for distributing press releases; it's a way to talk with customers, not at them'' (Carter, 2009). Service innovations such as offering a free birthday beverage for all registered cardholders or increasing store density in the Netherlands have been claimed to stem directly from the My Starbucks Idea initiative.

### 2.3.2. Respect

The second rule of successful micro-blogging is to show respect to your followers. This implies correctly identifying yourself, using appropriate language, and refraining from deceiving other users. Computer manufacturer Dell, for example, has defined strict guidelines for using social media applications. Among other criteria, the firm asks each and every employee to be transparent and to disclose their employment with Dell in all communications. It is important to note that transparency must extend both ways to be effective. When low-cost airline easyJet decided to join Twitter, the firm realized that some other user already posted regularly under the pseudonym 'Easy Jet Service.' Unfortunately, this was not an eager employee who took things into their own hands, but rather a frustrated customer who used the channel to vent his or her dissatisfaction. The company has now created the account 'easyJet Care' and is trying to limit the damage to its reputation.

Concerning the use of appropriate language, Whole Foods Market learned the hard way that it may be possible to be too casual with one's followers, especially if representing an upscale brand. In late August 2008, an official spokesperson of the Texas-based foods grocer tweeted ''Oh my f'ing gawd: Whole Foods has Hatch Chiles. From NM. On sale. Apparently I have died, but am not as evil as I thought.'' This message prompted outrage and discussion regarding the appropriate use of language in social media. Although Whole Foods tried to proactively manage the issue by sending out a reply message asking its customers whether they actually were offended by this post, discussions did not stop and the Whole Foods case became the key topic at the kick-off meeting of the Social Media Club Miami.

Finally, companies should not try to deceive or outsmart other users, at the risk of the community turning and fighting against them. In June 2009, UK-based furniture retailer Habitat launched a series of tweets to inform followers about new products available in its stores, hoping to increase traffic on its Internet site. To heighten awareness of its messages, the company tagged its tweets with keywords related to the Iranian presidential election—one of the hottest Twitter topics at that time. Soon, however, Habitat's followers realized the betrayal

and consequently criticized the firm for spamming Twitter. Although Habitat posted an official apology on Twitter (''We've been listening and we know 140 characters aren't enough for a full apology, please follow this link. . .'') and blamed an overenthusiastic intern for the issue, the company has not actively used Twitter since then.

### 2.3.3. Return

Last but not least, firms that use micro-blogging should also pay close attention to the benefits and return-on-investment of their activities. Ultimately, engaging in Twitter only makes sense when it serves as a marketplace for your company, not as a playground. Should you believe that hard numbers and social media don't go together, think again and consider Dell. As previously mentioned, the role of the 40 employees involved with the Communities and Conversations team includes—among other things—engaging with customers and stakeholders via Twitter. Dell contends that these micro-blogging activities alone have generated an additional $7 million in sales. While this may seem small compared to the computer manufacturer's total revenue of $60 billion, it's certainly a promising sign that using social media can indeed generate measurable returns.

Nevertheless, in many cases it may be difficult or even impossible to put a hard dollar value on micro-blogging. In these situations, other types of measures might be more appropriate, and several companies provide such information—often free of charge. Twitalyzer, for example, determines a series of metrics such as a user's impact (a combination of the number of followers and the frequency with which the user tweets, re-tweets, and is re-tweeted) or Twitter ratio (the ratio of followers to people the user is following). Tweet Beep measures the number of times a company or brand name has been mentioned on Twitter, and sends out regular e-mail alerts ranging from once every 15 minutes to once an hour. And Twit Truth can tell—for each Twitter user—the number of messages sent to this user per day, the number of replies this user sends, and to what extent these replies go to other famous Twitter users.

Pages such as Graph Edge calculate how fast your follower network is growing or shrinking, who your most influential followers are, and how to reach them most efficiently. It hereby limits itself to 'legitimate followers,' which excludes people who follow more than 2,000 other users or who have been suspended by Twitter and therefore cannot read your messages. Finally, firms such as Tweet Psych create psychological profiles of any Twitter account by using a combination of Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) and Regressive Imagery Dictionary (RID) techniques. The list of suppliers is

endless and should be checked out thoroughly; there's certainly some company that can provide exactly the type of data your firm is looking for.

Combined with traditional e-commerce measures, such as click-through rates for promotional URLs, these metrics make it possible for any company to determine its own 'Return-on-Twitter.'

## 3. And so it happened that the hedgehog ran the hare to death. . .

The Global Language Monitor selected 'Twitter' as the top word of 2009, based on its frequency, contextual usage, and appearance in global media outlets. Followed by 'Obama' and 'H1N1,' the term was chosen because it represents the ability to encapsulate human thought in 140 characters. According to Paul JJ Payack, President of The Global Language Monitor, ''being limited to strict formats did wonders for the sonnet and haiku. One wonders where this highly impractical word-limit will lead as the future unfolds'' (Global Language Monitor, 2009). Based on our analysis, it should be clear that such reactions are not merely driven by the hype which so often surrounds new forms of communication; rather, micro-blogging can truly create tangible benefits for firms. While not without risks and pitfalls, Twitter and micro-blogging seem poised to enter the mainstream social media, much as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Second Life did years ago.

Many organizations have already realized this potential and have responded to this evolution. In posting a job opening for a senior manager in emerging media, U.S. electronics retailer Best Buy dictated that qualified candidates must have at least 200 Twitter followers. Similarly, Pizza Hut looked to fill the novel position of 'twintern'—a summer intern whose main job it would be to tweet about the company—and received over 400 applications. Even the White House—or, more precisely, Organizing for America, the successor organization of Obama for America—is hiring a Social Networks Manager, responsible for maintaining its accounts on several social networks including Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

Yet, while these companies are trying to prepare themselves for the first generation of micro-blogging, the second generation is already on its way. Since November 2009, Twitter has enabled users to merge into their messages the location from which they are tweeting. This combination of geotagging and micro-blogging allows users to engage in local conversations and, for example, find out what live music is playing in the neighborhood and what people are saying

about it. Twitter will also soon be accessible via mobile phone SMS services in Europe, a functionality that is already enabled in the United States. During the last quarter of 2008, 812,000 unique users sent or received Twitter text messages from AT&T or Verizon cell phones in the U.S., with an average of nearly 240 tweets per person and quarter—or 2.5 tweets per second per day.

Nevertheless, micro-blogging is still in its infancy and many questions need to be answered before we fully understand this new medium. One open issue deals with privacy. How can companies best make use of such applications without giving the impression that they monitor all their customers and try to brainwash those who might hold a negative opinion about the firm? Another point is whether corporate Twitter channels should be managed by the company itself (as practiced by Dell and Starbucks) or associated with a related prominent individual (e.g., David Neeleman, Jet-Blue Founder and CEO, who tweets all JetBlue messages himself). Finally, more analysis is needed to learn how micro-blogging should be integrated into an overall social media communication strategy. Should it be a separate contact channel, or a tool to drive traffic to other applications such as corporate web pages or blogs?

It is also necessary to realize that even if companies use micro-blogs with the best of intentions, they cannot always avoid undesirable outcomes. In May 2009, Starbucks launched a campaign encouraging customers to Twitter pictures of themselves in front of the company's new billboards. Film producer and political activist Robert Greenwald saw this as an opportunity to promote his latest documentary movie about unfair labor practices at the coffeehouse chain, and urged people to take photos of themselves in front of Starbucks stores holding signs criticizing the company's practices instead. Numerous individuals responded to Greenwald's plea, and soon approximately half of the photos distributed on Twitter were in a sense very different from those initially intended by Starbucks. Despite such risks, though, one thing seems certain: Firms which decide not to even consider using micro-blogs in their marketing strategy might find themselves in the same position as the hare at the end of the race with a couple of hedgehogs—dead on the ground!

## References

Baruh, L. (2009). Publicized intimacies on reality television: An analysis of voyeuristic content and its contribution to the appeal of reality programming. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 53*(2), 190—210.

Carter, M. (2009, February 19). Brands and Twitter. *New Media Age*. Retrieved from http://www.nma.co.uk/features/brands-and-twitter/41562.article

Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness, and structural design. *Management Science, 32*(5), 554—571.

Garrett, D. E. (1987). The effectiveness of marketing policy boycotts: Environmental opposition to marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 51*(2), 46—57.

Global Language Monitor. (2009, November 29). *Top words of 2009*. Retrieved from http://www.languagemonitor.com/news/top-words-of-2009/

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Press.

Goldenberg, J., Libai, B., Moldovan, S., & Muller, E. (2007). The NPV of bad news. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 24*(3), 186—200.

Ito, M., Okabe, D., & Matsuda, M. (2005). *Personal, portable, pedestrian: Mobile phones in Japanese life*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self-awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 31*(2), 177—192.

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media *Business Horizons, 53*(1), 59—68.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research, 39*(1), 61—72.

Manchanda, P., Dube, J-P., Goh, K. Y., & Chintagunta, P. K. (2006). The effect of banner advertising on Internet purchasing. *Journal of Marketing Research, 43*(1), 98—108.

Markopoulos, P., de Ruyter, B., & Mackay, W. (2007). Introduction to this special issue on awareness systems design. *Human-Computer Interaction, 22*(1), 1—6.

Reichheld, F. F. (2003). The one number you need to grow. *Harvard Business Review, 81*(12), 46—54.

Richins, M. L. (1983). Negative word-of-mouth by dissatisfied customers: A pilot study. *Journal of Marketing, 47*(1), 68—78.

Schau, H. J., & Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research, 30*(3), 385—404.

Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunications*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Streitz, N. A., Konomi, S. I., & Burkhardt, H-J. (1998). *Cooperative buildings: Integrating information, organization, and architecture*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 68*(1), 1—17.

Vosgerau, J., Wertenbroch, K., & Carmon, Z. (2006). Indeterminacy and live television. *Journal of Consumer Research, 32*(4), 487—495.

Ward, J. C., & Ostrom, A. L. (2006). Complaining to the masses: The role of protest framing in customer-created complaint web sites. *Journal of Consumer Research, 33*(2), 220—230.