

Chapter 4: Joining the Conversation

In This Chapter

- ✓ **Lurking and listening**
- ✓ **Minding your online manners**
- ✓ **Keeping your audience engaged**
- ✓ **Creating content that draws and applauds**

It takes some practice to discern relevant information when you first skim the flow of a stream of comments on Facebook or Twitter. Even when you join a threaded discussion in a group or reply to a blog, you're stepping into an already running river of information and relationships.

It seems obvious that the first step is to “get your bearings,” just as you would at a conference or party. You can, almost intuitively, assess how many people are present, who they are, how they behave, the emotional tone of the event, and who or what is the center of attention.

Yet many people start gabbing online before they truly grasp what's going on in that particular little corner of cyberspace. Whichever social networking methods you've chosen, start by watching and learning for at least a few days before you contribute. Unless you have unlimited time, select only a few groups, people, or companies to observe in each venue.



Each form of social media has its own search tools, described in Book II, Chapter 2 or in their corresponding books. Search for competitors, keywords, topics, and groups that are relevant to your business. Google Search now also incorporates social media. To sort for those results, click Show Options in the upper-left corner of any search results page; then select Updates in the left navigation area. Results from recent posts on social media feeds are displayed.

After you decide whom to follow or which groups to join, you can incorporate the principles in this chapter to gain invaluable market intelligence and become a valued participant in an ongoing conversation.

Lurking and Listening

You don't have to make detailed charts, but you should pay attention to several factors as you decide whether a specific account is worth following or a particular group is worth your time:

- ◆ The frequency and quantity of comments on a particular topic
- ◆ The length of a typical post
- ◆ Who posts and who receives the most responses
- ◆ The content of the posts and their relevance to your needs
- ◆ The quality of the posts and the value of the information they provide
- ◆ The tone of the communication
- ◆ The ratio of wheat (relevant to you) to chaff (nonrelevant to you)

Recognize that your goal isn't to become the center of attention, but rather to understand the concerns and interests of your target market, to build relationships, and to establish a reputation for your business. Social media conversations are much more about marketing than about sales.



Recall the old aphorism “You have two ears and one mouth because you should listen twice as much as you talk.” That’s a good rule to follow for your participation on social media. If in doubt, listen more.

Listening actively

The most important part of any offline conversation isn't the talking; it's the listening. The same concept is true online. You can easily apply active listening techniques to social media. If you're good at sales, you may already use this approach intuitively to understand the underlying problem that a prospective customer is trying to solve.

When you're online, you don't have the luxury of nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice and body language, but you can still pay careful attention to the words on the page and any unstated concerns that may underlie them. The steps for your reply are simple:

1. Thank people for their interest or for bringing up their concern.
2. Repeat the key element of their post in their own words.
3. Ask nonjudgmental questions for clarification, paraphrasing their point or concern. Try to detect an underlying emotional quality to which you can relate or respond.
4. When you're ready to answer with your own point of view, give an example or tell a story. Try to incorporate their point, restated in your own words.

5. Invite further response.

In some cases, you're better off extending a conversation with multiple back-and-forth posts than trying to accomplish all these goals in one message.



Active listening works best when you're sincerely interested in what someone else has to say.

Hearing an opportunity and taking it

The social media world is replete with examples of someone who was truly listening and took an action that made a difference. In many cases, that action resulted in invaluable word-of-mouth recommendations and, in some cases, publicity worth more than any paid advertising.

For instance, FreshBooks, a Canadian-based online billing and bookkeeping service (www.freshbooks.com) with more than a million clients, is a committed user of Twitter (<http://twitter.com/freshbooks>). One evening in May 2008, an alert employee noticed a stream of tweets from a FreshBooks customer describing how she had been stood up for a date. FreshBooks not only tweeted a message, shown at the top of Figure 4-1, but also sent the client a bouquet of flowers.

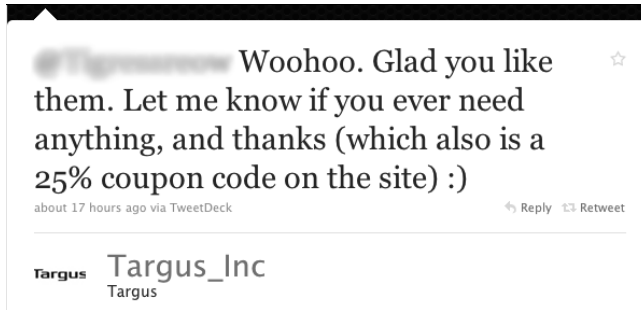
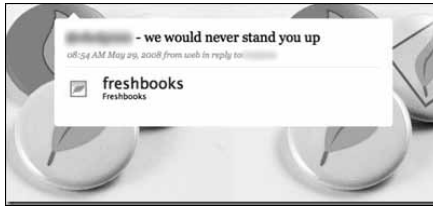
The surprised client blogged and tweeted her delight, resulting in hundreds of devoted followers for FreshBooks. The company now gathers from its Twitter feed remarkable insight into problems and requested product features. The gesture by FreshBooks earned it the loyalty of hundreds of volunteer product evangelists who now help with online tech support, reducing the cost of calls to the FreshBooks customer support center. All this was a result of empathizing with a customer's feelings.

Others have followed in the footsteps of FreshBooks. Targus, Inc., an international manufacturer of computer cases and accessories, uses its Twitter account (http://twitter.com/targus_inc) as an inexpensive way to build brand loyalty and increase its number of fans. It frequently offers special giveaways and promotions to its Twitter followers and monitors conversations to discover prospects who are close to a purchase.

Careful attention to the Twitter stream identified a conversation involving someone who had purchased a bag from a competitor and wasn't happy with it. Targus sent him a coupon code for 25 percent off, as shown at the bottom of Figure 4-1. Again, the happy customer wrote others about his experience, became a long-term loyal client, and yielded valuable word-of-mouth recommendations.

The secret to success in each case is being alert, attentive, and responsive.

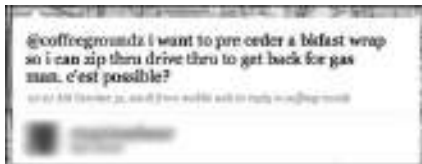
Figure 4-1: FreshBooks followed up this famous tweet to a client with a bouquet of flowers (top). Targus tweeted an online promo code to a prospective customer (bottom).



(Top) Courtesy FreshBooks; (Bottom) Courtesy Targus Inc.

A curious and media-savvy operations manager was already using Twitter in October 2008 to build up the clientele for the Houston coffee shop The Coffee Groundz (<http://coffeegroundz.net>). When he received what is now recognized as the first “to-go” order on Twitter, he responded as though it were the most natural thing in the world (see Figure 4-2). Now that the Library of Congress is archiving the entire repertoire of Twitter messages, these two will probably end up on display!

Figure 4-2: When The Coffee Groundz in Houston received the world’s first tweeted to-go order, on the left, it responded immediately, as shown on the right.



Soon, The Coffee Groundz was accepting Twitter preorders from all its clientele, which has since doubled from all the attention. Continuing its love affair with social media, the business hosts numerous Houston tweet-ups and four-square events — proof, perhaps, that good things come to those who listen.

Minding Your Social Media P's & Q's

The more the technology changes, the more technology stays the same. Common courtesy and common sense will get you far. The old rules of netiquette apply to social media, whether you're blogging, tweeting, commenting in a LinkedIn group, or posting to your Facebook stream.



Keeping these points in mind keeps your social capital high:

- ◆ **Be subtle, not self-promotional in your posts.** Avoid blatant advertising.
- ◆ **Content is king.** Whatever the venue, freely contribute real information. Share resources, connections, and links with other members of the community.
- ◆ **Avoid using ALL CAPITAL letters in any post.** It's considered "shouting."
- ◆ **Avoid e-mailing individuals directly.** This advice applies unless they have requested a personal response.
- ◆ **Respect your audience.** Avoid negative comments, name-calling, and expletives. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

If your powers of observation aren't enough to detect the unwritten rules or customs for each of the various networking options, the social media etiquette resources listed in Table 4-1 can help.

Table 4-1 **Some Social Media Etiquette Resources**

<i>Name</i>	<i>URL</i>	<i>Article Title</i>
Forbes magazine	www.forbes.com/2009/10/09/social-networking-etiquette-entrepreneurs-management-wharton.html	Are You Practicing Proper Social Networking Etiquette?
DaniWeb.com	www.daniweb.com/news/story220189.html#	@Miss Manners — Social Media Etiquette

(continued)

Table 4-1 (continued)

<i>Name</i>	<i>URL</i>	<i>Article Title</i>
Community Organizer 2.0	www.communityorganizer20.com/2009/01/12/social-media-etiquette-roundup-understanding-cultural-norms	Social Media Etiquette Roundup: Understanding Cultural Norms
Techipedia	www.techipedia.com/2008/social-media-etiquette-handbook	The Ultimate Social Media Etiquette Handbook

Sticking to business

Though some social media-istas encourage writing from a personal framework, that strategy may get you into trouble. The line between being personable and being personal is so faint that it's often hard to follow. You can generally talk safely about your personal evaluation of a product or event or share work-related information about business contacts you met at a trade show, but keep intimate information about your personal friends and children on your personal, friends-only blog.

It's fine to include a brief notice that no one will be tweeting for a week. But don't post that picture of you sipping a drink with a little paper umbrella or riding a surfboard on your social media pages (unless, of course, you're in the business of drinks with paper umbrellas, or surfboards, or travel).

When you become too chatty, you may inadvertently disclose private information about someone else or information that truly is company-confidential. If you feel you must disclose this type of information to a particular prospect, for goodness' sake, use a direct e-mail or, better, the phone. Request a signed nondisclosure agreement before discussing any proprietary or trade secret information!



Do not disclose confidential, proprietary, personnel, or trade secret information. Duh! If you aren't certain what to disclose, just review or revise your company policy. See Book I, Chapter 3 to brush up on your social media policy, if needed.

Selling them softly with your song

Some businesses experiment with hard-core sales promotions, making their feeds nothing more than a continuous stream of ads. Though this strategy might make sense for a coupon distribution site such as <http://twitter.com/mommysavers>, it doesn't make sense for most B2B businesses or service companies.

There are many ways to reduce the promotional density with other content, especially on Facebook and Twitter:

- ◆ Include industry news in your feeds.
- ◆ Increase the frequency of your responses to posts from followers.
- ◆ Include news and teasers about new products and about appearances at trade shows or craft fairs, or describe how you find new lines to carry or manufacture.
- ◆ Cultivate a circle of friends in related businesses whose news you can retweet; celebrate achievements, share business suggestions; and encourage each other, as Rotem Gear does with its Twitter feed at <http://twitter.com/jrotem>, shown in Figure 4-3.
- ◆ If your company donates to a nonprofit organization, talk about the cause that you believe in and fundraisers related to the organization, whether it's animal welfare, breast cancer, hunger, planned parenthood, or saving the rain forest.

Figure 4-3: Rotem Gear balances a tweet about its own product line with messages to business colleagues.



Courtesy R. Jean Roth / Rotem Design Studio

Engaging Your Audience

Whether you're blogging or tweeting or posting on Facebook, grabbing — and holding — readers' attention is extremely difficult. The competition is fierce. Nothing succeeds like originality, humor, and meaningful content. Of course, it's an extremely difficult order to fulfill.



Look at the “most popular” writers and posts on different social media. Try to discern the factor that's attracting readers. Use the internal search function for each social media to find people who post in topic area; focus on those with the high numbers of readers or fans.

Keeping it short and sweet

Except for followers of news and educational sites, most readers are looking for short, quick snippets of information. The snippets don't have to be as short as a tweet, but try to avoid long posts, even on your blog. Instead, use multiple short posts on multiple days and link to your hub Web site for more information.

For instance, break the content of a white paper into multiple blog posts of no more than several screens (about 500 words maximum). After each one, provide a link to obtain your complete white paper, for which you can request registration.



Keeping your posts short and sweet is likely to improve your search engine ranking as well as traffic. Find out more about optimizing for search engines using social media in Book II, Chapter 2.

Finding your voice

When you read something by Hemingway or Austen, you know immediately who wrote it. (If only we all had that gift.) Writers may spend years searching for their unique “voices.” Every once in a while, you run across someone with a truly creative and original voice — and you know it when you see it.

Heather Gorringer, the founder and creative force behind Wiggly Wiggles (www.wigglywiggles.co.uk), has just that kind of voice. Take a look at her blog at www.wigglywiggles.blogspot.com, shown in Figure 4-4, or listen to the podcasts on her Web site at www.wigglywiggles.co.uk/podcasts/index.html. The story of Wiggly Wiggles appears in the nearby sidebar “Wiggly Wiggles squirms to social success.”

Figure 4-4: The founder of Wiggly Wigglers has an earthy, humorous, accessible, and appealing “voice” on her blog.



Courtesy Heather Gorrige, Wiggly Wigglers

Wiggly Wigglers squirms to social success

Wiggly Wigglers sells squirming worms for composting, along with seeds and tools and other gardening accessories, to consumers in the United Kingdom and Europe through its online store at www.wigglywigglers.co.uk/shop. Founded in 1991, the company now employs 15 people and was named the 2008 global winner of the Dell Small Business Excellence Award. Unique from its origins, the company envisions itself as “environmentally sustainable and passionate about helping people bring a positive and measurable impact to their surroundings.”

According to founder and chief podcaster Heather Gorrige, “We had to go to the market

rather than waiting for it to come to us. We are based in a village with a population of 63 with no passing trade and no large towns nearby.” She and her husband, “Farmer Phil,” who farms their land at Lower Blakemere in England, built their first Internet site in 1996 and starting selling online as soon as possible.

For promotion, “I really wanted a radio show,” she explains, “but because we were a commercial organization, that was a real challenge. In June 2005, I found a new section on iTunes called Podcasts and had a real “Eureka” moment. If I could make my own radio show, reach people globally, and talk with them directly, then surely this would build my brand.”

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A true podcasting pioneer, she went to the first podcast conference in the United Kingdom in September 2005, with Wiggly Wigglers holding its own against huge companies such as the BBC and Virgin. “We went home, made the podcast on Wednesday, and put it out the Monday after! My plan was simply to reduce my advertising budget and form a direct relationship with potential customers and advocates worldwide. There was no strategy. I just thought that if fans could recommend our company at a click, it did not much matter where they were physically or whether we could actually sell to them.”

“We soon realized the power of repurposing content. For example, we have made Wiggly podcasts for gardening magazines at the same moment the Wiggly podcast goes out on our local hospital radio. Our videocasts are now part of our Web site; our blog is used as extra content for our Facebook group and to point folks from Twitter.” The site’s “Web guy” assists with creating podcasts, but Gorringe and her staff handle the blog, Facebook stream, and Twitter themselves, with a little help from several knowledgeable volunteer customers who assist with the Facebook group.

“It all comes under general marketing and customer service,” Gorringe says. “I have enthused about social media, and gradually folks inside the company picked it up and used it or at least respected the power. It doesn’t take too much explaining to the customer services manager that someone on Twitter is complaining that their order is late and they have 2,000 followers.”

Gorringe, who has a unique and authentic “voice” on her blog (refer to the nearby figure) and podcasts, does most of the writing. “I feel an obligation to communicate with folks. We do what we do. If you like it, follow us. If you don’t, find another company. We are not set up to be sophisticated and do not want to appear too clever. This way, we can be controversial

if we want to; we can challenge. And we therefore enjoy our jobs. We are not here to please a certain demographic.” (Her podcasts draw several thousand listeners, so it seems that plenty of people like the Wigglers just the way they are.)

Gorringe believes that “small companies can just be themselves and succeed. Honesty and integrity are essential. I think this transparency is beneficial for small companies like ours and allows us to compete against the corporations that are frightened of it.”

As for analytics, Gorringe uses the bottom line. “I can see if a particular offer works on Facebook by using a specific [promo] code... Twitter is more difficult to measure. You don’t measure the phone; you measure the conversation. Same goes for social media — if it isn’t working, you aren’t saying the right things!”

She acknowledges that there have been issues, “Like someone saying our service was rubbish. But because I was tracking our company name, I was able to contact them and sort out the problem really well. This turned the customer ‘round from fed-up to a fan – brilliant!”

The added benefits are huge, Gorringe notes. “We get TV appearances because of the brand building. We record famous people for our podcast because of the listeners we have.” In addition, Wigglers sends out a regular e-newsletter, which she gauges as successful, and attends several shows, like the Malvern Spring Show and the Hay Festival. Occasionally Wiggly Wigglers will advertise on Facebook, post Goggle AdWords, or — rarely — run a print ad. Its other major marketing effort is a print catalogue produced several times a year.

Wiggly Wigglers promotes their social media venues with icons on the Web site and on each other. “We tell folks to follow us on Twitter on the podcast, refer to the podcast on Facebook, etc. And we print details of all these things in our catalogue,” Gorringe explains.

“I absolutely love social media. It has enabled us to have the water cooler effect without a busy office or living in a city. We are able to

create interest and conversations around our business and contribute easily without physically traveling everywhere.”

Wiggly Wigglers URLs

www.wigglywigglers.co.uk

<http://wigglywigglers.blogspot.com>

www.wigglywigglers.co.uk/podcasts/index.html?session=shopper:DCFF07C6160c50D94FNkLL4EA719

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=3120520301

<http://twitter.com/wiggled> www.wigglywigglers.co.uk/podcasts/index.html (on-site podcasts)

www.youtube.com/user/michael

www.wigglywigglers.co.uk/cinema/index.html (on-site podcasts)

You can also check out Heather Gorrings thesis, Nuffield Farming Scholarship, “Web 2.0 & Social Media. Identifying the Opportunities That New Media Can Bring

to Farmers and Rural Business” at www.nuffieldinternational.org/rep_pdf/1253750899Gorrings_Heather_nuffield_report.pdf



Courtesy Heather Gorrings, Wiggly Wigglers

Staying Engaged



Sometimes the trick to keeping customers engaged is simply to luck into (or plan for) a topic on which people have plenty of opinions. Then let 'er rip. Sometimes you don't have to comment often; just watch and observe.

You're engaged in social media conversations for the long haul. Try not to drop a thread that has had lots of comments.

For example, people debated for more than a year on the blog My Starbucks Idea (<http://mystarbucksidea.force.com>) about the benefits and downsides of Starbucks using compact fluorescent lights. A franchise operator, not Starbucks, initiated the topic, but it caught on. The posting public maintained the thread with little input from Starbucks for about 17 months.

If you're interested in the complete transcript, see <http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/ideaView?id=087500000004CnkAAE>.

This list describes what Starbucks did so well. Try to emulate its work in your social media channels:

- ◆ **Praise commenters.** In the entry on 8/12/2009 (which concludes the chain), Sue from the Starbucks Global Responsibility department explains which actions the company has decided to take on store lighting and credits blog commenters by saying “with an update to this great idea.” She adds other phrases that reflect to readers both the advantages and disadvantages they raised in their postings.
- ◆ **Show commenters that they're important to you.** The last displayed entry in the sidebar is from Jim Hanna, the head of environmental affairs. First, Hanna introduces himself. Having a department head respond gives greater credibility to the answer and implies, “This comment is important enough that someone with authority is responding.” He is answering for the company, not in his personal role.
- ◆ **Give follow-up explanations with no defensiveness or derision.** Hanna thanks everyone for their posts and the good points they made, validating their input. He simply ignores the crankier posts. Carefully responding to each issue in turn, Hanna explains how Starbucks is addressing it. He makes every point positively, but not defensively. When providing explanatory material, Hanna avoids a patronizing tone. He concludes by describing the Starbucks decision-making process, leaving the floor open to additional comments (“Stay tuned”).



You might want to set up your blog to review all posts before publishing so that you can remove any highly objectionable material. However, don't set the filter so high that you remove any negative or critical comments, which would quickly shut off the conversation.

Asking questions . . .

If you don't happen to have readers who are as engaged as the ones at Starbucks (see the preceding section), you can easily encourage responses. At the end of each primary post, ask readers for their opinions by posing open-ended questions. Avoid questions that prompt a simple yes-or-no answer. Here are some examples of helpful ways to ask these questions:

- ◆ What do you think about this topic, or how do you feel about this topic?
- ◆ How would you handle a certain situation?
- ◆ What's your opinion about this topic?
- ◆ What's your experience with this widget? or How would you rate this widget? Why?
- ◆ Will you share your story about a certain topic?
- ◆ What are you doing or working on now in this area?
- ◆ How would you improve it?
- ◆ What ideas do you have to solve this problem?

. . . and answering questions

Some topics truly lend themselves to a question-and-answer format. You can repurpose questions submitted by readers and customers, and present them in your blog, Twitter, and Facebook entries. For example, the blog for K9 Cuisine, an online retailer of dog food, has a panel of experts handle the enormous range of questions that bedevil dog owners at <http://blog.k9cuisine.com>, shown in Figure 4-5. It's a helpful way to distribute content from multiple points of view while sharing the workload involved in maintaining a blog.

Being helpful

Sometimes the simplest posts are best. Readers may often need only straightforward information. The best thing to do is supply it, as Milwaukee Electric Tool does on its Facebook page (www.facebook.com/MilwaukeeElectricTool), shown in Figure 4-6.

Figure 4-5: K9Cuisine.com has eight different contributors on its blog, which is set up as a topic index.



Courtesy K9Cuisine.com

Figure 4-6: Milwaukee Electric Tool responds to customer inquiries that simply require information.



Courtesy Milwaukee Electric Tool

Finding content

Every once in a while, the creative well simply runs dry. Try as you might, you can't figure out what in the world to write about. Try some of the sources listed in Table 4-2 for ideas. If you're truly stuck, look around for a guest contributor to take over for a couple weeks until your juices start flowing again. Or, consider hiring a professional copywriter to help you, perhaps on a long-term basis.

Table 4-2 Blog Writing Resources

<i>Name</i>	<i>URL</i>	<i>What You Can Find</i>
BLOGBloke	www.blogbloke.com/blogging-by-osmosis	Blog-writing resources and tips
Copyblogger	www.copyblogger.com	Copywriting tips for online marketing success
ProBlogger	www.problogger.net	Blogging tips for bloggers
Direct Creative Blog	www.directcreative.com/blog/writing-resources	Quick online writing resources
<i>Smashing</i> magazine	www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/06/28/50-free-resources-that-will-improve-your-writing-skills	Free online writing resources
Vivid Image	www.vimm.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/50-Sources-of-Inspiration-for-Blog-Content.pdf	Fifty sources of inspiration for blog content
Writers Write	www.writerswrite.com/blogging	Blogging news, resources, tools, and articles



If you decide to use contributors or contractors to write your blog, monitor their postings randomly for accuracy and tone.

Goofing with grace

Stay positive, even when you make a mistake. Graciously thanking a follower for correcting your error and moving on is more gracious than getting involved in defense of your position. If a reader's facts are incorrect, of course, gently call attention to the discrepancy, perhaps with a link to a third-party source.



Some mistakes are minor enough that you should simply ignore them. You don't want your readers to feel that they will be criticized or corrected for every post they make. That's a total turnoff!

Handling critics

One of the trickiest problems for any writer is handling conflicts and critics. For an example, see the e-mail exchange at www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/08/personal-responsibility-v_n_489822.html between Arthur Delaney, a blogger for The Huffington Post, and a reader who took issue with an article about foreclosures, evictions, and bailouts, topics sure to stir emotional embers. The exchange, which took multiple responses to reach a conclusion, took place as a series of direct, private e-mails. This discussion illustrates several good points about how to handle criticism:

- ◆ Try not to be defensive, and acknowledge the value of another party's point of view.
- ◆ If the criticism is correct, thank the writer for their input and make the correction public.
- ◆ If you need clarification, ask the critic to explain himself or herself further.
- ◆ Use facts, not emotions in your response.
- ◆ Persist until a point of clarity is reached, even if it's nothing more than agreeing to disagree.
- ◆ Sometimes it's better to resolve an issue via e-mail, which remains between two parties, instead of conducting a public disagreement. Use your judgment and discretion.