

To tweet or not to tweet: that is NOT the question

THERE IS A CORRELATION between the speed with which communication technologies distribute information and the amount of time that information takes to have an effect. I call this 'cultural latency' – latency is a term stolen from network computing – and it's decreasing because of the increased speed of communication technologies.

One way of describing this process, or indeed a symptom of it, is Gartner's Hype Cycle – a model for cultural technology adoption, which maps visibility over time. In essence, people hear about technologies too soon, they get overly hyped before anyone has worked out what to do with them, so the world at large becomes disillusioned and stops paying attention, which gives the technologies the breathing room they need to work out what they are for.

The wireless 3G hype cycle stretches over more than a decade – but diminished latency means things can rise, fall and rise again much faster now. Twitter is both a driving force behind diminished cultural latency and its own accelerated hype cycle case study.

Technology trigger: Jack Dorsey wonders if the status update from Instant Messaging programs might be a standalone idea. He approaches ODEO. Following this meeting of minds, a prototype is hacked together for ODEO employees, called Status. A public version is launched in July 2006. No-one really knows what it is for.

Climbing the peak of inflated expectations: The technology festival South By South West kick-starts Twitter up the mountain. Darling of the show, it wins the web award, and raises the profile and usage of twitter massively. Daily tweet volume jumped from 20,000 to 60,000 per day – but Twitter is still unknown outside of tech circles.

Various niche communities begin to adopt Twitter, the race for followers begins, and users begin to realise that Twitter enables real-time group conversations, and sharing of links and news – far from the conceived status update function.

We are reaching the peak of inflated expectations – Twitter has become the talk of the town. As Ashton Kutcher raced CNN to his first million followers (he now has almost three million), 'Twitter' became a more searched term on Google than 'Obama' for the first time, a representative indicator of a shift in cultural salience. It has remained so ever since. So what happens now?

The trough of disillusionment: A minor Twitter backlash kicks in as we tumble into the trough of disillusionment. Media mentions begin to turn focus from Twitter, to the hype around Twitter and the possible dangers it presents.

The slope of enlightenment: The trough is shallow and short, but allows innovative companies to experiment with delivering services, content and contact through Twitter.

Now is the crucial time to be thinking about it and experimenting with Twitter. However, the question is not simply 'what do we do with Twitter?'. According to Ben Richards of Naked Communications: "The question 'what should we do

with Twitter?' is an impetuous one. Like the question 'what should we do with on-pack?' or 'what should we do with TV?'. The answer depends entirely on your business, marketing and communication objectives."

There are some things that Twitter is obviously better at than other channels – real-time direct conversations. This is why mainstream media, in all its forms, has adopted it as another path to modernity and relevance, further incorporating the audience into the programme. This is also why customer service and research should be the departments that first adopt Twitter in an organisation. Every brand should be listening when its customers talk, and every brand should be proactively engaged in resolving customer problems wherever they find them, and there are many to be found on Twitter.

The plateau of productivity: The Twitter platform is integrated into call centre functions and provides a viable way to reach companies (without navigating the infuriating interactive voice response systems) and communicate with distributed peer groups in real time. Twitter becomes a standard component of mainstream media operations.

The most interesting effect of new communication technologies is, perhaps, not how we use them, but how they change how we use everything else. An addition to the communication ecosystem does not simply increase the number of options – it changes the system itself. The emergence of the internet as a content distribution channel changes what television is for and how it should be used, regardless of whether or not a TV campaign has a digital component – the world does.

Twitter is changing how we feel about the speed of the system, because it is reducing latency to almost zero. Which means we must act faster and do more and reflect the world as it is now – not as it was nine months ago, when campaign development began.

Best Buy in the US has just launched a campaign for the 'Twelpforce' – a twitter account manned by a collective of the retailer's Geek Squad staff that offers technology advice and support. The TV advertising is used to promote a service, delivered over Twitter. To me, this is an indication that some are already climbing the slope of enlightenment.

The question is not 'what does my brand tweet about?', but 'how can we better serve our customers?' (real-time tech support), 'what tools will facilitate that in a way that is more convenient for them?' (Twitter), and 'How shall we let them know about it?' (TV advertising).

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