

editor's note



ONE OF THE AXIOMS OF JOURNALISM IS: "IF YOUR MOTHER SAYS SHE LOVES YOU, CHECK IT OUT." So when I recently heard an account of someone mentioning Comcast on a tweet and getting an immediate response from the company, I knew I had to check it out for myself.

But before I get into the details of my test, I guess a little explanation is in order. An increasing amount of communication and social interaction is occurring online. And while probably every reader has sent an email, fewer have sent a text message, joined Facebook or LinkedIn, or sent a tweet through Twitter. And if you're saying "Huh?" right about now, you're not alone; here are some definitions for you.

According to Wikipedia (an online encyclopedia created by its own users), "Text messaging or texting is the common term for the sending of 'short' (160 characters or fewer, including spaces) text messages from mobile phones using the Short Message Service (SMS)." If your cell plan doesn't include unlimited texting, you'll probably be charged something like \$0.20 for each incoming or outgoing text. If you're like my niece Beth Ann, you might send 4,000 texts a month (including texting her boyfriend when he's sitting right next to her!). And if you're under 30, this is pretty common.

Facebook is a social networking site that used to be open only to students but has since expanded to just about everyone (since joining the free service, I've reconnected with many old high school friends – nothing monumental, but kind of fun). You post a profile on the site and can be found by "friends." Fortunately, you get to accept, reject, or ignore those who want to be your friend. (Feel free to search for me on Facebook!)

LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking site mainly used for professional networking. Again, you post a profile and as others link to your profile, you can expand your professional network by seeing who they link to. Kind of like playing Kevin Bacon and six degrees of separation. (Yes, I'm on LinkedIn too.)

Twitter is the strangest of them all. It's a social networking and micro-blogging service. Essentially, people write 140 character tweets that

can be viewed by anyone (though some people actively follow the messages written by certain people). Lately, some people have been using Twitter for business purposes, which is the whole point of this story.

So as part of my test, I tweeted "Why can't Comcast get it right? They offered me digital, I accept, and they say they've twice sent me a digital box, but..." Within three minutes (three minutes!) I had a reply from Comcast (remember, I didn't send a message to Comcast; I simply mentioned Comcast in a message sent to no one in particular). When I then emailed them my contact info, they called me within a day and actually resolved the issue with an even better result than I asked for. And apparently Comcast isn't alone in monitoring Twitter messages; rumor is that GE and several other big corporations do it too (you'll have to run your own test).

Another use for Twitter is at conferences. I've been to a couple now where there was both an official Twitter stream (we'll have one at NASCC: The Steel Conference) to give announcements about room changes, when lunch is being served, etc., to attendees as well as where attendees will be tweeting about the conference (we're asking people who write about the conference to reference #nascc to make it easier for people to find their messages). You can receive tweets on your laptop, as text messages, or, if you have a BlackBerry, through the free Twitterberry service.

Does any of this have a professional application? Who knows. But now might be the time to expand your professional network so when the economy begins to recover, you'll be better positioned. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter. They're all free. And if nothing else, familiarity with them will better help you understand the people you'll soon be hiring.

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