

Chapter 1: Getting the Short Story with Microblogging

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Microblogging, Twitter, Plurk — these terms were unheard of until 2007, and the world would never be the same afterward. If you haven't jumped on the microblogging bandwagon yet, get ready for a fun ride! Microblogging is one of the "it" online activities for people to do. In fact, it's become so popular that terms such as *instant messaging* have nearly become *passé*. Everyone is tweeting!

Whether or not microblogging will continue to grow or fade away when the next big fad comes along remains to be seen. For now, it seems like everyone is microblogging, primarily through Twitter, where millions of people publish short messages to each other and the world all day, every day. This chapter explains what microblogging is and describes the most popular microblogging websites.

Microblogging for Beginners

In the simplest terms, *microblogging* is the process of publishing short status updates (for example, 140 characters or fewer on Twitter) on a personal profile through a microblogging website. The most popular microblogging sites are Twitter and Plurk (each is discussed in detail later in this chapter). You can create a profile on a microblogging site for free, input some personal information, and start publishing microblog posts. (Twitter users call them *tweets*.) Typically, you can make your account public or private, so you control who can see your updates — any person with access to the Internet or just people you approve.



Microblogging is intended to be a platform to share what you're doing *right now*, and it has transformed the world of online communications.

You can publish updates to most microblogging sites via the web or a mobile device, and that ability makes this form of blogging extremely flexible and portable.

Tweet tweet

Truth be told, the term *microblogging* has nearly been replaced. Almost as quickly as microblogging was introduced to the world, a dominant player stepped up to the plate and turned the process of microblogging into *tweeting*. Although it's true that Twitter (www.twitter.com) has become the most popular

microblogging website, there are other options for people who want to publish short snippets online without going through the hassle of starting a blog, sending an e-mail message, or opening an instant messaging application. But more about that later in this chapter.

Microblogging updates generally appear in reverse chronological order on your profile page. For example, you can easily view the updates for everyone you choose to follow on a single page within your Twitter account, as shown in Figure 1-1.

Of course, microblogging gets a bit more complex than that. For example, you can use special characters and phrases to share information through microblogging. You can send people direct messages, participate in live microblogging events, and more. Although it might seem like microblogging is just one more fad to add to the growing list of online applications and tools that clutter your desktop, many people find great value in it as a tool to connect with friends, meet new people, network, build business relationships, sell products, provide customer service, and much more.



Figure 1-1:
A Twitter
account
home page.

In other words, microblogging is what you make of it. There's no right or wrong way to use microblogging tools. That's not to say there aren't guidelines and unwritten rules of ethics, but not even the creators of Twitter provide a clear explanation of what microblogging is specifically intended to do. The only explanation provided on the Twitter website is, "Share and discover what's happening right now, anywhere in the world." Believe it or not, that really is all there is to it.



Don't be intimidated by microblogging! You can't break it, and as long as you act ethically and honestly, you can just dive in and join the conversation!

Understanding the Microblogging Craze

Now that you know what microblogging is, you're probably wondering why it's so popular. Why does it seem like everyone is talking about Twitter? I'm not sure that anyone truly knows the answer to that question. One might argue that it's the current cool online toy. Others might say that it's easy to use. Still others might say that it's free, so why not give it a try? I think the real reason is a bit of all of those answers combined.

The Internet has become a truly social place, where people can connect from around the world at any time. Microblogging made the concept of real-time communication across the globe a reality but with an added bonus. Everyone doesn't have to be online at the same time for it to work. Unlike instant messaging, where both people communicating have to be online simultaneously for it to work, microblogging updates are stored and can be directed to people or easily tied to specific topics, making it simple for people to catch up on conversations and for multiple people to communicate with each other.

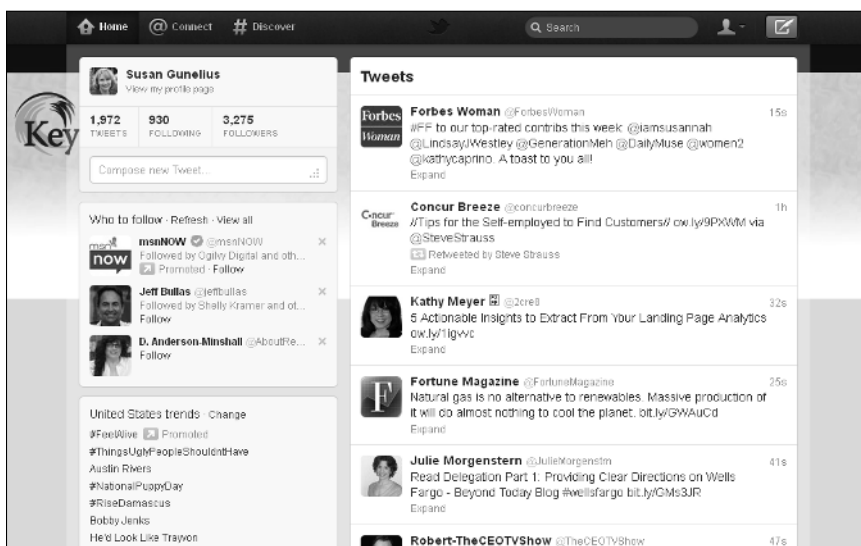
As shown in Figure 1-2, Twitter users can connect by tagging each other using the @reply feature or tagging topics using a hashtag feature. (Both features are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this minibook.)

Although many people abandon microblogging because they can't find additional value in it over other forms of communication, there's a large audience of people who love the ability to connect with others from around the world with few barriers to entry and an easy-to-use interface. The bottom line: microblogging through a site such as Twitter is convenient, far-reaching, and free! I think it's safe to say that many long-distance telephone bills probably dropped after friends and family found microblogging!

Many social networking sites, such as Facebook, include a form of microblogging *within* their systems where users can publish status updates.



Figure 1-2:
A Twitter
stream with
@replies
and
hashtags.



Choosing a Microblogging Application

When microblogging first hit the social web, a number of players jumped on board. Many microblogging applications have already come and gone, including the defunct Jaiku and Pownce. Twitter is now by far the most popular microblogging site, but its size can make it cluttered and overwhelming to casual users. That's why some people choose the less-trafficked Plurk for microblogging.



Because it's free to join each of the most popular microblogging sites, many people open an account with each and test them before they commit to using just one. Take some time to find out where the people you want to interact with spend their time. Look at the functionality provided by each site and then give the ones you're interested in a test run. Some people use more than one microblogging site, but that can become confusing and time-consuming for both you and your audience. Only you can ultimately determine which microblogging site (or sites) will help you meet your individual blogging goals.

Twitter

www.twitter.com

Character limit: 140 per message

Tens of millions of people have signed up and created free Twitter accounts since the site debuted in 2006 as a way for people to share quick status updates online. Statistics show that most of those people didn't remain

active users over a long period of time, and the vast majority of Twitter status updates (called *tweets*) come from a small group of power users. Those people who truly enjoy using Twitter and have built strong relationships with other users find a lot of value in it. Only you can determine whether Twitter is right for you by giving it a try!

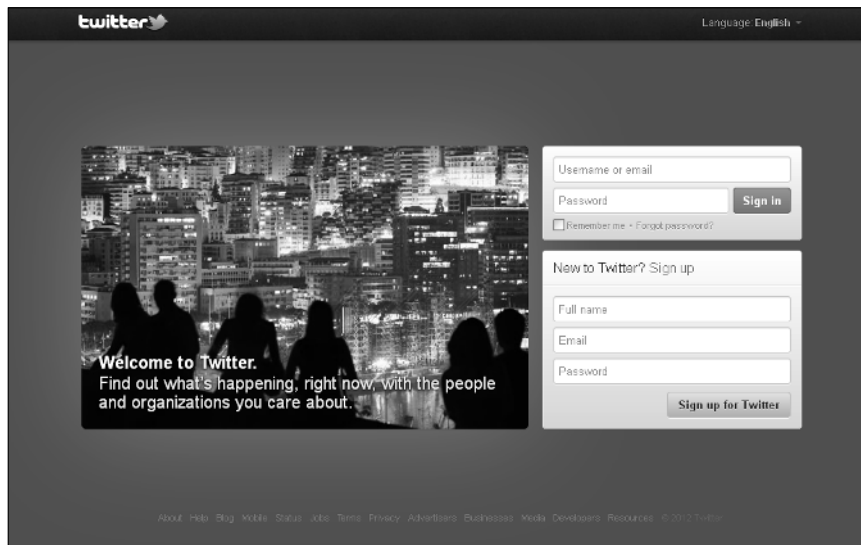
Twitter, shown in Figure 1-3, allows anyone to view anyone else's tweets, unless a user sets his account to *Private*, meaning only accepted *followers* can see that user's tweets. When you sign up to follow another user, that person's tweets are displayed within your Twitter stream in reverse chronological order, mixed within all the tweets of the users you follow. It can get cluttered, but a wide variety of third-party Twitter applications can make it easier for you to manage your tweets.

With Twitter, you can also send private direct messages to other users, and you can tag other users within your tweets to notify those users that you referenced them in a tweet. It's easy to share information through Twitter. Therefore, it's not surprising that many individuals and businesses find it useful for promotion and customer service.



The remainder of this minibook tells you the basics about Twitter. For a complete reference guide, check out *Twitter For Dummies*, by Laura Fitton, Michael E. Gruen, and Leslie Poston.

Figure 1-3: Twitter is the most popular microblogging site.



Plurk

www.plurk.com

Character limit: 140 per message

Plurk, shown in Figure 1-4, was introduced in 2008 as a microblogging alternative to Twitter. Plurk offers many similar features to Twitter such as the ability to send private messages and make your updates (called *plurks*) visible only to the people you choose.

The site picked up steam quickly after its introduction thanks to some special features that Twitter didn't have and that users liked, including a threaded messaging capability and scrollable timeline visuals. Furthermore, the ability to easily insert video and image content into updates set it apart from Twitter early on.

One feature that makes Plurk unique is the ability to create *cliques*. You can create a Plurk clique, so it's easy to keep track of what a smaller group of users are doing. This feature makes Plurk a great choice for creating and growing online communities more so than simply sharing information, as Twitter is best known for.

Figure 1-4:
The Plurk
home page.

