

Thou Shalt Tweet!



15
COMMANDMENTS
FOR GOVERNMENT AGENCIES
ON TWITTER

Here is a quick wrap up of the 15 Commandments

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A stylized illustration of a black bird with a green beak and a green stripe on its chest, holding a tablet. The tablet screen displays the text 'THOU SHALT TWEET' in a black, serif font. The background features a grey sky with white lightning bolts and wavy lines, and a landscape with green hills and a white building with a dome in the distance.

THOU
SHALT
TWEET

There is a promised land for government organizations - one where citizens pay attention to public agencies' information and pass it along to others, spreading the word for all to hear. Although there are many paths to the promised land, your journey is likely going to pass through Twitter. Learning how to use Twitter effectively and knowing the ins and outs will certainly help you safely arrive in the promise land.

There is enormous value for government organizations to use Twitter. There are areas where Twitter can get critical information out to the people who need it faster than any other means available.

Just to name a few examples, Twitter has been effectively used for crisis communication, public health coordination and public safety improvement.

Government organizations venturing out on Twitter face a steep learning curve. The roads can be treacherous and you can easily get lost along the way and end up in the "land of nobody listens", or worse, the land of "nobody cares". While starting up your Twitter account or adopting some new practices, patience is important. Although Twitter can immediately connect you to your constituents, it takes some time to build up an audience and learn to use the tool.

NOT TO WORRY! The 15 commandments in this guide will help you avoid the most common pitfalls and help steer you in the right direction.

This guide evolved from a post by [Alain Lemay](#) on GovLoop titled "Who Not to Follow On Twitter: A Guide for Public Sector Employees." Alain is a Senior Web Communications Analyst for the Foreign Affairs and International Trade Agency in Canada. He graciously donated his time to assist in producing this guide in tandem with the GovLoop team.

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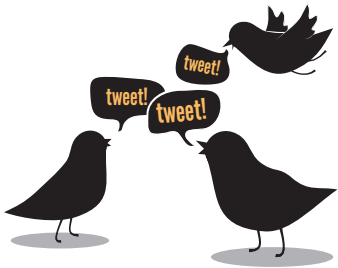


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1 THOU SHALT LISTEN BEFORE YOU LEAP



We cannot emphasize enough the fact that any government organization should learn to monitor social media before they even attempt to create a Twitter (or any other type of) account.



If you went to a social function and saw a group of people in the midst of a discussion, would you just barge in and start talking about your work and your interest? No, you would walk over to the group, listen in a bit to see what they are talking about, and then when there was an opening to add value to the conversation, you would chime in. The same principle should be applied to social media, especially on Twitter. The important lesson for government agencies while using social media is to go where your citizens are. Listen in on their concerns, needs and interests. And then contribute where it adds value.

There are many tools you can use to monitor your Twitter accounts and listen to your citizens. If your agency wants to broaden and monitor multiple social media channels (and you have the money), you can go for one of the big guys (Radian6, Scout Labs, Alterian).

On the cheaper side, Hootsuite, TweetDeck and Seesmic all offer free or very affordable social media management/monitoring solutions. You can do a lot of cool things with these tools. One cool feature is that you can link your Facebook account with your Twitter account, this will save you a lot of time posting content in multiple locations.

Also worth mentioning are Social Mention and Google Alerts.

But for a simpler approach, you can start with Twitter Advanced Search, Monitor and Twitterfall to name a few other tools you can use to monitor Twitter.

GovLoop Tip: Use the Search Function

Comment in the Twitterati Group from GovLoop member Sam Allgood:

“Search for terms in your area of interest to find people to follow who are tweeting about the area. Once following, read their tweets for hints on how to tweet.

Check out different tools like TweetDeck and twitterfall.com to find a tool that is comfortable for you.”

2 THOU SHALT USE THY PROFILE INFO PROPERLY



Your profile should entice people to want to follow and engage with you. That means putting up a picture (a logo or other identifier) and filling in your profile information.

Your Picture: Your organization's Twitter picture should be the senior representative doing the tweeting (an ambassador, for example) or your agency logo. This should be up on the first day and changed when it is appropriate.

Your Profile: Your profile is where you tell people who you are and what you will be tweeting about. You are limited to 160 characters, so make every character count.

You should include:

- A link back to your agency website
- A description of the account's "raison d'être:" This is the official feed of the department of ...

You could also include things like:

- What you intend to tweet about (We tweet about international trade, travel alerts, etc)
- Something personal, if appropriate (John Dough, senior trade officer, tweeting for the Department of Commerce)


Your User Name: Usernames must be no more than 15 characters in length so take this into consideration when choosing your name. You may have to use an acronym. If you can, try using something that is universal instead of terms generally only used in your organization. For example, use industry terms, or international ISO country codes. Also, avoid selecting a username that is specific to the senior executive running the agency, as we know these people change often.

GovLoop Tip: Who's in your network already?

Take a look at other agencies and departments, maybe someone has already set up an account. Get in touch with these people, sit down with them and talk through the challenges you're having and see where you can collaborate.

3 THOU SHALT HAVE A DISCLAIMER

Do you only plan to tweet from Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 5:00 or only check for mentions once a day at 3:00 pm?



disclaimer:
Tweet, tweet tweet, tweet
tweet. Tweet tweet tweet
tweet tweet.

Fine, but you need to spell this out. You need a good disclaimer!

As a government organization, you are subject to certain limitations. You can't always be on 24/7 and your social media team may well consist of a group of one plus occasional help from a temp or summer student. So you may not be able to answer every inquiry up to the minute and you may have to do things that go a bit against the spirit of social media.

exactly how you intend to use the channel so that followers will know what to expect - and then stick to it. If you make changes to the disclaimer, tweet about it.

Put the disclaimer up on your main website and link to it from your Twitter bio.

People are usually forgiving of this approach if you are upfront about it. Explain

GovLoop Tip: Managing Accidental Tweets

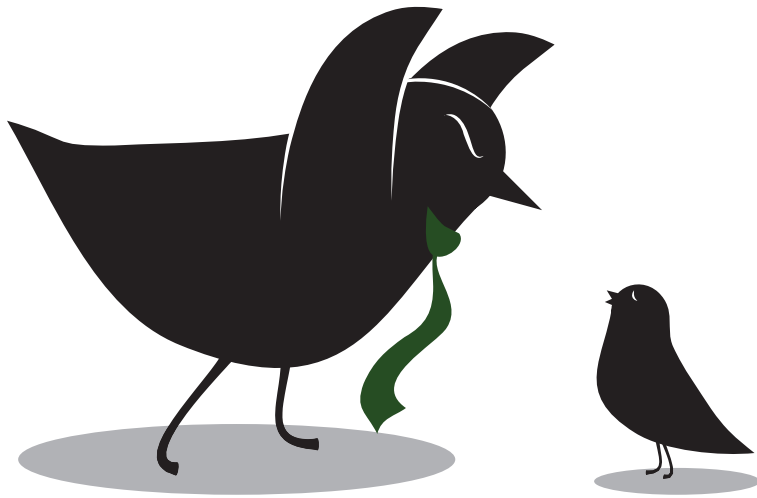
So what happens if you accidentally send out a tweet? This can easily happen if you forget to log out of your official account and think you are tweeting from your professional. If you make this mistake, the first thing you need to do is admit fault, be honest and transparent, and then issue an apology to your followers.

A comment by GovLoop member Charles A. Ray, in the post “Secret Service Starts Twitter Account”, stumbles says:

“Stuff happens. One of the things agencies have to realize when they launch social media initiatives, is that mistakes will be made, but they’re usually not fatal. It helps if staff are part of the launch and are thoroughly briefed on what is and is not appropriate.”

4 THOU SHALT NOT BULLY (NO ONE LIKES A BULLY!)

As a government agency, you certainly want to give some authority to your account and discourage spoofers who



may want to intentionally mislead the public. And certainly you will want to report to Twitter any accounts that appear to be intentionally spoofing your account and/or tweeting misleading information.

But! This does not give you a license to go on a witch hunt on Twitter. This includes reporting or threatening anyone with legal action over coincidental and unintentional similarities with your name, trademark, or other. Nothing will get you on the wrong end of a Twitter storm faster and your organization's reputation can be permanently damaged.

The fact is that some people might have created a Twitter account in order to push out your information out of sheer concern for their fellow citizens. They probably did so because you weren't doing it and they willingly filled the void. The best thing for your organization is to try to get these people on board. Let them know you created an official account. Encourage them to re-tweet your tweets. In short, this is a golden opportunity to create brand advocates.

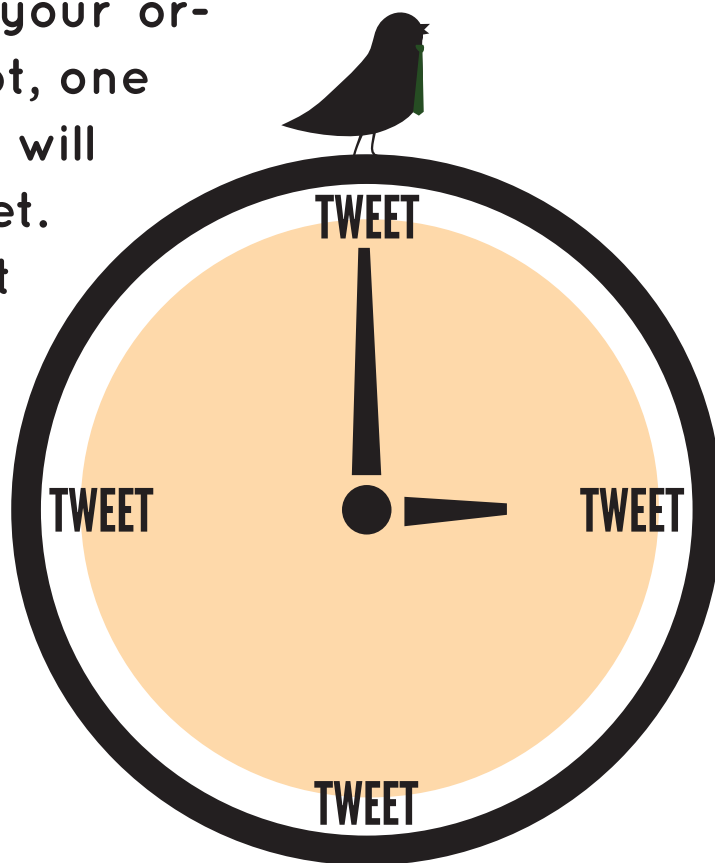
Get your account verified if you can. If not, make sure you have your Twitter account properly branded and have links to and from your official government website.



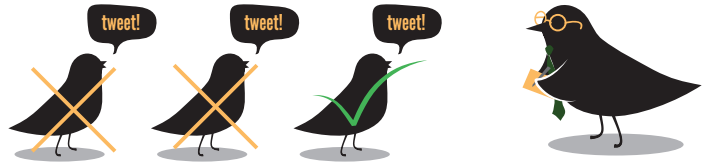
5 THOU SHALT TWEET REGULARLY

When deciding to follow your organization's account or not, one of the first thing twittizens will do is look at your last tweet. If it is 2 months old, forget about it!

Set a tweet schedule and try to stick with it - even if it's just for a quick RT or a reply to an interesting post. It will give twittizens the feeling that your account is lively and that you are taking care of it.



6 THOU SHALT INTEGRATE THY TWEET APPROVAL PROCESS



No one wants to go back ten times to get what is essentially the same content approved over and over again. The trick is to build in an approval process into your organization's regular content approval process.

You will likely have some negotiating to do, so here's what can help:

- Propose a blanket approval for certain types of content. This can be news releases, ministerial announcements, etc - stuff that already gets approved more quickly!
- For other types of content your organization produces that could be re-purposed as content for tweets, determine the level of approval. For example:
 - Ministerial photo galleries need approval from the minister's office.
 - Program announcements need director general approval or above
 - Updated need director approval, etc, etc
- Identify posting authority for different individuals. For example:
 - Your senior analyst can post tweets on this subject without approval
 - Interns/summer students can only tweet media releases
 - John Dough is authorized to tweet at his discretion on select topics during a crisis situation
 - etc, etc

Not only will this simplify the process down the line, it will considerably speed up your response time when you need it - a crucial part of using Twitter effectively.



7 THOU SHALT NOT REGISTER ALTERNATE ACCOUNTS



It is standard procedure for government organizations to register alternate site names to prevent squatters

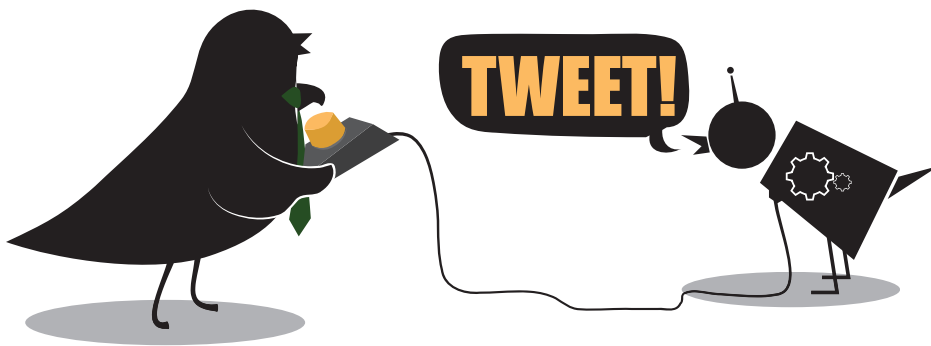
or spoofers. Unfortunately, this is forbidden under Twitter Rules and Twitter is pretty specific about it:

“Any accounts engaging in the activities specified below are subject to permanent suspension.”

- **Serial Accounts:** You may not create serial accounts ... with overlapping use cases.
- **Username Squatting:** As far as Twitter is concerned, this includes “creating accounts for the purpose of preventing others from using those account names.”
- **Inactive Accounts:** accounts that are inactive for more than 6 months may be removed without notice

So what can you do to avoid copycats, spoofers and spammers? Report any account that seems to be spoofing yours for malicious purposes but please be careful how you go about it (see commandment 5 on bullying)

8 THOU SHALT NOT AUTOMATE THY TWEETS



I know it can be tempting!
Automation reduces the workload, but there are two major drawbacks:
1 - It is not social
2- It can get you in trouble!

Not-so-social!

Nothing says “I don’t really give a darn about this engagement nonsense” better than automated tweets, replete with cut off text and links because the person inputting the titles to your news releases or page titles knows nothing about Twitter. If you are going to tweet, take the two extra minutes to craft a tweet that at least shows a genuine interest in sharing valuable information.

Double trouble!

Forgetting for a moment that this is against Twitter rules, you may remember recently that some politicians (who shall remain anonymous) recently got a nasty surprise when false tweets began showing up on their accounts. You see, these politicians were tweeting the RSS feeds of a higher up whose site had been hacked. So the false

tweets were being spread through out their network of tweeters. Needless to say, they don’t do that anymore!

One thing that is accepted and in fact, good practice is to schedule tweets (it helps if you are using a Twitter client). If it is very important information, you could Tweet it when it comes out and schedule a similar tweet for peak viewing times (usually, early morning, early afternoon, and after dinner time)

If your target audience is in a different time zone, you should take that into account.

What if your audience is international? You could plan 3 tweets at 12 hour intervals. Just make sure there is different content that appears between those tweets so it doesn’t look like you are just tweeting the same thing over and over.

GovLoop Tip: Use the Right Language

Make sure you are using language online that your audience is receptive too. This will take some time to feel out. You don’t have a lot of space in a tweet, so think critically about each character.

GovLoop Member David Ferguson shares his experiences:

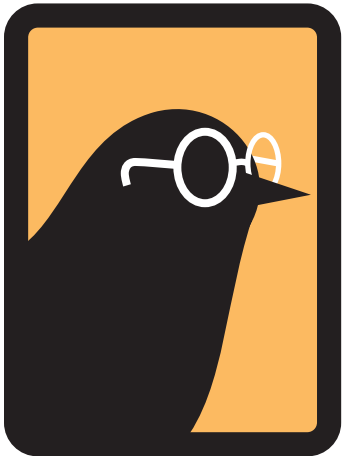
Things I don’t care for (recognizing this is only my opinion): excess of exclamation points. ALL CAPS stuff. Gratuitous personalization, as in “I just checked out the Libraries list of upcoming

events. Wow! “ -- who’s *I* and why is he so easily impressed?

And, oh, heavens, the bureaucratic passive: “Public Encouraged to Attend The Next Budget Forum.” (their quirky title caps.)

So, have a clear voice and don’t try too many tricks. It is very challenging to describe a link in less than 140 characters, but this is an essential skill an agency needs to master.

9 THOU SHALT TWEET IN FIRST PERSON



OK. This may sound like strange advice for an organization that frequently issues highly impersonal press releases: “Minister Soandso to visit site of the new WidgetrUs factory.” But experience has shown time and again that an individual on Twitter will beat out an anonymous organization hands down on followers, retweets, etc. So find a way to add humanity to your streams if you can.

There are two ways you can do this.

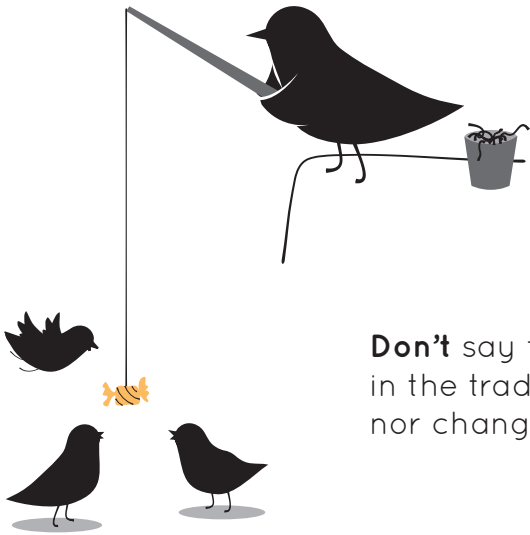
1- Find one or more spokesperson(s) to tweet on behalf of the organizations. Even if most of the tweets are clearly organizational, a few more personal tweets here and there will go a long way. (This is the official Twitter account of the Department of Deep Pockets. Deputy Minister Lint and his staff will be tweeting with you)

2- Mention first names of some of the people who will be doing the actual tweeting for the organization in the profile (This is the official Twitter account of the Department of Friendliness. Marc, Lindsey and Todd will be tweeting with you.)

3- Brand an account to a senior executive. For example, An embassy Twitter account could have a picture and bio of the ambassador and tweet in the first person about the mission’s activities:

- I am attending a meeting of the business association of Prague
- My staff and I are attending a benefit concert with local artists performing live.

10 THOU SHALT NOT BAIT AND SWITCH



It can be tempting to spice-up our tweets to get more clicks, RTs, etc. This is especially true in the public sector where content can sometimes be...shall we say...dry. **DON'T!**

Don't say that your senior leader is announcing important changes in the trade industry if he or she is only really commenting on minor changes.

Don't say that your mayor is on a "historic" tour of Williamsburg if 3 mayors have done it before him or her.

And **don't** ever provide a description for a link that directs tweeps to a different page. Nothing will frustrate Twitter users faster than clicking on a shortened URL only to find out that the subject is different that what you described.

It is ok to improve a title to give it some hook, but only to a point.

Do try to find something that is "newsworthy" in your post if you can.

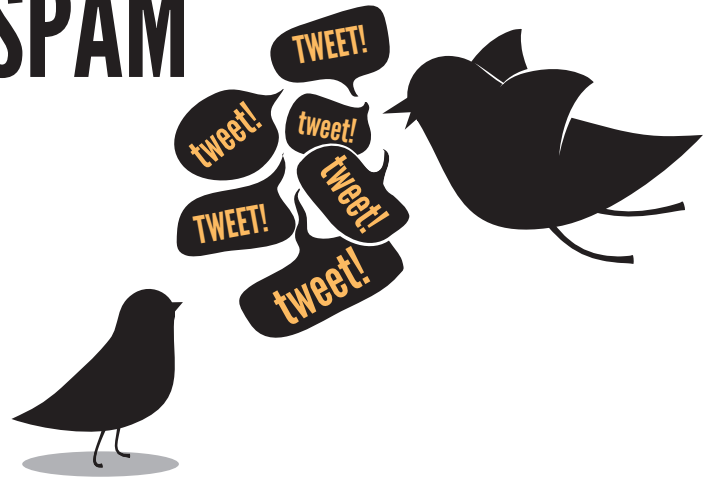
Is it a first visit? Is it important? To whom is it directed to?

Try to find what is interesting about this post and highlight it.

Do this consistently and you will earn a good reputation, and a good following.

11 THOU SHALT NOT SPAM

Government organizations don't spam, do they? Maybe not intentionally, but Twitter has a long list of behaviors that it qualifies as spam that you might not have thought of.

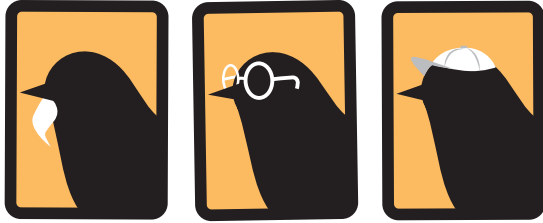


Here are a few of those:

- Posting misleading links;
- Posting duplicate content over multiple accounts or multiple duplicate updates on one-account;
- Posting multiple unrelated updates to a topic using #;
- Sending large numbers of duplicate @replies or mentions;
- Sending large numbers of unsolicited @replies or mentions in an attempt to spam a service or link;
- Adding a large number of unrelated users to lists in an attempt to spam a service or link;
- Repeatedly posting other users' Tweets as your own;
- Creating or purchasing accounts in order to gain followers;
- Using or promoting third-party sites that claim to get you more followers

So keep these in mind and remember - the only good Spam comes in a can!

12 THOU SHALT BE SELECTIVE OF WHO YOU FOLLOW



Following an individual or an organization on Twitter could be considered an endorsement of that individual or organization. So you will need to be selective and strategic about it.



So, what types of accounts should you follow?

- Programs\initiatives from within your organization who have a Twitter presence
- Fellow government departments who share part of your mandate
- Foreign government organizations who are in

the same “business” as yours

- International organizations who bring something to bear on your industry
- Universities of other higher learning institution who have programs related to your domain of expertise.

You could also follow other types of stakeholder accounts but always keep the notion of perceived bias in mind:

- Industry associations (bar associations, or other professional associations)
- Thought leaders in your industry



13 THOU SHALT MONITOR THY ACCOUNT

Creating a Twitter account is one thing but keeping it alive is another. If you create a Twitter account for your organization, you had better do some thinking beforehand.

Who will monitor the account for mentions or direct messages (i.e. praise, criticisms, RTs, @ mentions, etc.)? Some of the tools mentioned in commandment 1 will come in very hand here to monitor your own accounts.

What will you do with those mentions? When do you reply? What should go to your media staff? Do you have a list of key contacts in the organization that you can forward questions to? How will you handle criticism? These are all things you have to think of ahead about time and include in your planning.

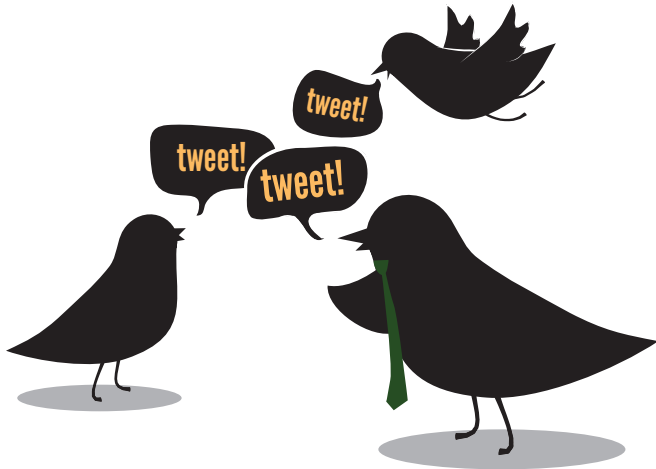
I would suggest a quick risk analysis while you are at it. What happens if your account gets hacked? What if someone sends out a tweet by mistake?

The better prepared you are, the lower your level of risk to your organization.

P.S. When someone RT's your tweet, it is customary to thank them! @johndeus
Thank you for the RT. Much appreciated.



14 THOU SHALT CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONVERSATION



Yes, you can use Twitter purely as a push medium and, indeed, some of the bigshots do. But you can move your agenda forward by retweeting those accounts that have the same goals as your organization.

Start by making a list of your stakeholders and follow their accounts. These could include:

- Other government departments which share your mission
- Foreign departments that have the same mandate as your agency
- Universities
- Trade unions

A side note here, following an account can be seen as an endorsement of that organization/business/individual, so be selective. Only follow official accounts of reputable organizations. Avoid (unless it makes sense) following individuals, businesses, or politicians.

When they put out important content, don't be afraid to retweet (RT) the post. In turn, they will likely retweet your information when it is appropriate. After all, that is the whole point of using Twitter - circulating important information.

15 THOU SHALT MEASURE FOR SUCCESS



As a government organization, you always have a duty to spend taxpayer money responsibly. In order to do this, you have to show that the resources you expended for “this Twitter thing” were justified.

The way you do this is by keeping track of your successes.

Growth of your followers

Chart the increase over time of your followers. Try to see if there are spikes related to topics, seasons, timing, etc.

Number of clicks on your links

Most url shortening technologies include a way to track the clickthroughs to your content. You can also check your web logs to see where the traffic came from.

Number of retweets

How many people have retweeted your tweets?

Number of @ mentions

How many questions or comments have you received through Twitter?

Quality of retweets and @ mentions

Who is retweeting your content? You may find that the same individuals are retweeting your content on a regular basis. Are these people influential (reporters, celebrities, subject authorities, etc. Do they have large number of followers?)?

If you notice individuals who have taken to retweeting your content, it may be useful to develop a relationship with them. Then, when you have really important content you are going to send out, you can let them know in advance. It will ensure they retweet it and give them a scoop of sorts. Win-win!

Reach

Some tools such as Tweetreach will give you an evaluation of how many people your tweet has reached.

Sentiment

The jury is still out on automated measurement of sentiment but if you have a manageable number of RTs and @ mentions you can eyeball it. Just count how many were positive, negative, or neutral.

If you can't or don't feel the need to eyeball for sentiment on a regular basis, you can perhaps do it only when you issue very important content to gauge the response.

There you have it -

15 simple commandments that will put your organization on the road to the promised land. Twitter is a great tool to improve your outreach efforts and connect with citizens. Just remember to be patient while using Twitter, if you follow this guide, you will see increases in your followers and RTs, and grow your community. We have faith that, in no time at all, you will have mastered Twitter and other agencies will look to you for guidance and best practices on how to use Twitter.

More Resources

- [A Twitterfall in Congress](#)
- [Can Twitter Reimagine Democracy?](#)
- [Federal Government New Media Contacts](#)
- [Getting Started on Twitter \(and Bonus Glossary of Terms\)](#)
- [Government-Related Twitter Hashtag Directory](#)
- [Mashable Twitter Guide Book](#)
- [Mom, This is How Twitter Works](#)
- [The Importance of the Twitter ReTweet](#)
- [Twitter Cliff Notes](#)
- [Twitterati Group on GovLoop](#)
- [Unlucky 13? Twitter “Worst Practices” For Rookies \(And Others\) to Avoid](#)
- And follow us! @Govloop!

