Editorial

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As marketers wrestle with the implications of social media, loud birdsong can be heard in the marketplace. It is of course the sound of Twitter, the latest (but certainly not the last) social networking phenomenon to achieve exponential growth. The Nielsen Company reported in March 2009 that the real-time short messaging service had experienced a 1300 per cent growth in unique users in a year, from 475 000 to 7 million¹ (but still just under 11 per cent of Facebook's tally in the same month). Twitter's exponential growth over a 2-year period shows the way in which a social networking e-business technology can capture the public imagination, but also present challenges for marketers. What are you doing right now? Can you express yourself in 140 characters? If you are a brand owner do you want to communicate with your market in this way? Will they welcome your intervention, or will it damage your brand? How can you measure the effects of that intervention on your brand awareness or market share?

The first prototype of Twitter was built by a US team led by Jack Dorsey in 2 weeks in March 2006 and was launched publicly in August of 2006. The company was incorporated in 2007. Dorsey was simply interested in learning what his friends were doing, and 'following' their activities. This very simple application's 7 million unique visitors at the beginning of 2009 included President Obama – with over 1.2 million followers (<http://twitter.com/BarackObama>) as well as British comedian Stephen Fry (<http://twitter.com/stephenfry>) with 530 000 and appears to be becoming part of the warp and weft of a networked society. During the terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008, some 80 tweets every 5 seconds were being posted from the city, providing eyewitness accounts, pleas for medical assistance and blood donors and updates on casualty numbers. *Mumbai is not a city under attack as much as it is a social media experiment in action*

(Busari, 2008²). The Twitter name currently generates nearly 500 million hits on Google. Some celebrities even employ a team of people to keep their tweets up to date. From a targeting point of view, Twitter is intriguingly most popular among working adults, rather than among teenagers: 42 per cent of the site's audience is aged between 35 and 49.

Twitter is 'device agnostic', that is to say it accepts input from SMS, web, mobile web, instant message or from third party software projects suitably programmed. Sending and receiving Twitter status updates from a mobile device is clearly a very appealing feature. The Nielsen Company reported that 735 000 people accessed the web site from their mobile phones at the beginning of 2009. Twitter is still in 'not-for-profit' mode, although a Japanese service is supported by advertising revenues: *Twitter has many appealing opportunities for generating revenue but we are holding off on implementation for now because we don't want to distract ourselves from the more important work at hand which is to create a compelling service and great user experience for millions of people around the world. While our business model is in a research phase, we spend more money than we make* (web site). This means rather helpfully that the company is also listening to its users and constantly experimenting with new features. Recent innovations include the ability to send messages directly to members using the '@' feature (rather than broadcasting to the world), or to refer directly to members ('mentions'), a mobile site (m.twitter.com) and generating lists of 'suggested users' for members to follow.

The service itself has also been spawned into specialist interest areas. For example, an ExecTweets service, sponsored by Microsoft allows participants to follow the commentary of senior business executives (<http://exectweets.com>). A specialist site was developed (now closed) to focus on 2008 US Presidential election.

Nor are these applications limited to the end consumer or citizen: marketers, too have become actively involved. For example, the enterprise cloud computing service Salesforce.com has developed Salesforce CRM for Twitter. The platform allows brand owners and companies to track their presence in the informal forum between Twitter participants, building upon the firm's 'Service Cloud' software-as-a-service proposition, which is an online 'customer community' package (<http://www.salesforce.com/servicelcloud>). There are also a great many third-party organisations seeking to capitalise on the 'tweetstream', ranging from small-scale API projects to major brands. For example, Twitpic allows users to share photos (<http://twitpic.com>), while PepsiCo has sponsored a visualisation of the tweetstream emerging from the SXSW music, film and media conference and festival in Texas: the PepsiCo SXSW Zeitgeist (<http://pepsicozeitgeist.com/>).

But Twitter does not have it all its own way. The Nielsen Company has also undertaken some analysis of the sticking power of the average Tweeter. It has calculated – somewhat controversially – that about 60 per cent of people using Twitter end up abandoning the service after the first month (although that has fallen from a

high of around 80 per cent last summer).^{3,4} In other words, annual loyalty levels are running at around 40 per cent – substantially lower than for Facebook and MySpace at similar points in their development. So a major question for marketers is: Does the Twitter channel provide a stable and reliable long-term promotional mechanism?

Mind you, the news cannot be all bad. In a sure sign of perceived commercial value, someone has just offered me money to buy out my Twitter account.

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