

# The **tweeting** truth



**FORGET THE CLICHÉS. TWITTER IS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR WRITERS BECAUSE IT IS THE EASIEST WAY TO RAISE ONE'S PROFILE AND ENGAGE WITH READERS, WRITES LESLIE CANNOLD.**

Perhaps more than any other social media platform, Twitter is maligned by the intelligentsia as a time-wasting exercise in dumbing-down. I want to challenge this perception. In my experience, Twitter is an essential marketing tool for writers: the best, easiest and most intelligent social media platform currently available to raise one's profile and engage with current and potential readers. For writers who accept that marketing themselves and their wares is an inescapable part of the job-description, Twitter is a must.

## **The Role of Authors**

We all know the book market is in the doldrums. As Borders in the US seeks bankruptcy protection and REDgroup retail – which owns Borders, Angus & Robertson's and Whitcoulls in New Zealand – goes into voluntary receivership, insiders

say they've never seen the trade so bearish. The downstream impact on local authors is brutal and direct. It makes it harder for us to sell our first book and – should that fail to cut through – all subsequent manuscripts.

In this environment, writers can no longer see their task as concluded when the final edits are done. While some find the popularizing and promoting process as degrading, uninteresting and/or terrifying, the truth is that authors can have a significant influence on whether their book crashes or crashes through. According to small business marketing expert Doug Hay, authors should dedicate just 10 per cent of their efforts to writing and 90 per cent to marketing. While such advice about division of efforts seems extreme (!), it underlines the essential truth that contemporary authors must see themselves as a key ingredient in getting their book

from paddock to plate. Failure to accept the challenge of understanding and channelling our power not just to produce great work but to market it is to sell ourselves – and our *magnum opera* – short.

### The Role of Twitter

Enough rah-rah. Let's talk about where Twitter fits in. Twitter is one of the most vibrant and innovative of the social media spaces and is growing like topsy. More than 90 million tweets were sent each day in 2010, 100% more than the previous year. According to Twitter guru Gary Hayes, over four new accounts are created every second.

While much of the traffic is dross – as engaging as a detailed report of the extracted contents of one's nasal cavities – a study by Pear Analytics found that nine per cent of tweets had news links or were otherwise rated by recipients as important enough to pass along to others.

For those unfamiliar with how it works, Twitter – like Facebook – offers an environment where you can chat online. You can also post photos, or links to reports and newspaper articles, and discuss them. Where Facebook allows users to bang on, the ideal tweet is just 140 characters.

Twitter allows you to follow who you like, just as anyone can follow you. Indeed, unlike Facebook where friending is reciprocal, those you follow on Twitter may be entirely different to those opting to receive your posts in their inbox, or Twitter feed. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has more than 166,500 people signed up to get her tweets, but chooses to receive tweets from just 157.

When using Twitter as a marketing tool, the aim is to have as many quality followers as possible. More on this later.

The best way to think of followers is as subscribers. Imagine you had an electronic mailing list with thousands of subscribers – thousands of individuals who had voluntarily signed up to get daily, even hourly, update about you and all that you do. Valuable, right?

A strong and loyal Twitter following is just like a subscriber list, with all its geometric potential. In the same way as you might forward on an email with

interesting insights or information about events to friends, each of your Twitter followers has a following of their own. Passing on an interesting post from you – or retweeting – is as simple as the click of a button. Indeed, much like an email list, those who regularly end up with retweets from you may be motivated to find out more and, perhaps, to subscribe to your posts directly. And so your audience grows.

### Making Twitter Work for You

Hopefully, having convinced you that Twitter (or whatever short-form social media tool that may eventually compete with or replace it) is essential to the success of your writing career, it's time to ask how Twitter can work for you.

“Writers can no longer see their task as concluded when the final edits are done. While some find promotion degrading, authors can have a big influence on whether their book crashes or crashes through.”

Success must be measured against a goal. For writers using Twitter as a marketing tool, success can be measured in the size, engagement and loyalty of their Twitter following. The bigger the group of subscribers who read and enjoy your tweets – sometimes even passing them on – the more enhanced your capacity to ensure awareness of your latest book project or festival appearance.

A full compendium of Twitter do's and don'ts is not possible here, but the following are some tips to get you on your way.

### Start Early

There's no point joining Twitter on Tuesday when the book and book-related events you want to promote are on Wednesday. Obvious, yet I've seen too many writers do this not to mention it. Much as film producers snatch the website name for their production the moment they have one – and often years before the picture appears in the cinema – authors must begin building a follower on Twitter as early in the book-writing process as possible. Like, today would be good.

### Interact, Don't Broadcast

Signing up for a Twitter account is easy. Several writers I know have never got further than this. When I ask why, their answers are all a version of, “I didn't know what to say.” A variant of this problem – common to newbies – is simply to broadcast self-promotional material of the “I'm at the Wheeler Centre talking about my novel,” or “Tune in to hear me on Radio Zog discussing my Griffith Review essay.”

Some followers will tolerate what the Twitverse disparagingly refers to as broadcasting, but not many. I get subscriber emails from singer Judith Perl. They tell me where and when she'll be playing next, and nothing more. This is OK because I'm a fan and that's exactly what she promised they'd do when I subscribed.

But because there's no value-add, I only open Perl's email when I have time to see live music, and I never forward them on. This might not be the case if in addition to broadcasting details of her next gig, she included interesting tidbits of music news.

This ties into my next tip, which is go easy on the self-promotion.

### Limit Self-Promotion

People have lots of reasons they engage on Twitter, but most come down to relationships – the buzzword of all commercial and social interaction these days. One of my loyal Twitter fans is @reuvenim. In a recent blog he swore I was the best thing on Twitter. Here, I modestly quote what he said:



"To me, Cannold is an intellectual... discussing matters I consider to be of extreme importance to contemporary society...[She]...knows how to use Twitter's platform of limited length for maximum effect. Not only does Cannold state her opinion on Twitter, she also listens to followers' feedback... which is much more than can be said for my contact with all other celebrity intellectuals. With Cannold I can "dance with the stars."

According to @reuvenim, I've got the Twitter formula right (and you'd hope so, given I'm advising you). That formula is:

- post links and talk about things you're passionate about;
- use your writing skills to send good, clear tweets. While most see the 140 character limits as an obstacle, writers should see it as a way of showcasing their skills (The author of the first Twitter novel, Matt Stewart, really took this challenge to heart)
- interact, interact, interact

To engage, hold and grow your following, your twitter posts must be about stuff that interests and excites

you. For me, that's science, education, feminism, the secular state and medical ethics. For others it could be celebrity pregnancies or stain-removal tips. It's best to focus on subjects at least tangentially related to the themes and issues you explore in your writing, so the audience you attract for your tweets are also likely to be interested in your books.

Most important, and as book marketing consultant Dana Lynn Smith advises, don't make it all about you. Instead "reach...out to add value to others." This means keeping a tight lid on self-promotion – as that is all about you. Indulge in it rarely and, wherever possible, via third party endorsement. To wit, retweeting congratulatory or praiseworthy tweets by others about you.


You'll know if what you're sending is interesting by the number of followers that pass it on, and how quickly your following shrinks or grows. Indeed, there are programs to keep track of this latter metric – like Social Too and Qwitter – that you can sign up to for free on the net.

## Time Management

Like all profile-raising exercises, Twitter is a time vampire (defined by the urban dictionary as "something or someone who literally sucks your time like a vampire sucks blood"). This is because the task of raising your profile and attracting subscribers is a bigger-the-better enterprise, and so never really ends. The trick is to decide how much of your day/week/month you want to spend on marketing yourself and your writing, and where Twitter fits into that allocation. Then, set yourself a schedule for interacting on Twitter and stick to it.

Oh, and when you work out how to do this, please let me know.




**Dr Leslie Cannold first novel, *The Book of Rachael*, was published in April by Text. She was a finalist in the 2010 Best Science Tweet contest for Science Week and pays the bills by helping journalists and writers get what they want out of Twitter. Find out more, including how to follow her on Facebook and Twitter, at [www.cannold.com](http://www.cannold.com)**



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