140 characters. Can every thought be drilled down to just 140 letters, numbers, hashtags and spaces? Can a really important or impactful idea be brought across in 140 keystrokes or less? Yes. Friendships have been made, businesses have been developed and national revolutions have been launched on Twitter. While many (most?) people have caught on to how to tweet generally, taking it to a more useful level is another story.

This week, I met with Josh Beccara, founder of Tweepwise, (www.tweepwise.com). Tweepwise is a St. Paul company dedicated to bringing businesses the “most authentic and responsible way to grow a highly targeted following on Twitter.” While his target customers are marketing folks who want to develop a relevant following and thus get their name and brand out into the world effectively, he had a few recommendations for the small-business user, as well.

In Josh’s experience, improving a Twitter profile is the first step to cultivating a strong following. Twitter Profile Optimization, he calls it, starts with improving your profile. Is your handle catchy enough? Your bio is searchable; does it contain the keywords that will lead customers to your profile? Are your background, photo and location information appropriate?

Josh suggests coming up with a few goals for what you want Twitter to do for you. In my case, I want to connect with people who want new work; I want to quickly share information about job leads and useful career planning information with people who want to know; and I want to build a rapport with these people in order to be viewed as a trusted resource, someone who will help them when they need it.

Once you know what you want out of Twitter, you can easily make the tool work for you. Spend the time it takes one Saturday afternoon to update your profile background and your bio. Then, take a look at your stats. You should have about the same number of followers as people you are following. Remove those followers who look like spammers, aren’t interesting to you or are so far across the world that it makes no sense to keep them.

Next, choose ten or twenty or 100 people you want to follow. If they follow you back, great. If they don’t, consider unfollowing them for a while, and follow a few more. This is a give and take tool. Your best followers are people you actually stand some chance of meeting in person someday.

Finally, think about how you are going to engage with all your new followers. Especially if you are new to the game, your posts should be thoughtful and interesting, a mix of some personal and some professional comments. Pay attention to other people on Twitter, and learn as you go along, so you can tweet smart, or Tweepwise, as Josh would say.

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