



CENTERPIECE

FOCUS ON: SOCIAL MEDIA

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HOW TO USE TWITTER TO BUILD AUDIENCE

BY CALLIE KIMBALL

INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, I gave a talk to TCG member theatres on how to use Twitter to expand audiences. Executive director Teresa Eyring and I had “met” on Twitter, where she’d heard about a talk I gave on how performing arts organizations are using Twitter to strengthen their brand and build their audience. She asked me if I’d share my presentation with TCG member theatres, and I gladly signed on.

A record number of theatres signed up for the talk, and many submitted questions ahead of time. The majority of people joining the talk already had some basic experience with Twitter, so rather than talk about how to get started (just Google “how to tweet” and you’re off), I focused on answering questions like: who’s using Twitter, how is it different from Facebook and how to decide who should tweet for your organization? In this article, I’ll recap some of that information, and I’ll also go into more detail on how to use Search, one of the most powerful Twitter functions.

Here’s a link to an audio recording of the talk and the Q&A:

http://www.tcg.org/media/events/teleconference/TCG_Twitter_Teleconference_7.30.mp3

And here is a link to a page which includes the visual aids that accompanied my presentation:

<http://www.tcg.org/events/teleconferences/LeadershipTeleconferences.cfm>

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Everyone's Doing It

Twitter. It's white hot and all over the news. Maybe you're on board with it or maybe you're still skeptical. And if you *are* on board and already tweeting, you're probably wondering if you're doing it right—"What should I tweet? Do I tweet enough? Too much?" There's a lot of performance anxiety around it. And for organizations nervous about dipping a toe in the water, there can be concerns that Twitter's too casual or that it's about inane things or that it's for young people—basically that it doesn't fit your brand.

Twitter will only hijack your brand if you let it. You are in control. Twitter is a wonderfully flexible tool, and you get out of it exactly what you put into it. The simplest and most useful comparison is that Twitter is a cocktail party. It's a conversation with real people in real time, like a giant public chat room. You can certainly use Twitter as just another marketing platform if that's your wish, but you'll be missing the whole point. Just as the most compelling actors on stage are those who listen to their fellow actors, the most successful Twitterers are those who listen to their followers.

Who's On Twitter?

Twitter has had a lot of publicity this year, and a lot of consequent growth. Everyone loves statistics, so here goes. In February, Nielsen reported that 7 million unique monthly visitors were using Twitter.ⁱ By June, comScore was reporting 21 million unique monthly visitors—a nearly 2,000 percent jump from June 2008 to June 2009.ⁱⁱ And that giant leap, according to comScore's report on September's numbers, has held steady for Twitter.ⁱⁱⁱ

So who are all these people? According to a study earlier this year by the PEW Internet and American Life Project, the median age on Twitter is 31.^{iv} Compare that to the median ages on Facebook (26), and MySpace (27), and you can see that this isn't just for college kids. Twitter skews older than most other social networking platforms. In fact, the Nielsen study mentioned above shows that 42% of Twitter users fall in the 35-49 age range.

In October, Nieman Journalism Lab reported that women use social media more than men (57% on Twitter),^v while reminding us that "women make 80 percent of the buying decisions in most American households."^{vi} While there are exceptions to the generalization I'm about to make, it's reasonable to think that part of the draw for many women is the way social media can be used to share information and to create and sustain relationships.^{vii} The importance of having an authentic voice on Twitter and of genuinely connecting to this particular community cannot be over-stressed.

All the Twitter hype this year has had the misleading effect of making it sound like Twitter is just for celebrities and those who love to hate them. But Twitter is only new to the mainstream media—it's been around for a few years now. If someone's been on Twitter for at least a year, they were ahead of the curve, which means they're an early adopter, which means they're usually up on the next big thing, which means their friends and families probably turn to them for advice and suggestions. The fact is, many regular users of Twitter are thought leaders in fields of technology, science, literature and journalism. These people are plugged in, and you want to be on their radar.

Think of your average daily user as an informed global citizen using Twitter to connect to people in their field, to share information, to know first-hand what's going on around the world. They're a generous, polite bunch. They're not on Twitter to be marketed to—they're there to connect to real people, in back-and-forth exchanges. They want to learn and they want to have fun. They're engaged.

Why Is Twitter So Special?

I've been using social media for the last seven years and writing plays for the last four. (My first play was actually based on my blog.) Social networks have been a terrific tool in building my audience, especially the times when I've self-produced. I've used Blogger, Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, Google Groups, Yahoo! Groups, Flickr, Tumblr and even Geocities; and I'm more excited by Twitter than all of those platforms combined.

People often ask, “Isn’t Twitter just a fad? I don’t want to learn something only to have something new come along.” Here’s the thing—sure, Twitter might be replaced by something shinier a year from now but this platform, this new medium on which people are finding each other in real time on a level playing field, is here to stay.

When the telephone first came along there were detractors, people who couldn’t imagine why they would need a machine to talk to someone when they could just walk down the street and find them. Now everyone in the developed world has a phone. We’re all still trying to get our arms around the possibilities and implications of this new arena, but the consensus is, even though (or perhaps because) it’s still evolving, this is a game-changer. Even if you’re still skeptical, you should know that the chances are good that your organization is already being talked about on Twitter—don’t you want to be a part of that conversation?

Since it’s likely you’re more familiar with Facebook than Twitter, let me do a quick comparison to show how different they are. Most every theatre has a Facebook page by now. You have fans, you share photos, you invite people to events—it’s a great tool for cultivating your *existing* audience. Your “fans” or “friends” are people who already know about you, who have sought you out on Facebook because they’re already excited about the work you’re doing. When your theatre is on Twitter, you’re participating in a more fluid experience with strangers—people who are *potential* audience. It’s an ever-changing dialogue that you can contribute to and use to find new audience members while strengthening existing relationships. It’s polite and it’s casual (again with the cocktail party analogy). It’s helpful to think that approaching people on Twitter is like tapping them on the shoulder and introducing yourself over hors d’oeuvres. Some people are uncomfortable at first approaching people on Twitter, but these genuine conversations are the heart of what makes Twitter so unique. These connections can be made randomly, by stumbling across people who are following other theatres and following them, or simply by following back people who follow you. You can also use the Search function to find people who may be interested in your theatre.

In order to get right to the point with Search, I’m going to assume you either know the basics or can get up to speed on how to Twitter through a few quick Google searches. Just know that on Twitter, you have a profile page, you have a number of people you follow (“Following”), and you have a number of people following you (“Followers”). You can “follow” anyone—other theatres, news organizations, actors, designers, etc. to read their tweets. In turn, these people might follow you back in order to read your tweets.

The leap a lot of people don’t make, that they don’t even know is possible, is the Search function. You can use it to identify and reach out to people in your community who otherwise might not know your theatre is right in their backyard.

Example 1: Say you’re doing *A Streetcar Named Desire*. You can go to <http://search.twitter.com> and search the terms “Tennessee Williams,” “alcoholism,” “southern literature,” “New Orleans,” “mental illness” or even “kindness of strangers,” and turn up people who might be interested in attending your production and who might help spread the word about your production.

Example 2: Say you’re building a collaborative piece that centers on issues affecting the disabled community. You can search for specific disabilities or illnesses, and you can find non-profit organizations, teachers or social workers tweeting about their work with and for the differently abled. Chances are, these people will gladly help spread the word about your show if it addresses issues they’re concerned with. They might even buy a ticket to your show.

Location, Location, Location

With Advanced Search (<http://search.twitter.com/advanced>), you can search for tweets that include keywords or phrases, links, question marks, “frownies” or “smilies.” You can search for tweets within a date range. You can search for tweets to and from certain people. You can search for tweets written in different languages. Best of all, you can search by location.

Enter a ZIP Code or City and you'll instantly find people near your theatre. Read that sentence again and let it sink in. Now put it all together—enter your city *plus* keywords to narrow your search (“Tennessee Williams”) and you now have a conversational point of entry with this person. You can follow them, introduce your theatre and let them know you're interested in what they have to say. They'll check you out and respond as they wish—by engaging in conversation, by following you or by coming to your show. Or not. Again, think cocktail party—a light touch is generally more successful on Twitter than a transparent marketing plan.

It's not about tweeting strangers right off with a nudge to buy tickets to your show. You're better off building a genuine connection with someone on Twitter, with an eye to the long view. You might think following a slew of people and then blasting them all with the same cut-and-pasted “Come see our show!” tweet is very clever, but besides alienating people and getting yourself blocked, you'll be violating Twitter's Terms of Service.

People on Twitter don't want you to sell to them, they want you to engage with them, to listen to them. Go back to the idea of a cocktail party. You don't want to be that guy, the one over at the bar, hawking Amway. (Not that there's anything wrong with Amway.)

So now you understand that Twitter offers free, instant, geographically targeted search. (And why Facebook has been madly scrambling to upgrade itself with a Search function.) And this is why Twitter is uniquely equipped to address the needs of performing arts organizations. The performing arts, unlike most other entertainment options today, rely on an audience coming to a show, and Twitter helps you find people nearby.

OK, I Get It. So Now What?

There are no shortcuts in Twitter. Clearly, it's free, but it's also a time investment. It's not something you want to hand off to an intern as a side project in their non-existent spare time. Find someone in your organization who loves social media and give them a few hours a week (preferably a little time each day), plus lots of support and the inside scoop to share on Twitter. What you do with Twitter is limited only by your imagination. I keep hearing of all sorts of creative ways theatres are engaging with their followers. Below are just a few.

- A theatre needed to construct a set entirely out of books. They tweeted their needs and the community responded with boxes and boxes of donated books—enough to build their set.
- Dance Theater Workshop occasionally does Community Choreography projects on Twitter. They ask for movement suggestions from their followers and then put them all together in a dance, record it and then upload the video and tweet to share it.
- American Repertory Theater held a props scavenger hunt, among other fun activities and contests.
- The New York Neo-Futurists issue weekly TwitterPlay challenges to their followers, then collate, upload and tweet the plays their followers write.
- Boston Court asked their followers to name their office paper cutter.

You can run ticket giveaway contests. You can reach out to your local event guides or news stations that are Twittering to let them know about special events—Twitter is so hot right now that every news organization wants stories on it. You can offer Twitter-specific discounts and get the benefit of being able to track the effectiveness of your Twitter outreach efforts.). If you're presenting a play about social themes or current events, you can tweet links to relevant news articles. Or you can host a “tweetup”—bring your online family of loyal followers to a happy hour right in your theatre lobby before a show. Isn't that what it's all about—getting people to your theatre? You're welcoming them and recognizing their value in the community. They'll appreciate you reaching out to them and even if the show isn't their

cup of tea, you can continue the conversation after the show, on their terms. You want people to see your show. And there are people out there who want to be invited.

There's no single right way to use Twitter, but you can blow it if you're not sincerely engaged. Tony Hsieh founded Zappos, an online retailer known for its superior customer service, and for a remarkably engaged social media presence. Amazon purchased Zappos for 10 million Amazon shares (roughly \$928 million, depending on the day).^{viii} The joke on the street was that Amazon didn't buy a retailer, it bought social media. And do you know what Hsieh's entire corporate social media policy for his employees was? "Be authentic and use common sense."

"Do Theatre-Goers Really Twitter?"

This was one of the questions theatres sent in ahead of the conference call, and it really stuck out for me. If you're asking if your subscriber base is on Twitter, and they're largely 65-year-olds, then maybe not. But there *are* people in your surrounding community who drop in and out of Twitter all day to see what's going on outside their cubicle and they might appreciate the fresh entertainment choice you're offering.

Many theatres are dealing with funding cutbacks and smaller box office revenues. At the same time, new media has thrust itself into the mix. Theatre has a leg up on other industries when it comes to social media. We've always done more with less. Our most elegant solutions have always come to us when we've had the fewest resources. Playmakers were born to adapt and connect. And Twitter is specifically, uniquely well suited to help theatres find new audiences.

Hopefully I've given you a sense of what Twitter is, and how to successfully and comfortably transition your organization onto this new platform. Believe me, everyone stumbles around on Twitter at first—it's not intuitive. But if you aim for an authentic voice and sincere engagement (and avoid looking at Twitter solely as a marketing tool), you'll have a strong voice in this new medium. Your followers' appreciation of your engagement with them on their chosen platform may very well translate into ticket sales and brand loyalty. Twitter has brought in new audience members to other theaters—why not yours?

Callie Kimball is a blogger, performer and playwright based in New York City. She also consults in social media and is available to talk to performing arts organizations and conferences. Her email is calliekimball@gmail.com and her website is <http://www.calliekimball.com>.

ⁱ http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/twitters-tweet-smell-of-success/

ⁱⁱ <http://ir.comscore.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=398136>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2009/10/14/the-latest-numbers-on-facebooks-september-us-traffic-from-comscore-quantcast-compet/>

^{iv} <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Twitter-and-status-updating/Part-1/Section-3.aspx?r=1>

^v <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/10/women-use-social-media-more-than-men-whats-news-orgs-response/>

^{vi} <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/08/what-do-women-want-punditmom-gives-one-answer-to-that-question/>

^{vii} http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article6868818.ece

^{viii} <http://www.techcrunch.com/2009/07/22/amazon-buys-zappos/>