

Tweets Can Tip Papers Off to News Stories, Help Them Interact with Community

By Sean Ireland
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Has your newspaper Tweeted yet? How many followers does it have?

This isn't exactly the language of the newsroom yet, but there are newspapers out there that are well on their way toward making it so. Yes, [Twitter](#) is coming to the newspaper industry.

The [Clovis \(N.M.\) News Journal](#) and the [Shelbyville \(Tenn.\) Times-Gazette](#) are among the first newspapers experimenting with Twitter, the hottest new thing in social networking.

Twitter is an online service that allows people to stay in near-constant contact with each other through the exchanges of brief messages, usually sent through cell phones. Messages, or Tweets, are short – limited by number of screen characters – and allow people to update their “followers” in real time on what they are doing at any given moment. In turn, they get instantaneous messages anytime someone they have signed up to “follow” sends out a message.



Sean Ireland

Both the News Journal and the Times-Gazette have been experimenting with Twitter for a few months, and they are focusing on learning ways to use it to better understand their audiences and better connect with them.

“I feel like the newspaper’s job is to interact with the community,” said Donovan Thornhill, content developer for the News Journal, an 8,000-circulation newspaper located in central New Mexico just west of the Texas border. “What Twitter is allowing us to do is hear the voices of the people we are putting the newspaper out for. We get to hear their interests, we quickly get updated on news events and can see breaking news immediately so we can instantly send out a reporter to get more information.”



The Times-Gazette, located about 60 miles south of Nashville, Tenn., also has begun experimenting with Twitter over the last few months, and it too is using it as an ear to the ground to pick up on breaking news. “I check our followers’ Tweets a few times a day to see if anything interesting has popped up that might tip us off to a news story,” said City Editor John I. Carney.

While the papers are looking to find news through Twitter, they also are using it to deliver breaking news to people who’ve signed up to follow them. “We also Tweet about larger stories that may not be as current, but that we know the community will still be interested in,” Thornhill said. “The Tweets are a hook, and they have a tiny URL address to a story online.”

As they move forward, the newspapers are looking at the best ways to use, and not abuse, Twitter. “I think that Twittering is personal, and I think that there needs to be an understanding of this that comes from a business perspective. We don’t want it to be seen as Spam,” Thornhill said.

Originally, the News Journal sent all of its news stories to its followers. “That’s counterproductive,” Thornhill said. “Twitter is all about micro-blogging. There’s a certain amount of screen real estate, and when you push through 20 stories, people will quit reading and unsubscribe. We are handpicking stories, and receiving positive feedback from readers who are Tweeting responses.”

Carney agrees. “I don’t want it to be just a headline RSS feed,” he said.

To build the newspaper’s following in Clovis, Thornhill and Internet Director Daren Estrada have been actively searching for people in the area who are using Twitter. “For us to generate more followers, we search for people Tweeting in this area,” Thornhill said. “We follow them and try Tweeting a few personal Tweets, and they usually, in turn, follow us. It’s more of an active process of seeking followers rather than a passive one at this point.”

As the News Journal continues to build a Twitter audience (the paper has 124 followers just a few months into its Twitter experiment), it is also considering the best ways to build and maintain personal relationships with them, and the ramifications those relationships will have on news delivery in the future.

"In my opinion other newspapers should be considering using Twitter, as I feel the newspaper industry is moving more and more toward being viewed mainly on electronic devices. As I understand it, The New York Times is considering including a Kindle with subscriptions rather than delivering a paper to cut costs," Thornhill said. "The way I feel newspapers of our size can keep a strong hold on providing the news to our readers is by developing a rapport with our local communities. I think rapport can be achieved through newspapers keeping current with technologies their readers are using to communicate, such as Twitter."

"If you can figure out a way to develop that personal relationship but still keep the content you provide professional, that's where you're going to be successful," Thornhill said.

For more information, contact Donovan Thornhill at (575) 763-3431.

Kudzu.com Connects with Twitter

Sharing consumer reviews just got easier through the fastest-growing social network. Consumers who use Kudzu.com to review and find their favorite landscaper, hair salon, pediatrician and other local service professionals can now share recommendations with their fellow Twitterers whenever they write a review.

Kudzu.com, which is owned and operated by Cox Search Inc., a subsidiary of Cox Enterprises, has launched a new functionality that allows users to "Tweet" their reviews on Twitter after they write a consumer review. When a review of a business is submitted to the Web site, users have the option of posting a short summary and link to their review in the status update box on Twitter, to be seen by their "followers."

"We're excited to help our users share their Kudzu reviews through Twitter," said Tom Bates, vice president of Cox Search Inc. and general manager, Kudzu.com. "This is another great opportunity Kudzu.com is giving people to amplify their opinions and spread the word about their favorite local businesses. Kudzu.com visitors can write a review and conveniently share it through multiple communication channels. We like to call this viral efficiency."