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Twitter: How to Get Started Guide for Business People

– C.G. Lynch, CIO

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[Twitter](#) remains a very nascent social network, so if you don't know how it works or what it does (or you haven't even heard of it), don't feel bad. In fact, you're still in the majority. But we're here to help you reap the benefits of [Twitter](#) with this quick get-started guide.

More about Twitter on CIO.com
[Twitter's Potential for Business Users](#)
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[Jeremiah Owyang \(@jowyang\)](#), a senior Forrester analyst who researches social media and who pens a [blog on Web Strategy](#), says that while Twitter doesn't release exact numbers, he estimates that three to six million people use Twitter, compared to 150 million for [Facebook](#).



Here is an (appropriately) short explanation of Twitter: Twitter is a free service that allows users to publish short messages of 140 characters or less. These messages are read by "followers" — people who make a conscious decision to subscribe to your messages and have them delivered to their own Twitter home pages.

Each message you post is known as a "Tweet." In the social media and social networking industry, Twitter facilitates a process known as microblogging or microsharing. Every user is identified by putting an "@" sign in front of their name (for instance: [@cglynch](#)).

Joining Twitter has value for many people, but it can also be a waste of time if you don't understand how the medium works and how best to utilize it. We take a look at suggestions from social networking gurus to help you determine if adding Twitter to your daily tech diet is in your best interest.

Do You Belong on Twitter?

The Wild West view of social networks proposes that you should just try them out and see whether or not you like them. But in a world where most people already belong to existing social networks (such as Facebook or LinkedIn), on top of using long-established technology like e-mail and text messaging, allocating time for another outlet should be considered carefully.

"Think about why do you want to do it," Owyang says. "Do you want to join because there's buzz about it [in the media] or because President Obama is on it? Especially now, you need to spend your resources and your time well."

Twitter should be place where you want to share common interests and ask insightful questions, and, ideally, read the interesting answers you get back, says Laura Fitton ([@pistachio](#)), who runs [Pistachio Consulting](#), which advises people and companies on how best to utilize Twitter.

Though some people use Twitter to keep people in their personal life updated, Twitter has developed a business following. People in a particular industry (say engineering, software development, or public relations) often use Twitter to keep up with news, opinion and happenings in their field, for example. Once you get going with Twitter, this information will come to you. More on that in a minute.

What You Can Gain and Share With Twitter

If many Twitter evangelists looking to broaden the service's demographic had it their way, they might want to change the site's official branding a bit. When you go to Twitter to sign up, it says, "Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?"

"The best way to make the most use of it is not just answer what are you doing now," says Owyang. "Instead, answer: 'What's important to me?' That changes the conversation and makes value. It takes away some of the minutia and shows you want to talk about something that's more useful and interesting."

In other words, the "I'm running to the store" messages might not be as compelling amidst the noise of Twitter messages as "I just read a book on [insert some topic that's interest to you]." If you have room in the 140 characters, state an opinion or analysis of it.

It's about "what has my attention right now?" Fitton says. "The point of Twitter is what do we have in common or having some kind of shared experience."

How to Sign Up for Twitter

1. [Twitter.com](http://twitter.com) Click on the "Join the Conversation" button in middle of the page.
2. Fill out basic information. This will include your full name, preferred user name, password and e-mail address. Remember that the user name is what people will see with an "@" symbol in front of it.
3. See if your friends are on Twitter. After you fill out basic info, you'll be prompted to look for friends in your [Gmail](http://gmail.com), Yahoo, MSN, Hotmail or AOL accounts so you can begin following them if they're already on the service.
4. Twitter's suggestions. Twitter will suggest some people for you to follow as well. Check to see if anyone of them are relevant.
5. Setting up your profile. Click on "settings" in the upper right hand corner of your Twitter home page. You'll be brought to a tab-based menu that helps you build your profile and adjust settings.
6. Fill in the fields. Of particular importance is the "one line bio" under the "Account" tab. You have 160 characters to present yourself to the Twitter community. Many people choose to state their profession, and then maybe something outside of work that interests them as well. CIO's C.G. Lynch ([@cglynch](http://twitter.com/cglynch)), for instance, has the following: "Staff Writer at CIO, New England Sports Fan."
7. Start looking for followers Regardless of how many people you found through e-mail search and Twitter's suggestions, start looking around for people you might find interesting. Use search.twitter.com.

Who to Follow on Twitter?

The early users of Twitter have turned the issue of followers into a bit of popularity contest, and the PR and marketing professionals follow thousands of people in some cases to help tout their brands over the service.

But following a lot of people can create unnecessary noise that will render the service useless to you.

"The people you choose to follow should bring something compelling to your life," says Fitton. "I feel sad people think that's important to follow a ton of random people or have people with a lot of followers to be important or get value from Twitter."

Owyang suggests starting with people you know. When you sign up for Twitter, you will be promoted to search for friends from your Gmail or Yahoo Mail accounts and show if you are on the service. Also, he says, you can use [Twitter's search tool](http://twitter.com/search) to look for people that might be twittering in your field.

You don't need to know people personally, but they should relate to your interests. You also might want to look for luminaries in your industry who often publish links to things they're reading with short comments on it. If you're into biking, you might follow Lance Armstrong ([@lancearmstrong](#)). If you're into politics, maybe you follow party operatives like democrat Joe Trippi ([@JoeTrippi](#)) or republican Karl Rove ([@KarlRove](#)).

Not long after you join, people will begin following you. Before you follow back, make sure you're going to get something substantive out of their tweets, Owyang says.

Other experts advise you think more broadly, at least to start. Stowe Boyd ([@stoweboyd](#)), a social media consultant who writes the [message blog](#), suggests following at least 100 people right away. He agrees with Owyang and Fitton that you should look for quality people, but believes it's important to throw yourself into the Twitter environment and see how information moves differently.

With Twitter, information flows to you, in contrast to more traditional mediums such as a news website, where you must click around and seek out information on your own. On Twitter, after you select followers, the information just comes to you.

"The point is getting in the flow, and having it wash over you," Boyd says.

Remember, You're Publishing: [Google](#) Will Find Your Tweets

It's important to remember that Twitter is a publishing medium. In many cases, Tweets can be picked up by Google. So remember what you say, especially if you tend to talk business over Twitter (as many people do).

An executive from a PR agency that works with FedEx [published a tweet where he spoke ill of the shipping company's hometown of Memphis, Tennessee.](#)

The tweet went: "True confession but I'm in one of those towns where I scratch my head and say 'I would die if I had to live here!'"

FedEx responded to him with an e-mail expressing its disappointment in the post.

"What you say can affect your blog or business. Your boss, competitors, wife or future wife," Owyang says. "You need to remember, it's publishing."

Another caution: because a Tweet is so short, it's even harder than with say e-mail for people to pick up context or tell when you're being sarcastic versus serious, Fitton says.

"You need to think carefully about how you put it and how it sounds," she says. "Think about not only your immediate followers but your potential audience, which is the whole Web. Tweets get googled pretty prominently."

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