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The Beginner's Guide to Twitter

I originally wrote this post in May 2008. I have learned a lot since then. Twitter has also changed since then. I have updated this post to reflect both.

his post is a 20-minute guide to Twitter for non-techies. If you don't know what Twitter is, start with my first post on the topic, **T**witter-dee, Twitter-dum (<https://michaelhyatt.com/twitter-dee-twitter-dum.html>). If you still aren't convinced it's worth your time, then read my 12 Reasons to Start Tweeting (<https://michaelhyatt.com/12-reasons-to-start-tweeting.html>).



Photo courtesy of @iStockphoto.com/ymgerman

Over the last few years, I have helped several friends and a few family members get setup on Twitter. I found myself explaining the basics over and over again, so I decided to write a simple, step-by-step guide.

If you are new to Twitter, this will get you up and running *fast*. If you know someone who needs a little help or motivation getting started, send them a link to this post.

Just follow these eight steps.

1. **Set up your account.** Go to Twitter (<https://twitter.com/>) to get started. Enter your name, email, and a password. Click **Sign up**.

You will now be taken to a second screen where you can select a username. This is the name by which you will be known on Twitter. What name should you use?

Your real name is best—if it's available. If not, you can try using a middle initial or prefacing it with something like “the” or “real” (e.g., “TheFrankDavis” or “Real FrankDavis”).



Also, I recommend using initial caps and in-word caps. It will make your username more readable and memorable. For example: I use “MichaelHyatt” rather than simply “michaelhyatt.”

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Now click on the **Create my account** button. That's it. You are now official a member of the Twitter community. Congratulations!

Next, Twitter will assist you in getting started. It will explain what a tweet is and give you the opportunity to “follow” a few friends, popular people, or brands. You can opt out of these steps for now if you wish. Simply click the **Skip this step** link.

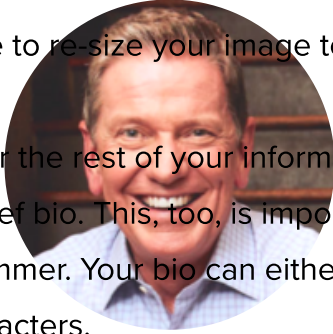
Twitter will also give you a chance to see if some of your friends are on Twitter by checking your online address book. However, your contacts will have to be in one of the supported services: GMail, Hotmail, Yahoo, or AOL. Also, you'll only see users who have allowed their accounts to be found by email address.

This wasn't that helpful to me when I initially started, since my contacts resided in Microsoft Outlook. However, I had a GMail account, so I just exported my contacts from Outlook and then imported them into Gmail. It worked flawlessly. However, if you get stuck, forget this step. You can add your friends later.

2. **Tweak your settings.** Make sure you are on your Twitter home page. Click on the **Settings** link. You should be on the **Account** tab. Set the time zone.

Do not check “Protect my updates” unless you only want those whom you approve to be able to get your updates. Personally, if you check this, it will seriously limit the fun. Make whatever other changes you want. Click the **Save** button.

Now click on the **Profile** tab. Upload your picture. This is important. Many Twitter users (including me) will not follow users without photos, because it is a tell-tale sign of a spammer. Remember that the maximum upload size of your photo is 700k, so you may have to re-size your image to meet this requirement.



Enter the rest of your information, including your location, website or blog (if any), and a brief bio. This, too, is important to keep you from getting flagged as a possible spammer. Your bio can either be serious or fun, but it must be brief—no more than 160 characters.

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Note that you can also connect your Twitter account to Facebook on this page. This will post all your Tweets directly to Facebook. Personally, I don't recommend this, but you may want to do it. You can always change the setting later.

When you are finished, click the **Save** button.

- 3. Setup your phone.** Twitter is *much* more fun if you connect it to your cell phone. By doing so, you can receive updates from those you are following (or just some of them) as well as send your own updates. It's all done through text messaging (e.g., SMS).

However, be forewarned: While Twitter doesn't charge anything for this service, your phone carrier might. It's a good idea to check with them and make sure you are on an "unlimited text messaging plan." You don't want to be surprised with a big phone bill.

Again, under the **Settings** link, click on the **Mobile** tab. Enter your mobile phone number and click on the **Start** button. Now take your cell phone and text message the code Twitter gives you to 40404 (the number will be different if you are outside the U.S.). Be patient. Eventually, Twitter will confirm to you that your device is registered.

If you are using an iPhone, Twitter is built into the operating system (at least if you are using iOS 5 and up). You can set it up by opening the **Preferences** app, scrolling down the screen, and touching the Twitter section. This will give you the ability to post updates to Twitter from within many iPhone applications, including the Photo app.

Now, while still on your cell phone, set up a contact named "Twitter." For the mobile phone number, use 40404. Now every time you want to send a Twitter update, you will send it to this contact name.

4. **Follow family and friends.** If you haven't done so already, add your family and friends by clicking in the "Search" field at the top of your home page. You can type in a username or first and last name. When you do, you will get a list of users who match your search criteria.



You can also do a more advanced search (e.g., searching by location) by clicking on "Refine results" or by going directly to the Advanced Search (<https://twitter.com/#!/search-advanced>) page.

You can begin "following" them by simply clicking on the **Follow** button. If you want to also follow them on your cell phone, then you can turn the "Device Updates" to "on." Personally, I only follow my family and a few close friends on my cell phone. Regardless, you will be able to see everyone you follow on your Twitter home page.

5. **Learn the basic commands.** Think of Twitter as a room full of people, all sitting in a circle. It's a conversation. When you update your status, you are speaking to the whole group. Everyone can hear what you have to say.

- *Replies.* If you want to direct your comments to one specific person in the circle, but loud enough that everyone else can hear, use the "Reply" function. You address the person by using their Twitter user name preceded by the "@" symbol. For example:

@spencesmith I get my haircut at Dion's South in downtown Franklin.

Everyone who is following Spence and me will see the message, but I am specifically directing it to Spence. (Those who are not following both of us will not see the message.)

You can also use the Reply function to refer to someone by name. For example:

I'm headed to dinner at Tin Angel with @gailhyatt and @meghmiller. I am looking forward to trying the new menu.

The thing about replies is that they are “clickable links.” If someone who is following me, clicks on one of the names, they will automatically go to that person’s Twitter page. This will give them the opportunity to follow that person, too.



- *Direct Messages.* Continuing with the metaphor of a conversation with a room full of people, you can also use the “direct message” function. This is like whispering in one person’s ear. They can hear you, but no one else can. You are directing the message to them and only them. For example:

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 (HTTPS://MICHAELHYATT.COM/AUTHOR/MICHAELHYATT/) d Inobles Can you bring my Business Review notebook down to the cafeteria conference room?

Or:

d gailhyatt It looks like I will not be able to leave the office for another 30 minutes. Bummer.

Twitter direct messages have largely replaced simple text messaging for me and many people I know.

- *Hash tags.* You are probably familiar with tagging photos with a short piece of text. Twitter has this capability, too.

The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages. If you click on a hash tag, it will show you all the other tweets associated with a hashtag.

I have attended many conferences where an official hashtag was announced. This enables everyone at the conference to track what everyone is saying about the conference.

For example, someone might say:

Man, I loved @AndyStanley’s opening talk. He never ceases to speak to me. #cat2011

#Cat2011 was the hashtag for the Catalyst Conference in Atlanta in the fall of 2011.

- *Other Commands.* You can add people you want to follow from your cell phone. Just type in “follow [username].” For example:



You can check your stats—the number of people you are following plus the number of people following you—from your cell phone by typing “stats” without any additional text.
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To stop all Twitter updates to your phone, send:

off

To turn them back on send:

on

You can find answers to almost every other Twitter question in the Twitter Help Center (<https://support.twitter.com/>).

6. **Start tweeting.** So now you are all setup. It's time to start posting. You can do this from your Twitter home page or from your cell phone.

The main thing you need to know is that the message can be no longer than 140 characters long. If you use the Web page, the entry field will automatically count your characters. After a while, you'll instinctively know how long this is. I rarely go over the limit. But if you do, it's no big deal. Your message will just be truncated.

How often should you Twitter? That's the 30-character question. My daughter @meghmiller says, “Don't Twitter more than six times a day.” Personally, I think 10–12 is the upper limit. Obviously, there's a balance here. Some of the people I follow, post way more updates than that.

The real issue is whether or not you are adding something of value. There's an old Jerry Seinfeld comedy routine called "Air Travel." In it, he talks about airline pilots who insist on telling us all about the route they are taking. (Like anyone cares.)



He says, as passengers, we don't knock on the cockpit door and say, "Oh, by the way, I'm eating the peanuts now." (Obviously this was pre-911.) So why do pilots feel the need to update us? All we care about is getting to the destination.

In like manner, no one probably wants to hear the blow-by-blow of your life. However, some color commentary is good. However, this is definitely art not science, so there are no hard, fast rules.

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Regardless, you should consider every Twitter update as a *branding impression*. You are developing a reputation with your online friends, so make sure you are adding something to the conversation.

This is really no different than a face-to-face conversation. You want to say something that is interesting, helpful, or just plain entertaining. I don't think you should over-think it, but I don't think you should just text the first thing that pops in your mind.

7. **Be careful.** You definitely need to be cautious. It's probably not a good idea to say something like, "I'm headed to the west coast for a week. My poor, beautiful wife is going to be home all alone." Bad idea. For obvious reasons.

You need to think about the fact that crazy people and criminals have Twitter accounts, too. You especially need to be cautious about sharing too much private information that could compromise your safety or that of your loved ones.

I have also had some experience with stalkers, so you may only want to Twitter *after* you have gone somewhere, not before. Otherwise, you might find people showing up to watch you. (Don't laugh. It has happened to me on several occasions.)

8. **Consider third-party apps.** An entire eco-system has sprung up around Twitter. Here are some of my favorite applications:

- *HootSuite* (<https://www.hootsuite.com/>). This is the application I use to manage Twitter on my desktop. It will even manage Facebook profiles and pages,

LinkedIn, and several other social media services. It is great because it allows you to segment people by groups (or columns). I have groups for my family, close friends, colleagues, etc. It is available for both desktop systems and mobile devices.



- *BufferApp* (<http://bufferapp.com>). I use this application to post my tweets, so I don't flood my followers with a string of posts. Instead, I put them in Buffer, and it spreads my tweets throughout the day. It gives you tremendous control. You can determine how often and at what times you tweet. It comes with extensions for the most popular browsers, so you can buffer a tweet directly from a web page. It also allows you to buffer Facebook status updates. (<HTTPS://MICHAELHYATT.COM/AUTHOR/MICHAELHYATT/>)
- *SocialOomph* (<https://www.socialoomph.com/>). I use this application to bulk-schedule a whole series of tweets. For example, I have identified my 90 most popular blog posts. I have written a tweet promoting each one. Via SocialOomph, I schedule one tweet per day at a specific time. I upload the text file to SocialOomph and forget about it. Everything is on auto-pilot. It will also post to Facebook.

It is easy to get overwhelmed with all the third-party Twitter apps. Don't. Start with HootSuite and then grow from there as you have the time and interest.

Twitter is one of those apps that is best learned by using it. The most important thing you can do is *get started*. You really can't make that many mistakes. Just remember to have fun and enjoy the people you meet online.

Questions: What questions do you have about Twitter? What else would you recommend to Twitter beginners? You can leave a comment by clicking here (<https://michaelhyatt.com/the-beginners-guide-to-twitter.html#respond>).

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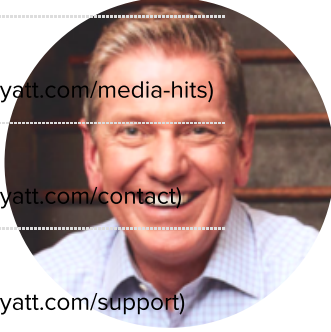
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