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Scott Public Relations...

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Twitter Helps Engage With Customers

The crash of U.S. Airways Flight 1549 is just one of the latest examples showing how platforms such as Twitter are evolving beyond social messaging services into interactive news sources that corporate executives have to consider and monitor in their communications programs.

Almost immediately after Flight 1549 slid safely into the New York's Hudson River, the first announcements of a plane crash appeared on Twitter. The first image of the crash, depicting evacuating passengers waiting on a wing, was posted by a passenger on a ferry boat hastily recruited to serve as a rescue vessel.

Within an hour, thousands of short messages relayed news and images of the event, re-posted links and updated news accounts, and shared toll-free numbers for information about passengers. Major news organizations were harvesting tips from the stream of Twitter messages as well as using it to provide updates and links to their coverage.

By the time the airline issued a statement on its Web site an hour after the event, the release was largely ignored by an audience already engaged in the Twitter coverage.

Although Twitter cannot be described as a mainstream service yet -- varying estimates place its user base at about 2.5 million -- it is reaching an Internet-savvy audience that feels a need to always feel connected.

Monitor the Conversation

As this expanding audience considers Twitter to be an important source of breaking news and social conversation, companies need to understand what Twitter users are saying about them.

One of the first steps corporations should take is to monitor Twitter to see how their brand is being discussed (and their reputation is being shaped). Twitter's search function (<http://search.twitter.com>) allows users to enter a specific term, such as a company name, to see recent messages containing that word. The search results can also be exported as an RSS feed into platforms such as Google Reader to allow executives to monitor discussions about their brands automatically.

Engage With Customers

Some companies have moved beyond monitoring online conversations to engaging with customers, the media and other interested stakeholders. Successful examples include Whole Foods, which provides news, recipes, contact information for local stores and weekly specials. So far, its efforts have attracted more than 22,647 followers (people who sign up to receive the company's updates).

Southwest Airlines (with at least 9,037 followers) includes updates about

company blog posts, earnings releases, events at local airports and executive interviews on TV. And Comcast (7,933 followers) has a team of representatives who monitor the channel and reach out to customers reporting service disruptions or other issues.

It's important to recognize that Twitter, like other social media outlets, is a conversation platform, and not an overt marketing channel. Sending messages that are overly promotional or commercial is often compared to shouting at a cocktail party, and the backlash can overwhelm the subtle benefits of participation. Instead, executives who engage with Twitter should take a couple of weeks to monitor the conversation and get a sense of the platform's social norms.

It's also important to make your messages as conversational as possible. People want to engage with other people, and not with an overly cautious corporate voice. Twitter allows companies to put a human face on their efforts, but the flip side is that other users expect companies to do exactly that.

But despite a few small challenges, Twitter is emerging as an important communication and news tool with a value that exceeds the relatively small size of its user base. Because those users are likely to be talking about your brand anyway, it can be an important and valuable move to join the conversation.

For More Information

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