

To: Public Libraries

From: Piper Mountain Webs – Library Website Specialists

Re: Public Libraries and Twitter – Does It Make Sense?

Twitter is one of the latest developments in the ‘social networking’ arena, and many libraries have already signed on. Does it make sense for you, and for your library?

This paper answers that question. For those who want to sign up, it also provides basic instructions, and even gives you a sample notice to provide to your patrons about your new Twitter presence.



For more free information on libraries and web technologies, for free links to interesting content that you can publish on your library’s website, and for information on a comprehensive public library website solution, visit www.librarywebsites.com

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Twitter Makes Sense for Small and Mid-Sized Public Libraries

Given the tight budgets and staffing levels of most small and mid-sized libraries, developing and maintaining social networking identities is seldom at the top of the “to do” list, and with good reason. While the jury is still out, there is as of yet little evidence to suggest that the effort involved in creating and maintaining a library Facebook or MySpace site, for example, pays off in terms of increased library use amongst any age group. If you’re forced to prioritize – which we all are - development and ongoing maintenance of a solid, well-designed and regularly updated library website should definitely come first.



So why does the use of Twitter by public libraries warrant a ‘thumbs up’ – even for small libraries with limited staff? Because Twitter is a no-cost communication channel that instantly puts your short, library-focused messages directly into the hands of people who have asked to see them. And, unlike some of the other social networking outlets, the required investment is so minimal (it’s free, and it takes only minutes to be up and running and to send out regular messages) that your time is well spent if only a few of your patrons benefit from it. Promoted wisely, you can increase awareness and patron use, and your return on your investment will grow considerably.

What follows is a basic introduction to Twitter through a list of Frequently Asked Questions, and a six-step guide to setting up and using a Twitter account for your library.

One important note: I’ve seen some articles touting the value of Twitter as a means of communicating with fellow librarians at ALA conferences and the like. That’s not an angle I’m going to explore in this review. Instead, I’m sticking with the value of Twitter as a means of marketing library services to your current or potential library users.

So, on to the nuts and bolts. What is Twitter, how does it work, and how do you get started?

Twitter FAQs

What is Twitter?

Twitter is an online messaging system. You go to the Twitter website (www.twitter.com), log in to your account, type in a message (of 140 characters or less), and instantly that message may be viewed by anyone who has chosen to “follow” you.

What does “following me” mean?

It means that the ‘follower’ has asked to see all of your messages as soon as you type them in.

How do people choose to “follow” me?

Once they have a Twitter account (free, and easy – see below), they can search for you and then choose to follow you with one click of their mouse. From that point forward, they will see all of your messages whenever they log in to their Twitter account. (There are other ways they can see your messages as well...keep reading.)

Why are messages limited to 140 characters?

Because Twitter is built on the same messaging system used by cell phones, and that messaging channel has a 140 to 160 character limit. The connection with cell phone messaging technology brings us to another really big benefit of Twitter...

Do people have to go to the Twitter website (www.twitter.com) in order to read my messages?

No – library ‘followers’ can choose to have the library’s Twitter messages delivered directly to their cell phone. And if the library does have a Facebook or MySpace account, it can be set up to accept and display Twitter updates automatically, so patrons that follow the library via those networks will see Twitter messages as well.

Does the library need to set up a Twitter account in order to post messages?

Yes, but it’s really easy, and it’s free. See below.

Do people who want to receive the library’s messages need to have a Twitter account?

Yes, they do. But it’s easy for them to set up an account, and it’s free. We even have a free downloadable instruction sheet that you can provide to your patrons.

How is using Twitter any different than sending a group e-mail to a list of patrons?

It’s not much different, really. It’s just an alternate communication channel, and it has the added benefit of being delivered directly to the recipient’s cell phone as a text message, so it will reach them wherever they are.

Twitter FAQs – continued

What is the benefit to a small or mid-sized public library?

The simple answer is that people get their information through many different channels, and the more channels you participate in, the better your chance that more people will receive your message. And, unlike other social networking outlets, Twitter takes only a few minutes to set up and to use. You haven't invested much time and effort at all, so it doesn't take much of a return to justify the effort. And as your list of followers grows, your message effort stays constant, so the payback becomes even greater.

The better way to answer this question, however, is to give some examples of how libraries are using Twitter. What appears below is the text from some actual Twitter messages (called 'tweets') that I have received from some of the libraries I'm following:

"Don't forget to pick up a great book to read over the long weekend! All branches closed Friday the 3rd & Saturday the 4th."

"Come on out today to hear Percussionist Scott Douglas perform! go to www.ourwebsite.org for details!"

"Donate your used ink cartridges to the Library-- we get credit for them at Staples."

"Friends of the Library 'Wine Tasting Event' - Thur. June 11. Get tickets @ the Library."

"The library is having a beautiful handmade quilt raffle going on now!! Stop, buy!!"

Do you see the possibilities? These aren't long missives – they're just very brief, to-the-point messages or reminders. In today's age of information overload, it might be just the ticket for many of your patrons who don't have time to read through long newsletters or check your website regularly. And typing these types of short little messages will only take you or your staff a few minutes.

Are you sold? If so, the balance of this article gives detailed instructions for creating your Twitter account and sending your first 'tweet'. And as mentioned earlier, we also include a sample flyer that you could distribute within your library that alerts patrons to your presence on Twitter and tells them how to sign up and receive your tweets!

Setting Up a Twitter Account for the Library

1. Go to the Twitter website at www.twitter.com
2. Click on the green “Get Started – Join!” button.
3. You’ll be asked to enter a full name and a user name. These names are important, because they identify you within the Twitter system, and are the names people will search for when they are trying to find and “follow” you. You should use your library name, and /or some other short acronym that your library users are very familiar with and would be apt to think of when searching for you online. You may get a message saying that your chosen username has already been taken. If so, keep trying with a few different variations until you locate an available name.
4. Complete the registration screen by entering a contact e-mail and choosing a password for your Twitter account.
5. After successfully registering, you’ll be given an opportunity to search for other people, or to ‘follow’ some famous people or organizations who are currently sending out messages via Twitter. I would skip this for now (click the “skip this step” link at the bottom of the page..
- 6 You’re DONE. Now you can start sending out your Twitter messages. Use the top menu bar to navigate to the Twitter home page, type in your message in the box beneath the “What are you doing” question, and click update. Each time you want to send out a message, you simply log back into Twitter and repeat step 6.

IMPORTANT NOTE: *It may take a few days for your presence on Twitter to be registered by the system. So don’t advertise your Twitter presence to patrons right away. Send out two or three messages in that first week or so, and then you should be able to be ‘found’ by anyone. You’re up and running!*

Account Customization

There are many options for customizing your Twitter account. They include uploading a custom background image for your Twitter page, choosing whether to receive e-mail notices when you receive new ‘followers’, and so on. With one exception (see the next page), we will not cover those custom settings in this article. You can browse through the Twitter website for further information.

To Receive Twitter Updates On Your Cell Phone

Each person (or business, or library) who sets up a Twitter account can choose to both deliver messages, and to ‘follow’, or receive messages, from others. If you’d like the messages you are receiving from the people you are following to be delivered directly to your cell phone, there are just a few simple steps for getting that done.

Note: Be aware that when you elect to receive Twitter updates via your cell phone, you are electing to receive your updates by means of text messages. You should make sure that your cell phone plan includes a text messaging option – otherwise you may be charged for each and every incoming text message!

Step 1. Log in to your Twitter Account.

Step 2. Click the “Settings” link in the top menu.

Step 3. Click on the “Devices” tab.

Step 4. Input your phone number, and check the box that says: “It’s okay for Twitter to sent txt messages to my phone. Standard rates apply.”

Note: When you enter your cell phone number in the text box, you must precede it with a plus sign (+) and the number 1, followed by your area code and phone number. So, if your complete phone number is 603-555-1212, you would enter +16035551212 in the text box.

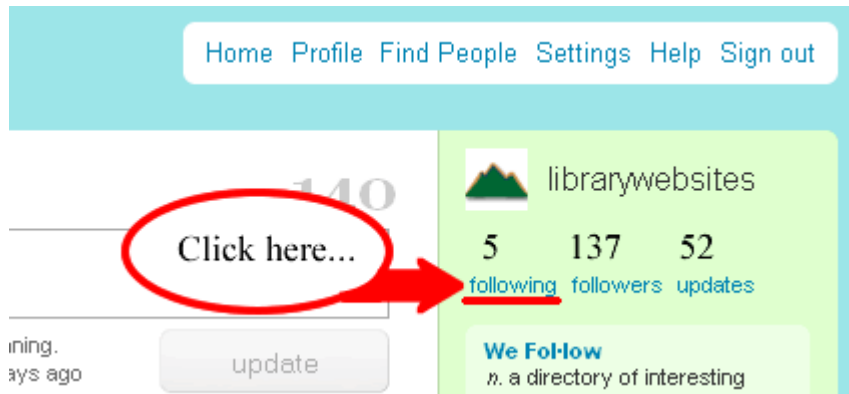
Step 5. Click the “Save” button

Step 6. You will receive a confirmation text message on your cell phone from Twitter. Follow the instructions in that text message, which typically ask that you simply respond to the message with a specific set of letters or numbers.

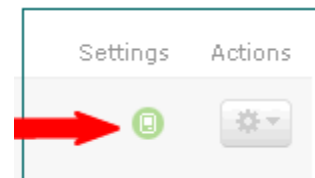
OK – now your cell phone is set up to receive updates from people you’re following. There is, however, one more step to take. You have to specifically identify, from the complete list of people you’re following, which of those people’s messages should be sent to your cell phone. In other words, you won’t automatically start receiving EVERYONE’s message updates on your phone. You have to specifically request that updates from person A, and / or person B, and/or person C, etc be sent to your phone. You will still get updates from all of the rest of the people you’re following, they just won’t come to your phone – you’ll have to log in to Twitter to read them.

Step 7. In the upper right corner of the Twitter home page, there is an indication of the number of people you are following, the number that are following you, and the number

of updates you've submitted. Click on the word "following" beneath the number of people that are following you. (see the diagram below)



On the page that appears next, you'll see a list of all of the people / organizations that you are following. To the right of each one is a "Settings" and "Action" graphic. The "Settings" graphic (see diagram at right) acts like toggle switch. Click it once, and you'll begin to receive that person's updates on your cell phone. Click again, and you won't. Etc.



Sample Announcement About Your Twitter Account

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Did You Know You Can Follow the Library on Twitter?

It's easy, and it's fun! Visit www.twitter.com to sign up for a free Twitter account. Once your account is set up, click on the "Find People" link, and the "Find on Twitter" tab, and type "YourPublicLibrary" in the box

From then on, you'll automatically receive short updates and notices from library staff. You'll never miss an event again! You'll know when new books arrive!. You'll know all the latest library news! You can even choose to receive library updates on your cell phone!



Why not try it out today – Log on to www.twitter.com, and follow the instructions for setting up a new account. It's easy, it's fun, and it's free!

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(Note to libraries – you will of course need to substitute your Twitter user name for the "YourPublicLibrary" entry above)