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TWITTERPATED

MARKETERS ENAMORED OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

THERE ARE SOME things that, at first, appear to have such niche appeal that they're deemed useless or silly by the masses and simply disregarded. Take cellular phones, for example: Why invest in a transportable phone when we have home phones, work phones and perfectly good pay phones nearby? But early adopters saw the product's merits, and eventually, the rest of us followed suit.

Twitter is another technological marvel that early adopters—many marketers included—have embraced wholeheartedly while the rest of us stand by, scratching our heads. What the heck is Twitter and why should we bother?

You should bother, experts say, because Twitter is an effective social media tool with which marketers can converse with tech-savvy consumers in a relevant and extemporaneous way. It can help to build relationships, bolster brand images, solve customer service issues and generate positive word of mouth. All the hype surrounding Twitter is warranted—for the most part. The key is knowing how to use it effectively.

"We're seeing Twitter as a wonderful tool to reach out to a very influential audience," says Shiv Singh, vice president of social media and global strategic initiatives at Seattle-based digital marketing firm Avenue A | Razorfish. "But if you approach it the wrong way, you'll be ignored. As a marketer, you have to know what channels to use in what way and for what purpose. Otherwise, it could come across as gimmicky."

Launched in 2006 by San Francisco-based founders Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone and Evan Williams, Twitter is a free, Web-based micro-messaging service that allows friends and family, and now businesses, employees and consumers, to keep in touch through quick updates sent and received online, via instant message or on the user's mobile device. Twitter users, or Twitterers, set up an account and post messages that "followers," or those who choose to read a particular Twitterer's messages, can receive in real time or can read on the Twitterer's Web page.

Twitter posts are purposefully short—there's a 140-character maximum for each "tweet"—and are intended to answer the simple question, "What are you doing?" Twitterers tweet about mundane events in their daily lives, such as at what time of day they're

planning to take a coffee break, as well as momentous news items—a California-based Twitterer was reportedly the first to break the news of the earthquake in Los Angeles in late July.

The much-hyped two-year-old Web site garnered nearly 3 million monthly unique visitors worldwide in June, according to comScore Inc. The Twitter service, overall, claims significantly more users because so much of the Twitter usage occurs via mobile phones.

Along with talkative teens and Web-savvy workers, many media companies, airlines, hotels, retailers, service providers and even politicians also have created Twitter accounts. Barack Obama's account, for example, has more than 56,000 regular followers, compared with Whole Foods' 2,650.

It might be hard to fathom how a micro-messaging service could be beneficial to marketers, but according to Twitter co-founder Biz Stone, the service's power lies in its posts' brevity and voluntary audience. "Limiting individual messages forces [marketers] to be concise," Stone says. "And because users must choose to follow an account on Twitter, these messages also need to be consistently compelling" to keep readers engaged.

According to Jonathan Burg, an emerging channels strategist for Boston-based interactive marketing firm Digitas, marketers can use Twitter to promote new products, send out deals, unearth new trends, collect timely feedback, humanize their brands or handle customer relations management.

"Twitter is an excellent tool for CRM," and companies such as Comcast and Dell are taking full advantage, Burg says. "CRM representatives can be providing product advice, answering questions, sharing links to relevant content and support pages, or sharing e-mail addresses for follow-up conversations. Just last week, I had a problem with my cell phone service. After posting a negative comment on Twitter, a representative direct-messaged me in private, offering to help resolve this problem."

Paw Luxury, a Montoursville, Pa.-based online retailer of eco-friendly dog products, uses Twitter to forge new relationships while developing old ones. The company maximizes Twitter's quick-hit format by sending new product and shipping updates and helping fellow Twitterers solve dog issues, doling

out advice on how to soothe their pets' itchy skin or about which eco-friendly chew toy is best.

"It allows us to connect one on one and makes us very approachable," says Adam Leidhecker, who owns Paw Luxury with his wife, Wendy, and their spokedog, Lola. The social media-savvy Paw Luxury team added Twitter to an online communications portfolio that includes a blog and an e-newsletter, as well as accounts on Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and even Dogster, a dog-based social networking site complete with canine diaries. While the company's blog had 22 readers on a recent day, its Twitter account had more than 3,000 followers.

Of course, Twitter's growth has not come without problems along the way. The service accepts no advertising at this point, nor does it charge corporate or individual users for their accounts. So Twitter Inc. has yet to figure out a way to make money from its service. Instead, it is relying on outside funding as it focuses on improving the service and building its user base. The company recently announced a financing deal involving Spark Capital and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. Also, the company is working to rebuild its system to keep it from crashing during periods of heavy usage, a recent problem for Twitter.

As Singh warned, Twitter is not an effective tool for marketers looking to spew forth corporate messages from an anonymous source. Twitter is a more personal medium by design. And according to Burg, there might be legal issues concerning the release of some corporate information in such a free-flowing medium, as well as problems with copycats or squatters who claim to be representatives of your company and set up fake accounts. But, Burg says, Twitter's potential rewards outweigh the risks of using it.

Like the workplace, the marketplace is in hyperdrive, and the length of marketing messages matters, says Singh's colleague Bob Lord, president of the east region for Avenue A | Razorfish. "In the new world, it's like this snackable content," Lord says. "If you don't have it short and if it's not sweet, then [consumers aren't] going to snack on it. ... It's absolutely too early to tell where [Twitter as a marketing tool] is going to go, but there's something about this short, sweet, snackable content." **m**