

Diagnosing
and Curing

Competitive Twitter Syndrome



About This Ebook

Are you struggling to figure out how to measure your effectiveness with Twitter? This ebook explains a common pitfall in that process, and offers some practical suggestions for focusing on the quality of your conversations over easily quantified but meaningless metrics.

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This ebook originally appeared as a two-part blog post in November 2008.

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Why You Need This

As you begin to implement your Twitter strategy, it's easy for well-meaning Twitter users to slip into Competitive Twitter Syndrome (CTS). When someone misses the purpose of social media by focusing on performance metrics instead of conversation, Twitter becomes a dull knife in the hands of your neighborhood barber. Not fun to watch, and even less fun if you participate!

I started using Twitter early in 2008. While that may not seem like a long time ago, that is a decade in Twitter years. During this time, I've experimented and watched others experiment. I've seen and done lots of things, some good, some bad, and some ugly.

In other words, I can show you some shortcuts and point out the potholes.



An Early Adopter's Tale

I came to Twitter nearly a year after the bleeding edge adopters. Like many people, I was intrigued by the concept, but didn't immediately see a use for my personal or business life. But the idea of constantly updating my status sat in my subconscious percolating.

I'll spare you the details of how I got started, and the missteps and lucky accidents along the way. But I can summarize this by saying that I jumped into the deep end and starting swimming.



Figuring It out

In the early adopter phase, everyone is mucking their way through, figuring out the smart or new uses for things. This means that you witness a lot of trial and error. With any new tool and new concept, it takes some experimentation to explore the possibilities and see what really works.

During this phase, people begin to figure out and stumble upon strategies and processes that later become best practices. But meanwhile, you watch a lot of people doing a lot of strange, wonderful, and sometimes not-so-brilliant things.

It's About Conversation

Several years ago, smart people started to realize that the Internet could be used to have conversations with people, not just monologues. Company and personal blogs began accepting comments from readers, starting a dialog between the blogger and readers. Retailers like Amazon.com started allowing people to post product reviews and rate purchased items.

These were the start of a shift in how we used the Internet, a new phase dubiously called “web 2.0.” From those humble starts came the roots of the social media explosion, where dialog is the reason for being online. Blogs exploded as more people found a platform to speak their mind, and social networking sites began forming around students, resume sharing, and photography. Common interests became the rallying point for each new social media network.



Short Message Nirvana

Twitter and its microsharing cousins allow the quickest and easiest conversations because of the short statement length. In a space shorter than a cell phone text message, you can invite your friends to lunch, share a great article, express your current work challenge, or tell a joke. In seconds, your followers can reply with their own lunch plans, favorite blog posts, work challenges, and humorous retorts. The Twitter timeline contains endless conversation threads.

Danger, Will Robinson!

I'll leave it to the social media analysts to say when Twitter goes mainstream. But my experience shows that the number of businesses coming to Twitter to get involved with social media scene is growing.

There are companies doing really smart things because they have been paying attention to social media and they understand what it is about.

But other companies are bringing their old-school marketing ideas to Twitter, wanting to use it for monologue. These companies don't seem to understand that they need to be listening as much as they are talking. Or that they need to be talking with (instead of talking to) their online community.

Spotting Trouble

But even among the early adopters and some of the smart new Twitter users, I see evidence of something dangerous creeping in. I'm calling it Competitive Twitter Syndrome (CTS). The main symptoms of CTS are a focus on quantities, grades, rankings, and scores. In other words, quantity over quality, and numbers over people. The conversation with your community, the whole reason for using social media, is secondary to something measurable like the size of your community.



Tell-Tale Signs

How can you tell if you have Competitive Twitter Syndrome? Here are some tell-tale signs:

- ☑ You have a whole folder of bookmarks (or a Delicious tag) for Twitter statistics and analysis tools.
- ☑ You can rattle off your follower number and current Twitter Grade.
- ☑ You change the way you tweet because you think it will improve your score or ranking.
- ☑ You know your location in your town's Twitter Elite.
- ☑ You evaluate new Twitter followers based on their numbers.
- ☑ You add or delete people you are following to keep your ratio of following/followers in a target zone.

This is a dangerous trend, and can be a trap that keeps people and businesses from really benefiting from social media.



The Causes

There are lots of reasons why Competitive Twitter Syndrome exists.

- **Humans love numbers.** We love to measure and count things, and once we have numbers, we love to compare things. Human nature isn't likely to change. There will always be some attention to the measurable aspects of Twitter and all social media.
- **Old-school thinking about new media.** Like an addictive personality, some companies seem on a collision course with CTS. A lot of companies today focus on quarterly results rather than long-term planning. This leads to the short-term over-analysis of things that can be measured. Often, companies using this strategy ignore things that are more important but less easy to quantify.
- **Abundance of analysis tools.** Developers, eager to participate in this exciting realm, build applications that filter, analyze, and mash together data from the Twitter time line. As a result, Twitter users become aware of tools that help them empirically examine their Twitter experience and determine their power ranking within the community. These tools measure what is easily measured, but don't provide a way to measure the effectiveness of your communication.



Don't think I'm against analysis because I'm not. I know my [Twitter Grade](#), and check my [TweetStats](#), and frequently review my [follow cost](#), among others. These tools provide feedback, a way to understand your past Twitter behavior. However, staring into them is a bit like driving while only looking in the rear view mirror—great while sitting in park, but dangerous when moving forward.

Finding The Cure

If you want to understand how to harness social media and reform your Twitter use, here are some suggestions.

- **What is your Twitter goal?** Ask yourself why you are on Twitter and be honest. If you just like chatting with your Friday night coffee klatch during the week, that's your goal. Your goal doesn't have to be business related. If you have more than one goal, break out your effort for meeting each goal as a percentage.
- **Define your ideal audience.** Your ideal audience is the kind of people you want to engage in conversation. Describe them. What features do they have? Be as specific as possible.
- **Review the list of people you follow.** Are you following the people who allow you to meet your goal? If not, start locating the people you want to engage. You are following the right people when you have interesting tweets to read that inspire your responses.
- **Review your updates.** What are you really saying? What conversations are you starting? Do some quick arithmetic and figure out how many tweets each day or week meet your goal.
- **Review your updates for @replies.** What percentage of your daily/weekly tweets go into responding to what other people say to you? Based on your goal and your ideal audience, does that seem like the right percentage?



Finding The Cure (cont.)

If you stay focused on the cure, you can improve your Twitter experience. You can enjoy more satisfying conversations with your ideal audience. These things might also improve your Twitter statistics, but that would be the icing on the cake. The whole purpose of this exercise is to engage your audience, not improve your scores.

What Not To Do

You might have noticed that I didn't say to review your follower list. That wasn't an oversight on my part. You have no control over the people who follow you. People make their own choices about who to follow and you must accept their decisions. If you are engaging in the conversations you want to have, other people who want to talk about the same things will find you. Your job is to be interesting and create content, not to fuss over who follows you. Put your attention on the things you can control, your content choices and who you follow. The quality of those decisions impacts who decides to follow you.

Robert Scoble (@Scobelizer) wrote that he defines himself by the people he follows, not who follows him. That wisdom rings true with me. Try it on, and see if it doesn't improve your own Twitter experience.

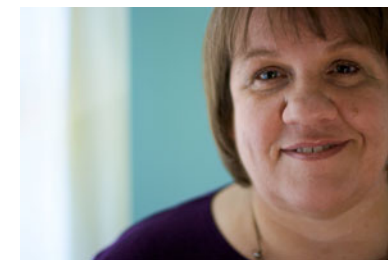
Conclusion

Some people are never going to understand that social media means talking and listening, no matter how many books or blog entries they read. Like many diseases, Competitive Twitter Syndrome is easily cured when caught in the early stages. Get clear about your goals and audience, and focus on what you can control. Forget about the metrics and enjoy the conversation. Twitter is all about conversation.

About The Author

About Charlene Kingston

Charlene Kingston is an information strategist and writer with more than 25 years experience solving business challenges with practical information solutions. She started Crow Information Design in 1995 in the Phoenix metropolitan area.



When she is not advising people about Twitter or [writing about Twitter](#), Charlene spends a lot of time using Twitter.

Find Charlene online:

- Follow Charlene on Twitter: [Kinchie](#) (personal) and [CrowInfoDesign](#) (business)
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Finding the shortest distance between your message and your audience.

I wrote this ebook to help people like you make better business use of Twitter.

I'd love to hear how you diagnose and cure

Competitive Twitter Syndrome in your business.

Regards,

