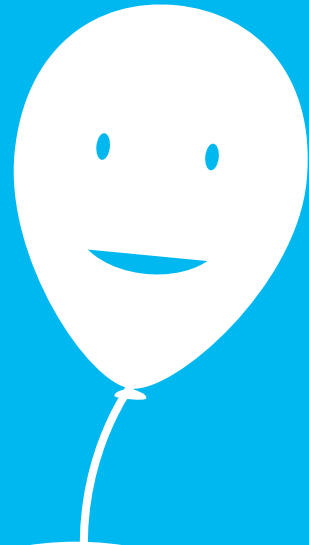




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USING TWITTER AS A RETAIL MARKETING TOOL

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Using Twitter As A Retail Marketing Tool

Tapping into the power of social media to help market brands is one of the hot topics in marketing, and within that Twitter is the focus of the majority of this attention. You can't pick up a paper or browse an online news site without finding a mention of it somewhere. With all this noise around it, brand marketers are starting to sit up and take notice and are becoming more receptive to the concept and looking at how they can fit Twitter into their strategies, but many are still unconvinced by its power and wary of getting involved.

While there are a growing number of corporate users on Twitter, many retail and e-commerce brands have been slow to jump on the bandwagon. However, this is changing and many in this sector are now reaping the rewards of using Twitter as a retail marketing tool.

Although there are still huge questions surrounding how brands and corporate stakeholders can monetise Twitter, whether you love it or loathe it, the reality is that very few brands can go wrong by using it – particularly within the retail sector.

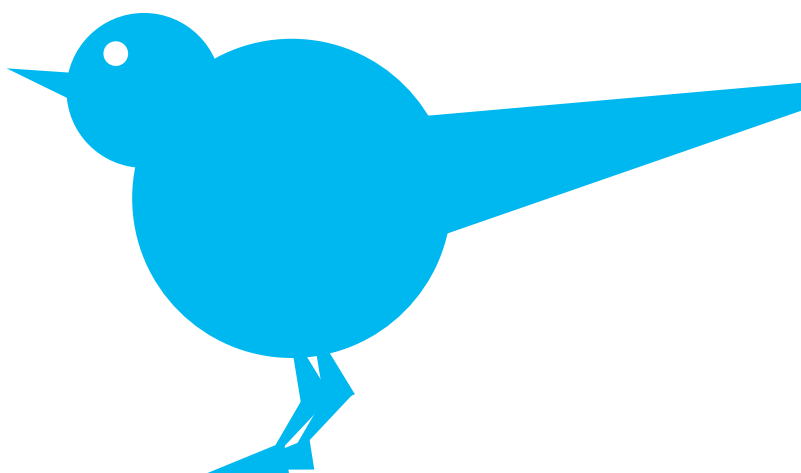
Purely online retailers such as ASOS (www.asos.com) and Net-a-porter (www.net-a-porter.com), which are both market leaders in the online luxury fashion retail sector, are using Twitter as a vital part of their joined-up social media strategies and embracing everything the new channel has to offer. How they use Twitter, in particular, is an example to other brands of its power as a customer-retention and customer-marketing tool.

Both sites are dealing with enquiries, problems and responding to comment online through Twitter as well as using it to communicate product information and promotions to their customers. This is a far cry from the sort of celebrity stalking that the medium has become known for through the likes of Stephen Fry, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher.

First steps

Even if they're not planning on doing anything on Twitter immediately, it's important that marketers sign their brands up as quickly as possible. As with web addresses, brands need to have their own brand/user name to protect their online identity.

Once a brand or retailer is ready to start using Twitter, it's important they sort out their landing page. This needs to be properly branded and look like an official page. Again, fashion brand ASOS (<http://twitter.com/ASOS>) and Net-a-porter (http://twitter.com/luxury_fashion) have done an excellent job of this. Whereas, strangely, brands like British Airways (<http://twitter.com/BritishAirways>) and the BBC (<http://twitter.com/BBC>) have not done as well – the branding on these particular pages is almost too understated.



Starting the conversation

Getting started with Twitter is all about brands creating a conversation with their customers. Initially, the people that are going to follow any brand on Twitter are likely to be their existing core customers, people who already care about that brand. But once that brand or retailer starts engaging with its audience this will soon expand.

It's crucial that brands make sure people know that they are on Twitter and that they want customers to talk to them. Sending out an email to existing customers informing them what they are doing, as well as ensuring that their Twitter details are included on their website contact details and any communications that are sent out, are both vital to kick starting this engagement process.



Defining moments

It's important to define your strategy for using Twitter early and there are essentially five key reasons for retail marketers to be looking to get involved with the media:

1 Keep customers up to date on the latest deals, promotions and competitions

Because of the direct access Twitter gives retailers to their customers, it offers marketers an excellent opportunity to target valued customers with specific deals and special offers. One company that is using this to extremely good effect is Dell (<http://www.dell.com/twitter>). The computer firm has created a number of Twitter profiles, each targeting different users with different types of deals (for example, Dell Outlet (<http://twitter.com/DellOutlet>) which posts details on recently refurbished computers). Also, coffee giant Starbucks (<http://twitter.com/Starbucks>) posts new offers and participates in threaded discussions of these offers with their Twitter followers.

2 Provide an alternative customer services option

There can be a powerful cost incentive for using Twitter, as brands and retailers can pre-empt being asked the same question multiple times, such as when a certain product is going to be available. By answering the question once, it's then available to everyone else to see on the Twitter feed, potentially saving an enormous amount of time. At the very least Twitter can provide brands and retailers with a regularly updated interactive Frequently Asked Questions page. Indeed, both ASOS and Net-a-porter also use Twitter as a way of dealing with enquiries on everything from product details to information on fit and fabric.

Some brands have even gone as far as to make their Twitter pages as personal as possible. Online travel booking agent JetBlue (<http://twitter.com/JetBlue>) provides the customer support employee's name that is currently on duty answering queries via Twitter, and US cable TV company Comcast (<http://twitter.com/comcastcares>) includes a photograph of the head of customer services. Both these examples make the page appear more "real" and approachable.

3 Get closer to your customers

By signing up to follow brands on Twitter consumers have already given that brand permission to talk to them and opened up the opportunity for two-way dialogue. It's almost the equivalent of being given their mobile phone number as brands can send information to them directly.

Once people have signed up to follow them, brands can start to not only push offers towards them but also engage further with them and strengthen their bond with the brand by providing relevant and useful information and feedback.

For example, via their Twitter profile US Southwest Airlines (<http://twitter.com/SouthwestAir>) runs non-official, entertaining discussions with its customers. Also, High street fashion retailer Top Shop (http://twitter.com/Topshop_tweets) shares styling tips and recommendations in a fun and chatty way, which fits with their target audience.

4 Getting customer feedback

Reacting to customer feedback – good or bad – is important for brands and Twitter gives them the platform for doing this. From a positive perspective it can be a great way to get consumers to engage with surveys or polls, and also to give their comments with regard to changes to a brand website. This in turn is an excellent opportunity for data capture.

It can also, however, be a direct way to deal with problems. Towards the end of 2008 PepsiCo came under fire for a magazine advert that depicted a “calorie” committing suicide. Its Twitter pages were awash with people attacking the advert and calling for an explanation. PepsiCo did indeed respond and apologise via Twitter for the advert – which was withdrawn after just one appearance – and those attacking the advert were appeased.

One thing that brands using Twitter must be aware of is that the community does not take lightly to brands using it to indiscriminately market themselves. In June 2009, furniture manufacturer Habitat was forced to issue a formal apology (aka blaming the intern!) for its Twitter marketing after Twitter users reacted angrily to its attempts to get people to sign up to its customer database.

The retailer was caught adding topics from the hot “trending topics” – as hash tags – to the front of its Tweets as a way to ensure that they were listed as hot topics on the site.

5 Post company news

Finally, keeping customers updated with news and other information about the brand means, brand owners can tell their customers about everything from the latest editions to their range to stock problems. It also means that consumers can be directed to press coverage and blog posts, as well as interesting news items helping to strengthen the brand-consumer bond.

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Linking with other social media

With search marketing getting more and more congested, particularly within the retail marketing space, brands are constantly looking for new ways to drive traffic to their websites. A Twitter feed can act as a powerful driver for a website as it allows brands to push marketing and promotional activity to core customers.

It can also be used as a key point of contact to tie in with any other social media activity any brand is running. While the basic Twitter mechanism does not allow users to include graphical content it does enable you to post links to other media such as Facebook, twitpic, YouTube and Flickr where imagery can be included, alongside more details of products and promotions.

One of the most appealing things about using Twitter as the central hub of a social media strategy is not just that brands can quickly get information out over the internet, but that it can also be done cheaply. There's no need for brands and retailers to spend a fortune on having a creative agency redesign their website every time they need to get information out to their customers, as they can do it quickly and simply themselves, and turnaround can be almost instant. If speed to market is essential, for example letting people know about stock control issues, no other media comes close.

From a retail perspective, the e-commerce industry is trying to bring the online shopping experience closer to that of the offline experience. By allowing customers the opportunity to engage in a real-time conversation, (staff levels permitting), with people, the experience becomes more "real". For example, if customers are unable to find items in the online shop by going through Twitter they can find out exactly where that item is or when it is due in stock, in much the same way as they if they were shopping in a physical store.

However, what is being done now with Twitter is only really the tip of the iceberg. As a medium it is fast developing as a hugely powerful brand management tool. Brands should not be scared of Twitter, but should instead look to harness its power as soon as possible, before they find themselves playing catch up with the competition.



About Pod1

Creatively focused but commercially led, the Pod1 team are experts at originating creative ideas to help you sell more online... in other words, they're fanatical about Ecommerce!

Since 2001, and now from offices in London, New York and Cape Town, Pod1 has been delivering world class ecommerce websites for many of the UK's leading retailers. It's unique approach to website design and build, founded on planning and insight development, has led to many firsts in online retail.

The team takes time out to understand the brand, it's business objectives and, most importantly, the customer before making recommendations for the design, functionality and usability of a website or campaign.

For the latest in ecommerce and to be first to receive our whitepapers, register your details at: www.pod1.com/newsletter

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