



PRACTICE BRIEFING

Getting started with Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Twitter is an online social networking service where users publicly send and receive text-based messages of up to 280 characters. Established in 2006, Twitter is now one of the 10 most-visited sites on the internet.

Like all social networking services, Twitter can be used by businesses, organisations and individuals to promote awareness of their presence. It is frequently used to make announcements and to comment on current events and political matters to direct people to information which may be of use to them.

The information in this Practice Briefing is based on the New Zealand Law Society's experience in setting up and operating a Twitter account.

HOW BIG IS TWITTER?

As of the first quarter of 2017, the service averaged 328 million monthly active users and this number keeps growing.

The United States has the most Twitter users, followed by the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

New Zealand statistics show that 44% of businesses here use Twitter either 'regularly' or 'sometimes'. However, Facebook and LinkedIn are more popular forms of communication here with 88% of New Zealand businesses using Facebook and 63% for LinkedIn according to the New Zealand Business Social Media Survey Report 2016.

WHY USE TWITTER?

Twitter has become a popular tool for networking, brand promotion and yes, entertaining rants.

For lawyers it is a chance to interact with colleagues and potential clients (in a public domain), hear about breaking news and recent developments in their field, discuss various issues and topics, and to promote themselves or their firm or employing organisation. It allows someone to talk about their profession in a more laid-back manner and is also a good way to keep informed about organisations that use Twitter to promote their business.

The 280-Character Limit

This sounds small, but a lot of information can be communicated within the limit.

The Hashtag Thing

Hashtags act as a *metadata* tag - a way of linking your tweet to a certain Twitter trend. For example, if you were to include #ABs during an All Blacks game, your tweet would appear in that trend if someone was to search the hashtag and you would be able to communicate with those also using that hashtag. If you were to include something along the lines of #nzpol or #nzlaw, then your tweet would appear in that trend and be seen by those like-minded tweeters.

Any Negatives?

Be careful about what you tweet. Unless your account is set to 'private', anyone can see your postings. As we see on a regular basis, one wrong tweet could create a wave of bad attention. Most professionals will include in their profile a blurb like "views are my own, not that of my employer" to avoid any embarrassment or litigious attention.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Go to twitter.com Hit the 'sign up' button and follow the prompts, entering your name, email address, choose a password, and decide on your username.

The username you choose is worth a bit of thought. How do you want your audience to think of you? If you work for a law firm or employer with a long name, how can you shorten it and remain identifiable?

Read the "terms of service" or at least try to, and click on the "Create my account" button.

You're now licensed to tweet.

SOME THINGS TO BE AWARE OF

The experiences of others are always good to draw on. Since Aotearoa has such a small audience, negative tweets are more likely to be picked up - as we have seen in the past with some lawyers and businesses.

The @nzlawsociety Twitter account (twitter.com/nzlawsociety) has drawn a solid and ever-growing band of followers. However, we put a strategy in place before establishing the account.

We defined our Twitter policy to create consistency across the board with our other social media accounts. The social media advisor also worked closely with the communications and website monitoring teams, and the sections that had a social media presence. It is a good idea to do this before you start voicing things in a public sphere.

We followed these steps:

- » What is your purpose?
- » What is your tone?

- » What do you want to communicate?
- » How will you decide if your use of Twitter achieves that purpose?
- » If your organisation is involved, who will manage the Twitter account?
- » Who will monitor it?

Decide early on how to deal with trouble

Many Twitter users utilise social media to criticise people or ask for things you can't or don't want to provide. You need to decide how/if you want to interact with comments and users.

- » Do you want to respond?
- » Should a response be done via more private channels?
- » Do you want to implement account blocking or just delete the comment?

It's best to decide this before issues occur.

The person managing the account must be someone who can (and is trusted to) speak for the organisation.

They need to be sufficiently senior, know what not to talk about and how to recognise and escalate potentially difficult situations. A social media skillset will be valuable too, you don't want someone who has never interacted with a social media platform before.

Deciding tone – choosing whether you want to have a responsive, chatty account or a broadcast account.

Will you actively participate in public conversations, or will you limit yourself to sending out crafted messages that don't invite response? Decide which is more appropriate for your firm or organisation and be consistent. You may decide that you want to do both – in which case consider multiple accounts so that you can have a different communication style in each.

Be consistent and authentic – but maintain a single organisational tone and voice.

This is especially important if you have more than one person managing an account.

Agree on a succession plan.

If the person handling your account is sick, goes on holiday or resigns, who will be able to step in and keep the account going?

Think broadly about the interests of your followers and the people you want to target.

Spend time thinking about the sort of information you will be tweeting. What will be of use to them in their business? What might they like to know? What won't be of use or interest to them?

If you have other communications channels – such as a website, a regular newsletter, a Facebook page – make sure they all work together.

Alert people to new website updates via Twitter, refer to your Twitter account in your

newsletters, make sure you have a Twitter link on your website.

Retweet.

This is a good way to show followers that there is a person behind your account, assessing and selecting content. It also shows that you're reading what they say.

Follow relevant hashtags and conferences and retweet from there.

This way people who are following the hashtag will find you.

Watch who is following you and what they like.

Your audience will probably change over time if people find your account interesting and useful. They will let others know, and those others may have slightly different interests and expectations.

Be respectful.

Don't tweet for the sake of it. People (especially other lawyers) have a lot of information to choose from. Make sure that if someone clicks on your link they will get something out of it. Think about the impression someone will get if they access an article.

Monitoring information and statistics is important to keep up to date with your followers and whether or not your approach is working. Keep a check on the size of your following, but don't expect rapid growth. Aim for small but steady growth - 10 new followers a week is 500 a year.

Decide whether you want to follow.

Do you want to follow all the people who follow you, or only those who interest you. A common sign of influence is the number of followers an account has in relation to those it follows: if you are being followed by more accounts than you are following, you are more likely to be considered influential.

Make sure you know what your followers are talking about.

Twitter is where the news breaks. You don't want to be tweeting yesterday's news or trying to start a discussion that was over weeks ago. Think before you launch a tweet to the waiting world - much the same way you would do in a social situation or workplace where you take time to get a feel for what is going on before starting to interact.

Spam exists.

Twitter has spam, just as it does everywhere else. If you suspect a follower is a spammer (for example, they may have a user photo that looks uncomfortably suggestive, or their tweets only ever present dodgy-looking content), consider blocking or reporting them to Twitter. Also, make sure you have a strong Twitter password to prevent people guessing it and using your account to spam your followers.

In the beginning, your Twitter experience will involve a bit of trial and error. You may not find a rhythm for a while, but don't be concerned or disheartened.

The most important thing to remember is that this is a public platform and that the internet

is forever. You cannot edit a tweet, you can only delete it, and it only takes a few seconds for people to take a screenshot and post it to the world.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER INFORMATION

The Government Social Media webkit is an excellent guide to practices and policies: webtoolkit.govt.nz/guideance/social-media/

This is written for government agencies and employees, but the advice it gives is appropriate for a risk-adverse law firm.

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Information in the Practice Briefing series is provided by the Law Society as a service to members. This briefing is intended to provide guidance and information on best practices. Some of the information and requirements may change over time and should be checked before any action is taken.

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