

Public relations at the micro level: connecting with customers on Twitter

David Kamerer, Ph.D., APR
Loyola University Chicago
dkamerer@luc.edu

Pamela Morris, PhD
Loyola University Chicago
pmorris1@luc.edu

Summary:

This is a panel study that explores how organizations use Twitter as a customer service portal. The study documents the explosive growth of Twitter from 2008 to 2010, classifies the communication activity, and finds partial support for the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Method:

The first panel of data for this study, from November 2008, represents “early adopter” use of Twitter by companies. At this time, Twitter was a novelty, and we simply collected every example of a company using Twitter that we could find (n=85). We revisited the same companies’ feeds in March, 2010, after Twitter had become a more mainstream communication channel. At each time we collected up to 10 tweets from each account (n = 697 in the first wave), using a random start point and a skip interval of five. These were summarized to reflect the overall voice of each company online. Among the variables we recorded were: followers, following, number of tweets, replies, internal/external links, style of tweet (soft, hard, miscellaneous), retweets and hashtags.

Table 1: Twitter Account Activity

#	Nov. 2008		March 2010	
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
Following	994	2,374	19,972	85,335
Followers	1,400	2,596	134,302	435,020
Updates	883	2,810	2,876	5,409

- During this time Twitter became a much more important channel for the companies in our panel.
- The number of followers grew by between 1,110 percent (median measure) and 9,493 percent (mean measure).
- Only six accounts in our initial sample were abandoned.

Table 2: Interactivity and Sharing

%	Nov. 2008		March 2010	
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
Reply	26	30	25	27
Retweet	NA	NA	13	18
Hashtag	NA	NA	13	19

Table 3: Tweeting Style

%	Nov. 2008		March 2010	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Soft	44	33	45	36
Hard	26	32	34	36
Misc.	29	31	20	28

- About a quarter of messages in both panels were replies
- In 2010, 13 percent of messages included a hashtag; 13% of messages were retweets
- “Soft” messages dominated in both panels; during the time frame of the study, Twitter became somewhat less conversational (more hard tweets, fewer miscellaneous tweets)
- Internal links dominate sharing (41 percent of messages in 2010), while external links were in 20 percent of messages

Predicting growth of followers:

For both panels, we created a regression equation to predict the number of followers, with the following independent variables, hypothesized to support the two-way symmetrical model, entered:

- Number of accounts following (implies a reciprocal comm. relationship)
- number of updates (shows use of the Twitter channel)
- number of replies (shows interactivity and reciprocal communication)
- number of miscellaneous tweets (the most “conversational” messages)
- use of external links (showing an outward orientation).

In both panels, only two variables were significantly related to follower growth:

- Number of accounts following
- number of updates

Summary: to grow your follower base, follow people back when they follow you. Tweet often.

For followup/discussion:

- Message content was remarkably stable during study, despite explosive growth
- High variability in descriptive statistics suggests distinctive Tweeting styles
- Partial support for two-way symmetrical model
- Next study: add qualitative layer, improve sample, explore tweeting styles