
UKSG and Twitter: what we're doing, why, and to what effect

Charlie Rapple

Associate Director, TBI Communications and Chair, UKSG Marketing Subcommittee
Email: charlie.rapple@tbicommunications.com

UKSG, the industry organisation that connects publishers, libraries and their suppliers, has been using Twitter since January 2009 to share information about our events, research and publications. Usage ranges from tweets about new issues of our journal or the latest announcements from our research projects, to real-time reporting from our conferences and training courses. We also try to comment on, or retweet, others' comments on news from around the knowledge community – policies, products, people and providers.

Why

We set up our Twitter channel because we felt it was important to experiment with this method of communication; our organisational focus is the information community, and among our members – librarians, publishers, intermediaries and suppliers – there is a particular emphasis on the early adoption of new technologies and media. We already had a blog and a Facebook page, so Twitter was a natural extension of our social media activities, albeit one that required more time.

Who

UKSG has a very small secretariat (only 1.5 full-time equivalent) so it is our volunteer committee members who keep our social media presence active. Any member of our marketing committee can log on and post tweets as @UKSG; this naturally requires a level of trust on the part of the organisation and a level of confidence on the part of volunteers, with both sides concerned that posts are appropriate.

How

As with any form of communication, it is important to ensure that etiquette is observed, and we are in the process of drawing up guidelines to give our volunteers a framework for this. A simple rule of thumb is to behave on Twitter as you would at a real-life gathering – be courteous and try to be interesting! Over the years, I have been aware of a certain amount of resistance to social media (perhaps because, by writing about it, I have become a focus for such concerns). Some feel that it is inappropriate to use Twitter at events, for example, considering it disrespectful to speakers and to others in the audience. We try to encourage those who want to engage with Twitter without disrupting those who don't: for example, we publicise an event hashtag, and archive tweets, but we don't project Twitter streams onto live displays as happens at some conferences. Personally, I consider writing tweets to be the equivalent of taking notes, and don't see that it is any more disrespectful or disturbing.

CHALLENGES

Although we were the first to use the #UKSG hashtag (in particular, for tweets from our conferences), we find that it is used by other organisations, including the UK Scriptwriters' Guild and the UK School Games (whose participants' language is sometimes a little 'fresh'). The folksonomic¹ nature of hashtags and the informality of Twitter culture have led us to take a relatively relaxed attitude towards hashtag clashes; although they are frustrating, we don't think the level of crossover use has yet caused unacceptable disruption. Do tell us if you think otherwise – we're aware that many of our members might wince at the lack of controlled vocabulary, and that we might benefit from endorsing a hashtag that is more likely to remain unique.

GROWTH

Soon after we set up our Twitter account, we created an Excel spreadsheet with a dashboard to monitor growth in followers across each of our social media platforms, and also to compare this with other similar organisations. It quickly became apparent that Twitter was our most widely used platform (we currently have 1150 followers). Growth is steady and we have a higher level of followers on Twitter than our 'competitors' (whereas other groups are more successful on LinkedIn, and we have seen a tail-off in our Facebook growth). On that basis, we have invested

more of our limited resource in building our Twitter channel, with active efforts to post more regularly, and to post a wider variety of content. We think that this additional effort, combined with Twitter's overall success and continued growth, is responsible for the ongoing increase in our followers. Naturally, as our follower numbers grow, so too does the level of engagement we see (in terms of retweets, response to specific campaigns, [appropriate] use of our hashtag and general reference to UKSG) and the level of traffic to our website (referrals from Twitter have increased by 465% since 2009). We also attribute our success to getting the balance right, on a number of levels – for example, in terms of the amount of content we post (cherry-picking so that we are posting regularly but not too often), and the tone of voice we use (professional but personable, so that although we are tweeting behind an organisational name, we seem like real people rather than PR robots).

SUPPORTING OUR CONFERENCES

Our most active time periods for Twitter usage are during our conferences, where around 5% of delegates will tweet at some point. We use Twitter to ask people to 'save the date' and to let them know when booking opens and closes. During the event itself, we tweet on the @UKSG channel, but for the most part let the delegate tweeters provide the commentary via the #uksg hashtag. It's interesting to see the response of different delegate types to the variety of speakers, with some points being widely tweeted by all, and others being fervently agreed with but by a smaller subset. There are also tweet contributions, via the hashtag, from people who are unable to be at the conference, but are able to participate from afar thanks to Twitter. Tweet archives are used as a source by organisations wishing to update their customers about the event, for example, this Storify round-up (<http://bit.ly/uo2q1K>). Twitter is also used as a way of meeting new people – it's great to see others (not just 'official' UKSG volunteers) organising 'tweet-ups' so that those who have 'met' on Twitter can get to know one another in person. Finally, we often see a healthy 'backchannel' discussion where small groups of tweeters will continue to debate and add contextual knowledge around a specific point even after the speaker has moved on. Although this might back up those concerns about disrespect to speakers, I think (as a regular speaker myself) that most would be pleased to see their points generating interest and discussion, even if that is at the expense of the next point or two made.

CONCLUSION

Twitter has proven to be an important and effective way to connect with UKSG's various members. The requirement for brevity is useful, as it means our volunteers don't have to spend too long contriving longer, more formal communications – they can share ideas and updates quickly, with minimal effort. Of course, we know that only a subset of our member community is actively using Twitter, so in no way can it yet be considered a replacement for our other communications (our fortnightly newsletter, for example). But Twitter's interactive nature does give it a function and value beyond our other communications media; it gives our members and delegates an opportunity to be more visibly involved with UKSG, enriching our events and providing us with feedback. One of our key objectives as an organisation is to provide a forum for discussion and networking between different members of the information supply chain, and Twitter has a unique role in helping us to deliver that.

Charlie Rapple provides organisations in the scholarly information sector with training and guidance on how social media can best be used to support strategic objectives (and not just take up time).

NOTE

- 1 'A folksonomy is a system of classification derived from the practice and method of collaboratively creating and managing tags to annotate and categorize content; this practice is also known as collaborative tagging, social classification, social indexing, and social tagging. Folksonomy, a term coined by Thomas Vander Wal, is a portmanteau of *folk* and *taxonomy*'.
Wikipedia definition <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folksonomy>