

Twitter Walls, Chat, and Engagement

A great idea to engage the audience – or a disaster in the making...

By Randall Craig

You've decided - or you've been told - that it is time that your meeting incorporates Twitter. In fact, the young keener in your office has assured you that doing so is actually quite easy - just set up a Twitter wall. Unfortunately, you know that whenever anyone says this, they either don't know what they're talking about, or they have conveniently omitted the fine print. And as more conferences are either being delivered virtual or in a hybrid model, why is this even relevant?

It probably makes sense to address the last question first. In a certain sense, 99% of all meetings delivered virtually have a Twitter Wall built in: it's called the chat box. As a result, expectations are changing rapidly: people are less enamored with being an *audience*, and more keen on being a *participant*. The chat box and the Twitter wall allow this to happen.

Including Twitter and Chat within your meeting plans actually does provide some benefits:

- 1) It allows a conversational backchannel to form amongst attendees – both remote and on-site – improving engagement and building community.
- 2) The conversation can continue well after the event itself.
- 3) The conversation can be archived/reviewed for feedback and ideas for future conferences.
- 4) Using Twitter and Chats successfully helps demonstrate that you are tech-savvy and up-to-date.

On the flip side, using it poorly also reflects on you. And Twitter /Chat does add one more thing to do... and one more thing that can go wrong.

For the uninitiated, Twitter is the Social Media service that allows users to post 280 character mini-status updates - "tweets". If a user follows you, anything that you tweet is then shown on their twitter home page. Twitter uses a concept called hashtags - a keyword preceded by the # character - as the mechanism to allow conversations to happen. Search for a particular hashtag, and you'll usually find a robust conversation on the topic at hand. To "join" the conversation, merely include the hashtag as part of your post.

A Twitter Wall is web-based software that automatically listens for a certain hashtag, and then displays it on the screen. Add a projector, and you are good to go. Or not.

Chat, on the other hand, doesn't always explicitly use Hashtags, but is the ongoing conversation that takes place within a streaming platform, such as Zoom, or on a third-party platform, such as Slack, MS-Teams, or iMessage/SMS. For the purpose of this whitepaper, I will use the term Twitter Wall to refer to the concept, whether the content is from Twitter, Chat, or some other platform.

Twitter walls can be used either in an open area - often near registration - so that attendees can see comments made by others, or within the conference rooms themselves, so that attendees can use them as a backchannel during each presentation. Here's the fine print on successfully using Twitter at your event:

Choose a hashtag

Choosing a unique hashtag is critical; if you choose one that another organization is using, then their comments will be mixed in with yours. CAFE, for example, is an acronym for the Canadian Association of Family Enterprises, the Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions, Canadian Association of Foundations of Education, and many others. For a unique hashtag, add qualifiers to your name: #CAFETalks2020 is good: #CAFE will generate problems.

Publicize hashtag and educate

- Send instructions to attendees beforehand via email, encouraging them to try it out beforehand. Whether you are using Twitter, or Chat, and whether they are on-site or remote, attendees will need some basic information.
- Consider printing instructions on a postcard: how to get Twitter on their smartphone or tablet, what the event hashtag is, how to use chat, how to post. (An idea: ask them to answer a specific question, otherwise you will have many posts that say "this is my first post"). The postcards can be given to delegates upon registration, handed out as people enter a room with a Twitter wall, or put on chairs.
- For Twitter walls in an open area, have a staff member or volunteer nearby to answer questions. Consider a poster on a stand, with instructions
- Before a session, have an expert do a "pre-show" to teach the audience how to use the technology. This should include how to download/sign-in on their smartphones, as well as sending their first tweet or chat.

Technical set-up

There are a number of websites that provide Twitter wall functionality; one that works particularly well is the free site [Twitterfall.com](#); another is [Walls.io](#), which provides a very wide range of formatting options. While there are many customization settings for each of these, here are the three key steps:

- Add in your search terms (e.g. the hashtag, say *#CAFETalks2020*).
- Click on the *presentation mode* link, or choose a template.
- Change the page title from the default to something useful, such as *Please use #CAFETalks2020*.

Ensure that the computer that is projecting the Twitter wall is connected to a wired internet connection. At many venues, the wireless internet can quickly become bogged down, leading to few (or no) updates being projected. While users won't have a problem with slightly slower speeds when posting, they will become frustrated if they don't see their tweets or chat messages appearing quickly.

If you are considering adding a Twitter wall into a conference room, ask the speaker how often they have presented with one. If the answer is never (or only a few times), then maybe don't use the Twitter wall for that session, or consider a speaker who is

experienced with one. (Professional speakers will always highly tune a presentation; the unending stream of questions and comments via Twitter or Chat can be exceptionally distracting - unless they have experience with it.)

When the speaker is presenting on-site, mirror the Twitter wall on a monitor at floor-level in front of the speaker. This will allow the speaker to see the backchannel conversation without turning his or her back to the audience. When the speaker is delivering virtually: triple check the quality of their home studio. Do they have multiple monitors, redundant computers, redundant internet feeds, etc? Another double check is whether they are [certified as a virtual presenter](#).

Finally, use a staff member or volunteer to "live tweet" or "live chat" the event; this adds value for remote attendees, and avoids the problem of the Twitter wall looking empty. Attendees are more likely to engage in a Twitter conversation if they see activity. Note that this is different than an official backchannel monitor/producer/co-host, who has different responsibilities.

Follow-up

Using Twitter or Chat doesn't just happen at the event. Afterwards, consider the following activities:

- Download and review the Twitter and Chat transcripts for ideas and suggestions for future events. Respond to any administrative questions that attendees asked.
- Ask the speaker to monitor the hashtag and respond to questions for a few weeks after the event.
- Send a note to attendees, reminding them that they can continue the conversation by including the hashtag(s) in relevant posts.
- Use the hashtag to provide links for event evaluations - and registration for future events.
- Add Twitter and Chat to your post-mortem agenda: what did you learn, and what would you do differently?

Some people are more comfortable reading posts, while others are more interested in actively being engaged. In both cases, using Twitter and Chat adds an important dimension to your meeting - if it's done properly. What has worked for you? What have you learned? Tweet your answer, and include [@randallcraig](#) so we can continue this conversation.

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