



Advice for Educators: Advocacy Using Twitter

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The presence of technology and social media has increased dramatically during the last decade. Educators can now advocate easily by using their smartphones to access the Internet and social media platforms. A particularly effective platform for advocacy is Twitter because of its ability to foster real-time interactions between people who share similar interests and concerns. Twitter allows like-minded people to network or “follow” other users. As people “tweet” or send messages, the relationships deepen and a community is formed. Twitter requires people to communicate their messages in a succinct way. Because each tweet is limited to 280 characters, advocates must share only the most important information.

Another strength of Twitter is its popularity. Some experts estimate that there are more than 35 million users in the United States and 1 billion people worldwide. And the number seems to be growing each year. Advocates are drawn to the vast reach of Twitter. Contributing to its popularity are cost and ease. Twitter is available free on the Internet. Creating an account is straightforward and easy to do.

Although Twitter has many strengths, the greatest may be its ability to provide information instantly. Users can generate a buzz about an issue quickly, create a trend, or follow one. Because of the speed and ease of using Twitter and the volume of information shared on it, some people rely on it as their primary source of news.

Besides advocates, elected officials have noted the strengths of Twitter, and many view it as an important tool for communication. Legislators can share their message directly and immediately with their constituents, thereby cultivating a grassroots community of support at the local, state, national, and international levels.

Professionalism and Legal Issues

Educators who want to advocate using Twitter should follow recommended guidelines to avoid ethical and legal problems.

1. **Inform your institution of the account.** Educators are prohibited from advocating as employees of a school district or a university; however, they can advocate as private citizens. As a professional courtesy, let your institution know about your Twitter account. It is important to refrain from tweeting during work hours.

2. **Post a disclaimer on the account.** Somewhere on the account, include phrases such as “views are my own” and “retweets are not endorsements” to clarify to others that the account is private.
3. **Remember that the posts are public.** Sometimes advocates forget that information remains on the Internet forever. It is highly probable that someone somewhere will take a screenshot of the information.
4. **Fact check diligently to protect your online reputation.** Tweets spread quickly to many people. Incorrect information online is difficult to correct and can permanently affect the advocate’s reputation and credibility.

The Message

Crafting a good message enhances an educator’s advocacy efforts.

1. **Write succinctly.** Twitter limits the length of a message to 280 characters. If you include a hyperlink, it counts as 23 characters regardless of its length. To maximize the amount of information shared, include photos, which no longer require extra characters. Another trick is to abbreviate words; however, caution is advised because online abbreviations may not be the same as those used in print.
2. **Engage your followers.** The goal is to attract more attention and connect with followers. Building a relationship online requires advocates to show that they care. When advocates express professional and respectful comments, they indicate a caring attitude. Photos and multimedia elements are another way to engage followers and help them to understand your message. When using hyperlinks, include key points of the linked information instead of the titles because titles do not always capture the idea being shared. Furthermore, asking questions and responding to others’ comments deepen the level of engagement. In short, if conversations are taking place, join them. Finally, use @ before an important person’s Twitter name to connect with the person, thereby increasing the likelihood that the tweet will be read and retweeted by more people.
3. **Share good content.** Because of the speed of Twitter, information should be relevant and timely. To maintain credibility, share verifiable facts and avoid exaggerations. Each tweet should focus on one issue so that followers are clear on the message. Post information that followers could possibly use as talking points when advocating.

Following and Building a Following

Effective advocates follow others on Twitter and build a following.

1. **Follow strategically.** When selecting people to follow, consider your areas of interest when it comes to advocacy and the number of tweets that you want to receive. Selecting a prolific tweeter means receiving many messages. The number of people and offices to follow is limitless. For advocates, the possibilities might include members of

U.S. Congress, members of state legislatures, state education and budget/appropriations committee members, governors' offices, key state and national government offices and officials, college and departmental leaders, union officials, school districts, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Sometimes overlooked, but invaluable, are people in the press. Newspaper and television reporters maintain Twitter accounts and tweet stories that may be interesting for advocates in education.

2. **Build a following by responding.** Successful advocates build a following. An easy way to start is by following others and responding to their posts. These efforts add new content to the discussion and draw attention to your tweets. The purpose of following others on Twitter is to get information, share information, and establish professional relationships. Responding to others capitalizes on the interactive nature of Twitter and establishes relationships.
3. **Build a following by retweeting.** Retweeting is the sharing of others' information, and it is an easy way to build professional relationships. When people whom you are following tweet something interesting, you can share it with others. The more a tweet is retweeted, the more people will see it, thereby increasing the reach and impact of the tweet. Retweeting other people's tweets is a way to develop your Twitter skills before taking the next step of tweeting your own content.
4. **Build a following by tweeting.** When you are more comfortable, begin tweeting your own information. Ask yourself, "Why would someone follow me?" Adhere to the previous guidelines for posting good content. Add @ to the tweet to tag another person's Twitter handle. Referencing someone in a post is a good way to get that person's attention.
5. **Build a following by using hashtags.** A hashtag is a key word marked by inserting the # symbol immediately before the word. Using a hashtag makes the Tweet appear when other people search for that particular topic. The use of hashtags broadens the reach of the tweet and makes it part of a larger conversation.

Optimal Tweeting

Advocates tweet an appropriate number of times.

1. **Tweet regularly.** The more you use your Twitter account to engage in the dialogue regarding education, the more likely you are to garner more followers and be viewed as a dependable source of information. Ideally you should attempt to tweet 2–3 times per day, particularly when specific issues are hot. The number of tweets and the quality of tweets determine how often you should tweet. If you are new to Twitter, then tweeting a few times a week could suffice. Consistency and regularity are important principles to remember. To determine an ideal number, note what others do and follow their example. Tweeting too little means you may fall off your audience's radar and lose their attention. Some studies show that Tuesday is the most active Twitter day, followed by Wednesday and Friday. Monday and Saturday

are the slowest days. People usually check their Twitter accounts before work, during lunch, and at the end of the work day.

2. **Use Twitter during events you host or attend.** If you are attending a large conference or hosting a public meeting, Twitter can be a great way to share key messages with fellow attendees as well as those not in attendance. Many conferences now designate a hashtag that allows interested parties to follow along and exchange ideas and resources.

References

The information in this handout is a synthesis of ideas published in the following documents.

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