

An Introduction to Twitter for Photographers

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Twitter - <http://www.twitter.com> - is one of the hottest social networks. Early in its adoption it was only used by hardcore geeks, but Twitter is now being used by millions of users from all walks of life. The Twitter homepage asks "What are you doing right now?" but the usage has moved far beyond that simple question. Photographers looking at Twitter often have a variety of questions. You might be wondering:

- Why should I use Twitter?
- Who should I follow?
- What should I tweet about?
- How do I have conversations on Twitter?
- How do I get others to follow me?
- How do I share photography on Twitter?
- How do I make money as a photographer on Twitter?

Let's answer those questions.

Why Should a Photographer Use Twitter?

Using Twitter will have three major benefits for a photographer.

- **Expanding your reach:** A Twitter presence can expose you and your work to a new audience. As you build up your Twitter presence and gain more followers, you will have your thoughts (and links) seen by dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people who might not have otherwise known of your photography. Instead of being known only to your existing circle of friends, clients, and vendors, your Twitter presence will be seen by new people, many of whom are potential clients or partners.
- **Maintaining relationships:** Your clients, vendors, and peers and follow you on Twitter, and you can keep tabs on what might be going on in their lives. In the

past, we didn't really know what was going on with people unless we gave them an occasional phone call or other sales followup message. With Twitter, you can keep an eye out for opportunities for connections or sales.

How might that work? Let's look at a couple examples. If you're a wedding photographer and your clients are on Twitter, you can follow them and be able to know see their reactions to your photos and see what they're saying about your work. Perhaps a few months or a couple years later, you'll see them tweet about expecting a child... there's another photo opportunity. If you work with vendors that are on Twitter, it's common for businesses to promote special deals via Twitter; if you're not following, you're missing out!

- **Networking with photography professionals:** By following others in the industry, you'll be able to learn photo tips, hear them talk about gear, keep up with what techniques are being tried, and in general keep a finger on the pulse of connected photographers.

Who Should a Photographer Follow on Twitter?

We touched on this in the last section, but there are three major groups that should be followed.

Follow your **clients**. How do you know if they're on Twitter? Ask them. As you're working out a deal or wrapping up an order, say "I really enjoy keeping in touch with my clients... are you on Twitter? What's your username?" I've never had a client balk at being followed on Twitter. What if they're not on Twitter? No worries... it doesn't hurt to ask.

Follow **people in your area**. Most photographers work primarily around their home city. Twitter allows a user to indicate their location and there are a variety of services that slice and dice that data to find out who are the movers and shakers in an area.

Follow other **photographers**. One good resource is WeFollow - <http://www.wefollow.com> - which allows Twitter users to register and categorize themselves. Browse over to the photography category and you can check out the most active photographers. Talk with your photographer buddies and find out their Twitter username and ask them who *they* follow as well.

Another way to follow photographers is with a Twitter list. A Twitter list is a user-curated selection of accounts surrounding a topic. It's easy to follow an entire list of Twitter users with one click. I maintain a list of interesting photographers on Twitter, which can be found at <http://twitter.com/ahockley/photographers>

What Should a Photographer Tweet About?

The Twitter user interface on the web asks "What are you doing?" That's a good start, but real-world Twitter use goes far above and beyond that simple question. As I write this, I've made over 23,000 tweets, and my gut tells me that probably 10% or less consist of a response to that question. What else am I talking about?

Life.

Tweet about your life... and I mean your whole life, not just your photography business. Nobody wants to follow you if the only messages you post are self-promotional. I tweet about interesting places I visit. I tweet about a great meal at a restaurant. I tweet about photo opportunities. I share links that I think will be of interest to others.

Why talk about things beyond photography? It helps your followers to gain a bit of insight into your personality. By sharing your likes, dislikes, frustrations, and joys, viewers will begin to identify with you as a person and not just as a vendor with a camera. When it comes time for a potential client to work with a photographer, they'll be more likely to contact and engage with someone whom they feel they already know. Twitter is an excellent means to build a relationship *before* the sale.

My way isn't the only way... some photographers *only* tweet about photography. While the photography information is useful, it's hard to develop any sort of personal relationship if the only tweets are about photos and gear. I'd encourage folks to tweet about life in general, which means your twitter stream will be filled with photography talk along with supporting details that will help your followers get to know you better.

Isn't Some Self-Promotion Okay?

Of course it is. Tweet a link to a blog post you wrote. Share a great photo you just posted online. Talk about a workshop you're teaching or a special deal on a new service you're offering. The key is that most of your tweets should be about topics *other* than self-promotion. Social media thought leader Chris Brogan suggests that for every time someone shares their own material, they should be sharing twelve links to other people's work.

How Does a Photographer Have Conversations on Twitter?

Many traditional communications and marketing channels are broadcast-only... it's essentially a one-way message. Viewers don't easily have a conversation with a billboard, a magazine advertisement, or a newspaper.

Like other social media technologies and tools, Twitter allows for two-way conversations. Users can reply to tweets. A reply to a user is noted with the @username convention (see

sidebar on next page). Even though a reply is directed to a single user, that reply will be seen by others on Twitter. It's a form of public conversation, and when the topic is interesting to others it can be educational and informative.

You *should* be having conversations on Twitter. As you start to tweet, people will respond to your messages, and you should reply back when you have a response (or sometimes just to say "thanks"). Once you establish your presence on Twitter, you'll find that people will direct messages to your @username out of the blue, perhaps with a question or concern they'd like you to address. Responding via Twitter is a great way to provide an answer as well as give a bit of helpful information to others that might view or come across your Twitter stream.

You *should* be having conversations on Twitter. The repetition of that sentence is not a mistake. Twitter isn't a one-way, broadcast-only medium, and if you treat it that way you'll find yourself out of favor with the Twitter crowd. Most Twitter users won't bother to follow someone who is only Tweeting in a one-way fashion.

What's up with the @Names?

When Twitter began, there was no convention or supported method to indicate that a particular public comment was directed towards another particular user. The early influential Twitter users started using the convention of preceding a Twitter user name with an @ symbol to indicate that a given tweet was directed "at" another user.

Over time, the @username convention stuck and is now a supported feature of Twitter. When writing or speaking about a Twitter user, referring to them by their username is usually done with the symbol. I'm [@ahockley](#).

How Does a Photographer Gain Followers on Twitter?

The suggestions in the previous section will help a photographer start tweeting about interesting things, but there are a few other tips for increasing the number of people will follow:

- Upload an avatar. That's the term for the thumbnail-sized user picture that appears on your profile page and next to your tweets. A consistent, professional avatar is part of your overall image on Twitter.
- List your location. For most photographers, a bulk of their business comes from the surrounding areas. Filling out the location field in Twitter's settings will let the world know where you are.
- Fill out the biography area. Twitter allows 160 characters for biographical information. Have some fun, but make sure that you mention you're a photographer!

Failing to provide those three basic pieces of information will greatly reduce the number of followers. In talking with several serious Twitter users, most indicate they will never follow someone who hasn't provided at least some user information.

How Does a Photographer Share Photography on Twitter?

The Twitter service itself does not include support for photos, videos, or any content other than 140 characters of text. Even though photo sharing isn't a core feature of Twitter, photos can be shared by pairing Twitter with other web photo services. Twitter can include links to other web locations, including photo sharing sites such as Flickr, SmugMug, or a photographer's self-hosted photo gallery.

Flickr includes direct Twitter integration. Flickr users can go to their preferences and configure Flickr to post directly to Twitter, so that when viewing a photo on Flickr, users can click the "Blog This" button and choose to share a link to the photo via Twitter.

In addition to being able to post links to material already on the web, there are a number of services that allow one to post photos directly from a camera phone. One of the popular services is Twitpic - <http://www.twitpic.com> - and Flickr also features support for posting to Twitter via email (which means that if your phone can send mail, it can post your photo to both Flickr and Twitter while you're on the go).

How Does a Photographer Make Money on Twitter?

Ah, the magic question... can Twitter help a photographer make money? Yes, it can.

From the preceding sections you've seen how Twitter can be used by a photographer and with whom it can help foster and develop connections. Twitter isn't usually a direct sales tool, but it can support a photographer's income in the following ways:

- Provide a channel for distribution of information about services and products being offered (this is the self-promotional bit)
- Allow photographers to follow other people in their area who might express a need for photography services, which can lead to new business.
- Allow photographers to maintain relationships with existing clients, leading to repeat business.
- Allow a photographer to network with peers and engage in conversations which help to establish industry credibility. This credibility often leads to future referrals or opportunities such as workshops and speaking engagements.

Conclusions

Twitter is a new media tool that can be used by photographers to expand the reach of current personal and professional relationships as well as a venue for marketing photography products and services. A wise photographer will include use of Twitter as part of one's overall communications, relations, and marketing strategy.

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