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## 5 Twitter marketing experiments

By **Blaise Nutter**

Has Twitter jumped the shark? If Oprah's doing it, and Ashton Kutcher can harass more than a million people into following him (certainly not me), then where is Twitter to grow? Like MySpace and Facebook, the young social networking tool has to grow up, move out of its parents' house, and probably engage in a little youthful experimentation.

Is Twitter for marketing? Bringing in customers? Developing a brand? Improving company performance in other ways? Since Twitter is such an open-ended tool, there's no obvious approach to using those 140 characters to benefit your business, but many companies have been willing to take a chance and see what it can deliver. That means trying new things and diving in without a life preserver.

Take a look at these five recent business experiments, each trying to find their way to Twittered glory, and see what's been working in the Twitterverse.

Tax season is over, but it was a big one for H&R Block. In its competition for our online tax preparation dollars, [H&R Block](#) was an early adopter on Twitter, joining a little less than two years ago. The company saw Twitter initially as a way to push its marketing message out to a small group of influential people. Call that Twitter Mistakes 101.

"We soon realized that we needed to listen and share, rather than pushing out marketing messages," said Stacy Getz, marketing manager at H&R Block and the person responsible for H&R Block's Twitter account. Once it started listening and sharing, Twitter revealed itself as a customer service medium rather than a marketing conduit. People need a ton of help during tax season, but it's not always sensible to depend on expensive phone support. Seeing H&R Block on Twitter, customers began using it as an easy way of asking questions and getting advice.

"Depending on the user inquiry, I work with our product team, tax research and/or customer resolution team to make sure we're providing the best possible response. The rule that I live by is to always ask myself, before I post a tweet, 'Am I being helpful and providing value to the user, as well as our followers?'" Getz said. "We now look at this as a brand effort to showcase our tax expertise. Our Twitter feed is now 75 percent @replies."

Those high-value @replies mean that Getz can answer specific questions for individuals, but also, when appropriate, share that knowledge with all of HR Block's 2,000 or so followers who might have similar questions in the future. And if things get too complicated to handle over-tweets, she gets contact information from the user via DM and gets in contact with someone who can help.

Using Twitter in this manner, HR Block is giving users one-on-one customer service that is both personal and relevant, with the possibility of high-quality engagement with a social group of people. That's smart, even if the quantities are limited, because those people might just turn around and recommend the company to their followers.

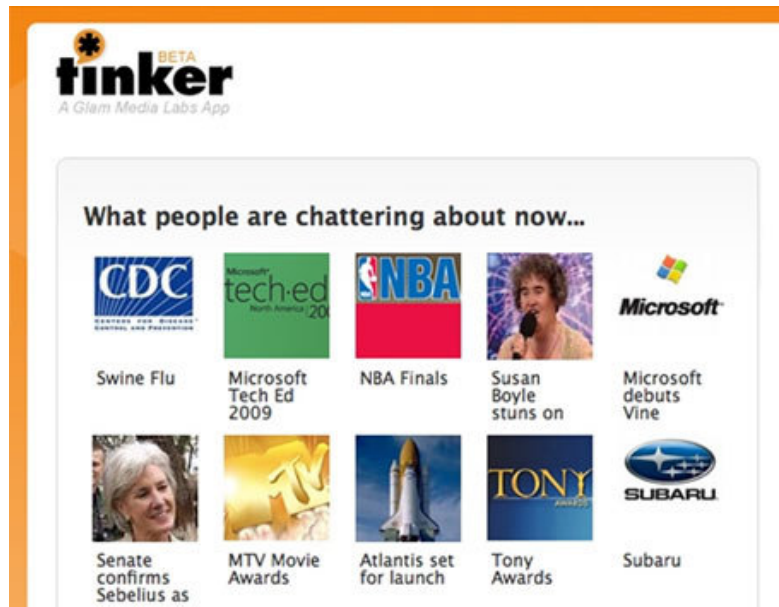
Back in January, during President Obama's inauguration, the live CNN broadcast featured a feed of status updates from Facebook, offering a real-time commentary on the historic event from people all over the world. It showed -- in a very distilled manner -- how microblogging platforms can enhance an event experience in a dramatic way.

The image shows a screenshot of the H&R Block Twitter profile. At the top, there is a green header bar. Below it, the H&R Block logo is displayed, consisting of a green square with the text "H&R BLOCK" inside. To the right of the logo, the name "HRBlock" is written in a large, bold, black font. Below the logo and name, there is a status bar that says "Following" with a checkmark and "Device updates OFF". Below this, there are three tweets. The first tweet is from @adnhiggins and says: "Stacy from H&R Block here. I saw your tweet. I'd love to help out. Please DM your contact info to me." The second tweet is from @eristoddle and says: "Please DM your contact info to me so I can help. Thx!". The third tweet is from @exocetau and says: "We're here if you have any tax questions." The tweets are separated by horizontal dashed lines.

Normally, Twitter can be a daunting flow of disorganized information that can be unattractive to advertisers. But if you could capture all the talk about a particular event or subject -- like the inauguration or a movie opening -- and curate a feed of that to display anywhere on the web, would that be desirable?

Inspired by what they saw on Inauguration Day, Glam Media, a vertical ad network with a range of lifestyle publishers, certainly thinks so. Its new service, [Tinker](#), allows users, brands, and advertisers to curate a Twitter feed around a particular topic or event, filtering out bad language, spammers, and other unwanted elements. The service uses more than just clumsy #hashtags and Twitter search, and these "curated event conversations" can be sponsored by a brand and distributed with a widget or through standard ad units across the web. Brands are already exploring it as an option for exploiting Twitter, even for swine flu. (A company that sells sanitizing soap sponsored the Swine Flu event, apparently.)

"If you're able to aggregate all of those posts on a topic into a single stream, now you're bringing an audience to that advertiser," said Raj Narayan, VP of engineering for Tinker. So say you're ABC and want to encourage viewers to talk about "Lost," you use Tinker to capture the "Lost" conversations on Twitter and then disseminate the widget of that conversation across your advertising network. People see it, interact, get more involved, and watch the show more. Ta-da, right?



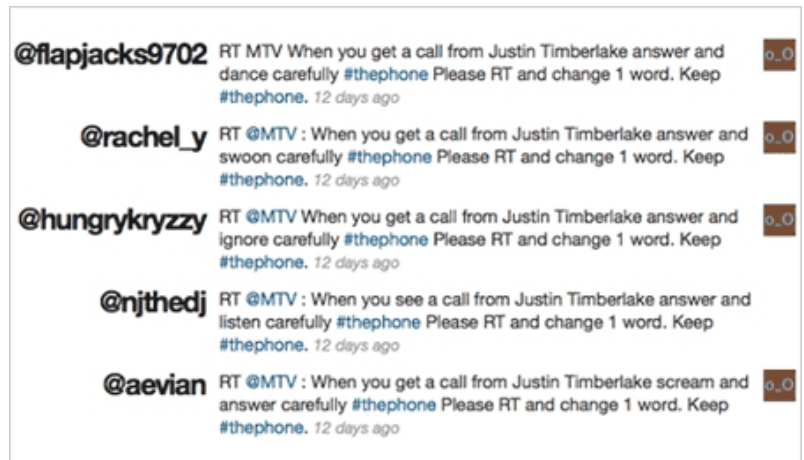
The service is still in beta and is obviously not right for everyone, but Tinker has high hopes for the future. Right now, it's an interesting experiment and worth checking out to see if it fits your needs as a brand.

While some companies want complicated new ways of using Twitter, here's a simple one. For the new Justin Timberlake-produced reality show, "The Phone," Fanscape and MTV want Twitter users to have some fun. The show is a blend of scripted reality TV, involving four participants attempting to solve a mystery for prize money, but the Twitter game is basically a modified version of the children's game Telephone.

Every week, the [MTV Twitter account](#) tweets a short message, such as "Tonight at 10 p.m., I may become a wise guy on The Phone. #thephone Please RT & change 1 word. Keep #thephone." Then MTV's 100,000+ followers are supposed to re-tweet the message with one word altered, and gradually the message will spread, morph, degrade, and hopefully entertain.

That's it, though. The game is self-consciously unsophisticated with no gimmicks, prizes, interactivity, or clues into the TV show, at least so far. The game isn't even mentioned on the show's official website. That was an intentional choice by Fanscape.

"We were really interested, when we were creating the game, to say, 'Let's not put any reward and see what happens naturally,'" said Terry Dry, president and co-founder of Fanscape. The main goal was to create something fun. That simplicity has translated into mixed results -- about 450 uses of the hashtag #thephone, reaching more than 1.3 million followers. So why would MTV use such a simple game to promote a big new show? One possibility: more followers.



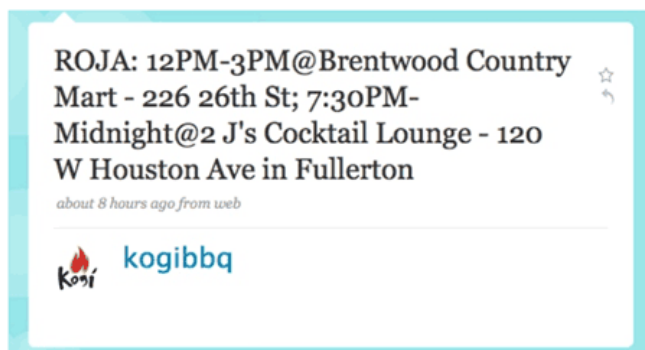
"Since the game launched, we've seen MTV's Twitter in the last 18 days grow by 47 percent," Dry said. That means a much bigger audience for all of MTV's other tweets, products, and marketing efforts. Dry admits it's probably not all the game. "Twitter's been growing and MTV's been growing, but this is exponentially higher. I'd be a jerk for taking credit for all that, but certainly having games floating around helps."

This is the experimental phase for the telephone game, and it may get more involved later with prizes and such. Last week, MTV's Twitter linked to a preview clip for the show. But for now, the appropriated kid's game is a clever place to start. Whether it catches on past the first few weeks is yet to be seen.

While these examples tend to be large media companies, small businesses can also get a real kick out of Twitter. Consider [Kogi BBQ](#), a Korean BBQ truck company that opened late 2008 in the Los Angeles area. From the beginning, the company's founders wanted to be more than just mobile food; they wanted to be a movement.

"The problem with taco trucks is people come and get their tacos and then they go off and do whatever it is they're doing. There's no culture, scene, or social aspect to it that allows for the business itself to engage with the clientele," said Mike Prasad, brand and new media director for Kogi BBQ. "One of our goals was to create a kind of culture, a cult following."

How do you do that with a taco truck? Before they even had a company name, Prasad and Kogi's founders began planning online strategies, and Prasad quickly turned to Twitter. He started tweeting about the taco truck, through both his personal account and the company's account, letting people know about the product and announcing where the truck was going to be. Wherever they went, the message was always the same: If you think this food is awesome, find us on Twitter.



"The biggest thing with Twitter, for any kind of business, is you've got to provide utility," he said. That means putting useful information -- the two trucks' locations -- in the follower's feed every day. Kogi BBQ also works hard to maintain a personality behind the account, to interact with anyone who @replies or DMs, and to even apply user feedback offered over Twitter to its menu recipes.

Kogi BBQ started tweeting late last November, and by the start of 2009, it had about 800 followers. By May, it had corralled more than 20,000. That's a lot of Angelenos who want to know where those two taco trucks are hiding. With its innovative business plan, Kogi BBQ has already been written up in [The](#)

[New York Times](#) and appeared on Nightline. And a lot of that success can be attributed to how Kogi BBQ approaches the microblogging service.

With [ExecTweets](#), even Microsoft is getting in on the act. The company is sponsoring one of the first real, albeit minor, revenue models for Twitter. It has created a site that collects the tweets from top business executives in a number of fields, which Twitter is advertising on users' pages. Built by Federated Media, the ExecTweets site allows users to find top executives, follow them individually, or get a summary feed through @exectweets and "tweet-up" individual tweets and their tweeters.

The site is part of Microsoft's ongoing "It's Everyone's Business" marketing campaign, which according to Advertising General Manager Gayle Troberman, aims "to illustrate how companies use technology to solve business problems, seize opportunities, and ultimately make themselves more competitive." While potentially a source of wisdom for consumers and business owners, why would Microsoft make the leap into the Twitter arena?

A company spokesperson offered this: "Microsoft saw value in providing a tool for Twitter users that makes it easy to follow and participate in organized conversations with business experts. They believe having a view into these conversations provides great value to customers and the business community at large in terms of gaining insight into relevant and important business discussions."



Or maybe Microsoft is doing it to slap its name next to a bunch of top new media and corporate executives and enjoy brand association with the hottest name in social media. This isn't in any way a criticism, though. It's a smart branding move, and it makes Microsoft look great. In a way, it shows how Twitter is just like any other new medium. Stand next to it, and you look good. That's less of an experiment and more of an old chestnut.

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