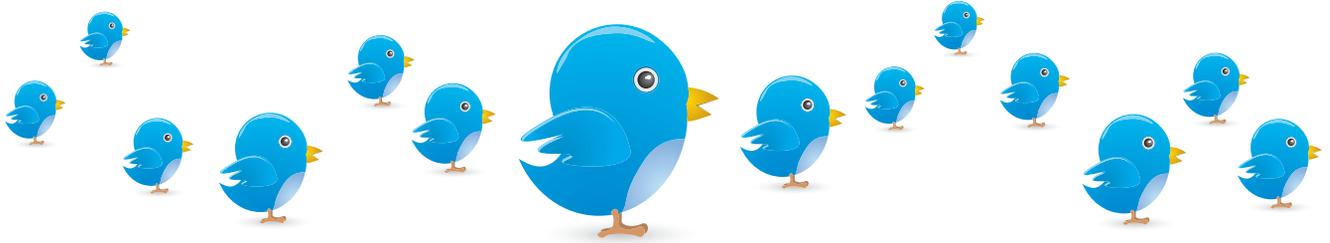


Your Flowing Twitter Stream



BY RICH MAGGIANI | Fellow

ON A RECENT camping trip, my pal Bill called out to me with some urgency. “Hey Rich! Come take a look at this!”

He was pointing to something floating in a nearby stream, swollen from the spring melt. However, by the time I made my way to the stream, whatever it was had floated on by, out of sight.

“Oh, you missed it,” Bill said. “It was really cool.”

We stood there for a brief moment, a mild look of chagrin crossed his face. “Well, tell me about it then,” I said. And he tried, but just couldn’t describe it in a way that did this mysterious object any justice.

“You just had to see it,” he concluded.



Social media has transformed the way we communicate. This column discusses the intricacies and ramifications that social media has on our everyday personal and professional lives. Suggestions for topics are welcome. Email me at rich.maggiani@solari.net.

“Well, I suppose I could jog down the stream bank and catch up to it,” I said helpfully.

He gave me a wry smile. “It was cool,” he replied. “But it wasn’t *that* cool.”

And so it is with your Twitter stream. Tweets flow down your Twitter stream continuously, and many of them are cool. But unless you are there, on

the bank so to speak, they just flow by unnoticed and unappreciated. Yes, you could “run down” your Twitter stream’s bank to peruse all those past tweets, but are they really worth it? Most likely, no.

Why am I telling you this? Because for the vast majority of us, Twitter is not a way to obtain meaningful information. Rather, it is a broadcast mechanism, a way for us to relay information to our followers, hope that they will respond, and then retweet our information so that we gain a larger audience. But what are the chances of that happening?

A recent study by Sysomos (<http://sysomos.com/insidetwitter/engagement/>) showed that few tweets are actually read or seen, and only about 1.5% of all tweets generate a conversation of at least three levels deep (a reply to the original tweet, a reply to that, and a follow-up reply). That’s about the same response rate as direct mail. For me, with 640 followers, I can expect 7 people to engage in a conversation over a tweet. And if you are expecting a reaction to a tweet, it’s going to come within the first few minutes. Retweets generally happen within the first hour of your original tweet as well. After that, it’s essentially gone, too far down the stream to chase after.

This also means, of course, that you respond to only 1.5% of the tweets you receive.

When I mentioned this at the Practical Conference on Communication (PCOC) recently, an audience member told me a Twitter

story about David Pogue. Pogue, a technical communicator for the *New York Times* (and keynote speaker at the 2009 STC Summit in Atlanta), demonstrated the capabilities of Twitter during his keynote presentation at the TechKnowledge 2009 conference. He tweeted: “I need a cure for hiccups... RIGHT NOW! Help?” Almost immediately, he began receiving responses. In his column about the event, Pogue listed about 30 responses. Considering that David Pogue has 1.3 million followers, though, and given the 1.5% response rate, he should have received over 19,000 responses.

While Pogue marveled about the power of Twitter in his column, he also offered this sobering statement: “I realize that this demo might not be as effective if you have, say, 20 followers instead of hundreds.”

Don’t get me wrong here. I’m not trying to whet your appetite for Twitter (pun intended). There certainly are circumstances where Twitter can be and is a powerful, useful communication method. Hashtags used at STC and other conferences come immediately to mind, as do constantly monitored customer service Twitter accounts of major service providers (such as JetBlue and Zappos) and the viral, grassroots power of retweeting a socially cataclysmic event (such as the Brazilian Police’s shantytown drug raid in Rio de Janeiro this past November). It also helps if you’re famous.

While I’m not famous, I use Twitter on a regular basis. It’s just that I’m realistic about my expectations. **i**