

## How Useful Is Your Twitter Stream?

*The quality, authenticity, and benefits of Twitter communication are at stake*

THE USE OF TWITTER HAS SIMPLY EXPLODED over the past year. As your list of followers grows, so do the amount of tweets, retweets, and direct messages you receive. Most of these tweets are well intended, but how useful are they?

An increasing percentage of the tweets you receive are spam. Twitter is especially vulnerable, given its inherent automation. Anyone can easily follow tens of thousands of people, gaining a large percentage of followers in return. An easy, ready market for spam from lurid “marketers”.



**What does Twitter spam look like?** Twitter spam can take many forms. Legitimate companies spam when they endlessly promote their products through dummy Twitter accounts. These accounts often bear no

resemblance to the products they pitch. Con artists attempt to shift your money and to gain your identity through a series of shady financial transactions. You are probably wary of these: “Help me access my dead uncle’s \$20 million from a backward third-world country and receive a 15% fee.” Still, a small percent click through.

Many times, spam tweets are sent by members with few followers yet following as many as possible. This should be your first tip-off when someone starts to follow you. These people send tweets with blind tiny URLs linked to those click-here-if-you-are-18-years-or-older sites—except that requirement is frequently omitted. These can easily be identified by the busty, cleavage-popping, young lady’s photo on the account.

Then there are the “See how I got 3,000 followers in one afternoon” spammers. Another come-on: “I can show you how to make \$1,000,000 by tomorrow afternoon by following this simple method. No, really I can!” Hair removal treatment for women garners a good share of spam tweets. You get the idea.

**The quality of tweets.** Pear Analytics, a products and services firm based in San Antonio, Texas, conducted a study of tweets. Over a two week period last month, they sampled the Twitter stream every 30 minutes from 11 AM to 5 PM for 10 days. They then organized this sampling of 2,000 tweets into six categories:

- ◆ *“Pointless babble”*, 40.55%. Described in the study as the “I am eating a sandwich” tweets. These are the kind of tweets that blindly follow Twitter’s original query, “What are you doing now?” Let’s be honest though: who cares?
- ◆ *“Conversational”*, 37.55%. That immediate dialogue, questions, answers, replies, and back and forth better suited for instant messaging. Again, who cares other than the two conversing, and even then...?
- ◆ *“Pass along value”*, 8.7%. Retweets passed along from other Twitter members that actually might have some value.
- ◆ *“Self promotion”*, 5.85%. Tweets that market the member, generally about products, services, demos, or the companies themselves. Actually, not that large a percentage.
- ◆ *Spam*, 3.75%. The unwanted tweets you hoped never to receive.
- ◆ *News*, 3.60%. Generally, these are retweets from mainstream or alternative media sources. As one wag stated, “It’s sad that news tweets are more rare than spam.”

**What to make of all this?** Here’s one thought: the vast majority of tweets—81.85%, the total of “pointless babble”, “conversational”, and spam—are virtually worthless. Adding “self promotion” to that total gets 87.7%, although this category could also contain valuable infor-

mation depending on your point of view. That means that a mere 12.3% of tweets, between “pass along value” and news, contain worthwhile information. Thus, for the sake of argument, one could conclude that approximately seven out of eight tweets are spam or spam-like. That represents a lot of time sifting through your personal twitter stream to garner some real usefulness and value.

**What you can do.** First, Twitter has been especially proactive in identifying spam accounts. In late July, Twitter simply deleted accounts that automatically follow people. They called it “Correcting follower and following counts.” As a result, counts dropped on many accounts, some precipitously. You can add to this protection by reducing the number of accounts you follow. First, don’t automatically click to follow everyone who follows you. Take the time to check out followers before following them. Block them if you want. If you think they are spammers, don’t send them a direct message or retweet them. Instead, follow the official Twitter spam account: type ‘spam’ into Find People (the account from Twitter HQ uses a Spam can as its photo); click the account’s Follow button. Report suspected spammers to this @spam account. Go to the account’s home page for more tips on thwarting spammers.

As a final resort, consider ticking the ‘Protect my tweets’ check box under Settings/Account. You must then approve anyone who attempts to follow you.

Appreciate the point of Twitter: rapid, immediate communication that enhances your social media experience and educates, entertains, and informs. Anything less than that is unacceptable. 🍷

—RICH MAGLIANI

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