

Chapter 1

Catching Twitter's Coat Tails

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A few years ago a small Web site called Twitter appeared on the Internet. Twitter is kind of like a blog, but your posts must be less than 140 characters. Twitter users call their posts *tweets*. Of course, your tweets have to be that small to be sent as a text message to your followers. That's Twitter lingo for subscribers to your Twitter updates, usually your friends, family, and fans. As it turns out, my dad is one of my biggest fans. All of my small daily updates about my life go straight to his cell phone. Likewise, all of his updates go to my phone. This way we get to share little things we wouldn't otherwise take the time to call and talk about. This helps bring us closer together, even though we live miles apart.

The idea of keeping in touch with friends and family is comforting and increases Twitter's appeal, but Twitter has even larger implications.

Why Do People Tweet?

You already know one reason I tweet, to stay close to friends and family. But there are several other reasons why people might be compelled to get involved with Twitter. Here are a few examples:

- ✓ Stay in touch with friends and family.
- ✓ Get instant advice from friends.
- ✓ Meet new people.
- ✓ Keep informed of stock market trends.
- ✓ Build cool stuff with their open API.
- ✓ Build a business around Twitter.

- ✓ Promote a business with Twitter and interact with customers.
- ✓ Get involved in politics.
- ✓ Stay informed of breaking current events as they happen.
- ✓ Talk to influential people and celebrities.

These are just a few common reasons why someone might be on Twitter. There are even more creative uses of Twitter. In Chapter 4, you learn about a plant that tweets when it needs to be watered. You can also use Twitter to update your Google Calendar by sending a direct message to @gcal. If you want to know the time in London, you can follow @big_ben_clock that bongs every hour on the hour.

Perhaps a more practical example of creative Twitter use is @AusTraffic, run by the *Austin American Statesmen* newspaper. The account includes only tweets on traffic conditions in Austin, Texas. People can even direct message (DM) the account to send traffic reports, which are then shared with all the account's followers. If you follow this account to your phone, you have an instant, real-time feed of traffic conditions in Austin.

One of Twitter's strengths is that it doesn't limit what people can do with it. Nor do they presume to know exactly how everyone should interact with it. The founders of Twitter have left it up to the users to discover what Twitter is to be used for and how.

Some now common features of Twitter were originally derived out of how the Twitter community decided to use the application. @ replies for instance were invented and adopted by the Twitter community first. @ replies are used when one Twitter user references another Twitter user's screen name. For example, if someone wanted to mention me in a tweet, they would type @DustyReagan. Twitter noticed how people were using the @ sign when they referred to another Twitter account, and to make the @ sign more helpful, Twitter linked it to the referred users account. Then they made it so you could search for all mentions of your screen name. Some other conventions that came out of the Twitter community include *hashtags* and *retweets*.

What Makes Twitter So Special?

Twitter's premise is simple, but its effects are wide-reaching. Here are four features of Twitter that make it more than a blog with 140 character posts:

- ✓ Asymmetrical relationships
- ✓ Follow and update using SMS
- ✓ Trends and Search
- ✓ Open API

A brief glossary of terms

If you haven't been around the Twitter block, you need to learn a few Twitter-specific terms to communicate with your new Twitter friends and colleagues.

- ✓ direct message — Sometimes referred to as a DM, a direct message is a private message sent to you, or by you, over Twitter.
- ✓ FailWhale — In the early days of Twitter, the small company suffered from growing pains as its application became popular. Unfortunately, this caused Twitter to crash frequently. When Twitter was down, an illustration of several birds lifting a whale out of the sea via ropes held from their beaks was displayed. This image became known as the *FailWhale*.
- ✓ hashtag — A word preceded with a # sign. Hashtags are used to signify that a status update is about a particular topic to allow for easy searching. For example, conference goers may tag all of their updates with a hashtag unique to the conference so other attendees can read all the updates pertaining to the event.
- ✓ @ replies — Pronounced “at replies.” @ replies are how you reference another Twitter user. For example, I am @Dusty Reagan. You use @ replies to direct a tweet to a user or to mention a user in passing. @ replies are sometimes referred to as “mentions” or a “mention.”
- ✓ retweet — Abbreviated RT. A retweet is a status update from someone you follow that you share with your followers, by using Twitter's built-in retweet feature or by copying the update attributing the original author and posting it from your Twitter account.
- ✓ tweet — A tweet is another word for a status update. It can be used as a noun or a verb. For example, you can tweet a tweet.
- ✓ twoosh — A tweet that is exactly 140 characters.

Asymmetrical relationships

Twitter's relationships structure is simple, but revolutionary. Before Twitter, most social networking sites, such as Facebook (<http://facebook.com>) and MySpace (<http://myspace.com>), required mutual friendships. You couldn't see a user's information if he or she didn't specify you as a friend. Twitter threw this model out the window.

On Twitter, you can follow the updates of anyone who has a public account, and they don't have to follow you back. This means celebrities and politicians can communicate with their fans and constituents without becoming friends with half of the Internet's population. This asymmetrical relationship model parallels relationships in real life. There are people whom I admire, who have simply never met me. Now I have a way to stalk those people! I can even send their updates to my phone. I write this with tongue in cheek — well, the stalking part anyway. Unless your account is private, tweets are intended to be public broadcasts of information.

Follow and update using SMS

I usually attend one or two technical conferences per year. These conferences usually last a few days, and I may know a few people at the event. Attending the panels is straightforward enough, but there is valuable time in-between panels and after the conference when people meet up, have a good time, exchange ideas, and so on. At these times, you have two options: find out where everyone is hanging out and join them, or go back to the hotel.

Twitter is my lifeline during these times. At conferences, I follow the people I know using SMS updates that are sent to my phone. This way, I know where the good parties are, where the free beer is, and where the conference presenters are hanging out.

Still not convinced about the usefulness of SMS updates? Here's another example.

Many news organizations have seen the potential of broadcasting news to Twitter. If you want to stay up-to-date on current events, you can't get much more current than having headlines sent to your phone in near real-time.

Along with receiving updates to your mobile phone, you can post updates to Twitter using SMS. This feature allows users to update their Twitter status while they're on the go, in real-time. The next time you go downtown for drinks or head to the coffee shop for a mid-afternoon cup of espresso, you can alert your friends. This may cause an impromptu gathering of good friends.

Trends and search

Following the Twitter accounts of news organizations to stay on top of current events is one option, but using Twitter, you can get information on newsworthy events even before the news organizations do.



One way to do this is by monitoring trending words and phrases on Twitter. Twitter has this functionality built in and provides the current trending topics to all users. When real-time events occur, they often spread organically by word of mouth, bubbling up in popularity until they become a trending topic.

A frequently referenced Twitter news-breaking event happened on December 20, 2008, when Mike Wilson (@2drinksbehind) tweeted that he was just in a plane crash. Thirty-eight people in the crash were injured. Everyone survived. News of the event spread quickly on Twitter before any major media outlet could cover the event.

Trends are helpful in finding recent interesting topics, but if you're looking for news on a particular subject, you can use Twitter's search functionality. Using Twitter Search, you can monitor Twitter for words and phrases in near real-time. You can even limit your results to tweets from particular geographical locations.



Search is also useful for monitoring mentions of your company's brand name or product. You can then interact with users who are talking about your brand from your company's Twitter account. Never before has it been this easy for a brand to contact customers about their concerns before their customers contact them.

The open API

The real reason Twitter is so appealing to developers, inventors, hackers, and entrepreneurs is the open API. Twitter provides all its data and functionality for free as an open API. This means you can invent and build new applications around Twitter's functionality. You can even create a whole new Twitter interface from the ground up.

Twitter encourages development with its API and has even acquired companies that build spectacular applications on top of Twitter. Twitter's current search engine was once an independent company called Summize.

The open API is probably the reason you picked up this book.

Why Should You Develop a Twitter App?

Opportunities to build interesting and compelling things in and around Twitter abound. Some third-party applications have started to show themselves as the leader in a particular facet of the Twitter ecosystem. But these leaders could use some competition, and there are still opportunities to use Twitter in ways no one has even thought of before. Developers are constantly pushing the envelope on how Twitter can be useful and entertaining.

I built my first Twitter app, Friend Or Follow (<http://friendorfollow.com>), because I wanted to know who wasn't following me back on Twitter. Plus it was something fun to do on the weekend. As it turned out, other people found Friend Or Follow useful as well. As my app's popularity began to grow, I realized I could make money with it through advertising. Suddenly I had a small business built on top of Twitter.

If you're looking for a reason to build a Twitter app, money could be one of them. However, it can also be fun and rewarding to learn something new, and if you're fortunate enough to gain an audience with your app, it can be really gratifying to build something people appreciate.

Here are few reasons why you might want to develop a Twitter app:

- ✓ **Make money:** Twitter is trendy right now, and its user base is growing every day. There are numerous ways to make money developing Twitter applications. I cover this in detail in Part IV.
- ✓ **Build your reputation:** Twitter is a social platform. If you build something people find useful or entertaining, you will gain a reputation with the users of your app.
- ✓ **Support a cause:** Leveraging the social nature of Twitter, you could build an app that raises awareness and money for a charitable cause or a philosophical idea. See TwitCause (<http://twitcause.com>) for an example of this.
- ✓ **Fill a need:** If there is something you don't like about Twitter, you can fix it using the API. It's quite likely several other people share your sentiments and will enjoy your fix.
- ✓ **Promote a brand:** In much the same way in which you can support a cause building a Twitter app, you can promote a brand with a Twitter app. For example, @twelpforce is a Twitter account used by Best Buy. They built an internal application that allows their employees to respond easily to technical inquiries directed to the account.
- ✓ **Scratch an itch:** Sometimes you just want to build something cool. You can't help it, and that's awesome! Build something cool because it's fun.

Turning Motivation into Action

I hope you're now motivated to start building a Twitter app. Now it's time to turn that motivation into action.

The next chapter is a refresher course on Web application development using a LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, and PHP) stack.



If your Web development skills are strong, feel free to head straight to Chapter 3 where you post your first message to Twitter using the API.