

Getting started with Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Twitter is an online social networking service. Users send and receive text-based messages of up to 140 characters. Twitter began in 2006 and is now one of the 10 most-visited sites on the internet.

Like all social networking services, Twitter can be used by businesses and organisations, to promote awareness of their presence, to make announcements and to comment on news, and to point clients or others 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?

Data statistic shows that, as of the first quarter of 2017, the microblogging service averaged 328 million monthly active users. At the beginning of 2016, Twitter had reached 310 monthly active users per quarter, according to Statista.

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

The most popular accounts in May 2017 were Katy Perry (99 million followers), Justin Bieber (95.7 million), Barack Obama (89.2 million), Taylor Swift (84.3 million), Rihanna (73.3 million). In case you are wondering, the busy account of one Donald J. Trump is 'only' ranked No.34 with 31 million followers.

According to the Pew Research Center, 24% of online adults in the United States use Twitter, a proportion that is statistically unchanged from a survey conducted in 2015 (23%).

Some 36% of online adults in the US aged 18-29 are on the social network, more than triple the share among online adults aged 65 and older (just 10% of whom are Twitter users).

Twitter is also somewhat more popular among the highly educated: 29% of internet users with college degrees use Twitter, compared with 20% of those with high school degrees or less.

New Zealand statistics show that 44% of local businesses use Twitter regularly or sometimes, with a further 44% not using the platform at all. This compares to 88% of New Zealand businesses using Facebook regularly or sometimes and 63% for LinkedIn (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, of course), 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.

It is also a good way to keep informed about organisations that use Twitter to promote press releases and updates.

THE 140-CHARACTER LIMIT

While 140 characters sounds small, a lot of information can be communicated within the limit.

Prolific tweeter Stephen Fry once said that tweeting was a better form of communication because you actually have to think about what you are writing.

THE HASHTAG THING

Hashtags act as a metadata tag – a way of linking your tweet to a certain Twitter trend. For instance, 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.

ANY NEGATIVES?

Be careful about what you tweet. Anyone in the world can see your postings (unless you have it with a private setting) and 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.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Go to <https://twitter.com/account/new>. Enter your name, email address, choose a password, and decide on your username. Read the “terms of service” or at least try to, and click on the “Create my account” button. You’re now licensed to tweet.

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?

SOME THINGS TO BE AWARE OF

The experiences of others are always a good thing to draw on. The New Zealand Law Society’s

Twitter account (twitter.com/mylawsociety) has drawn a good and growing band of followers. Here are some of the lessons learned:

- » Define your Twitter policy before you get started. What is your purpose? 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. Users will employ social media to criticise you or ask you for things you can't or don't want to provide. Should you respond or not? Should that be done via other channels? Block/delete the comment? It's best to decide this before trouble occurs.
- » The person managing the account must be someone who can (and is trusted to) speak for the organisation. They need to be sufficiently senior that they know what not to talk about and how to recognise and escalate potentially difficult situations. They shouldn't be completely new to social media.
- » Decide 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, 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

or item you have tweeted. Is it self-explanatory? Does it really say something of value?

- » Keep a check on the size of your following (and watch it grow hopefully), but don't expect rapid growth. Aim for small but steady growth. Remember, 10 new followers a week is 500 a year.
- » Decide whether 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.
- » Have fun, and 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. It is best to watch and to think before you launch a tweet to the waiting world - much the same way you do in a natural social situation or workplace where you take time to get a feel for what is going on before starting to interact.
- » Spam exists in Twitter 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.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER INFORMATION

The Government Social Media webkit is an excellent guide to practices and policies: <https://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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