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Twitter Chats: Connect, Foster, and Engage Internal Extension Networks

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Twitter Chats: Connect, Foster, and Engage Internal Extension Networks

Abstract

The eXtension Educational Technology Learning Network (EdTechLN) has found Twitter to be an effective form of informal communication for routinely engaging network members. Twitter chats provide Extension professionals an opportunity to reach and engage one other. As the EdTechLN's experimentation with Twitter chats has demonstrated, the use of this technology can be a worthwhile method of engagement if suitable for the intended audience.

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Introduction

In fall 2014, the newly formed eXtension Educational Technology Learning Network (EdTechLN) held its first meeting of guiding committee members. Ideas were generated on how to most effectively communicate with, and routinely engage, EdTechLN members. The committee had two goals:

1. Use a social networking service already being used by a majority of the EdTechLN target audience (i.e., Extension professionals interested in using technology at work).
2. Keep engagement informal to encourage participation.

After examining the social media accounts of hundreds of Extension professionals, the committee selected Twitter as the social network of choice. This decision was based on the wide adoption of the Twitter platform by potential EdTechLN members. Twitter also allows for live, informal engagement events, an option that coincides with the learning network's goals.

What Is a Twitter Chat?

A Twitter chat is a live Twitter event, usually moderated and focused around a preselected topic (Smarty, 2012). For filtering specific chatter on Twitter into a single conversation, a hashtag is used. Examples of hashtags used in Extension include: #AgChat, #CoopExt, #OSUExtension, #UF_IFAS, #CESvalue, and #LGUimpact. A

predetermined time is also scheduled so that the moderator, host, and guests of the chat are available to engage in the conversation.

To participate, all one needs to do is tweet during the designated time using the group's hashtag, which is #EdTechLN for the EdTechLN's chats. It is also possible to just follow the conversation by searching the hashtag without engaging (Cooper, 2013). This is a good option for those who want to join at least one or two Twitter chats to "lurk" and learn how the chats operate without actively participating.

Why #EdTechLN Twitter Chats?

The EdTechLN uses Twitter chats to reach Extension professionals who are (a) actively using Twitter, (b) interested in learning how to use Twitter, and/or (c) generally interested in integrating technology into their programming efforts. The EdTechLN aims for participants to feel as though they are in a virtual "meet-up" environment online; thus, the term "tweet-up" was chosen in lieu of "Twitter chat" for the learning network's purposes.

The first #EdTechLN tweet-up was held November 20, 2014. The topic chosen for the chat was "getting to know the EdTechLN." Questions during the tweet-up aimed to describe a learning network and the benefits of participating in the EdTechLN (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Screenshot of Tweets from First EdTechLN Tweet-Up

Storify TechieJamie "Getting to Know the #EdTechLN" November 20th TweetUp Recap a year ago

 **Jeff Hino**
@hinojosu [Follow](#)

So, for those newbies, please complete the sentence..."I joined EdTechLN because I believe _____" See video youtu.be/GiTLpQeYsc #edtechln
2:08 PM - 20 Nov 2014

 **YouTube** @YouTube



 **Jennifer Alexander**
@editor_jennifer [Follow](#)

.@hinojosu because I believe everyone has something to learn and something to share. #EdTechLN
2:13 PM - 20 Nov 2014

   3

 **Tammy McKinley**
@TammyMcKinley [Follow](#)

I joined to learn more about what others are doing & how I can help our folks w/tech #EdTechLN
2:12 PM - 20 Nov 2014

817    1

The pilot Twitter chat involved 18 individuals actively participating from various fields of expertise in Cooperative Extension (communication, programming, graphic design, and information technology support).

How to Host a Twitter Chat Like the #EdTechLN Chats

The EdTechLN gathers virtually twice a month for 60 min of chatting on a specific theme. The individual in charge of hosting the chat curates six to eight questions to ask during the event. These questions come from engaging with EdTechLN members and finding out what their most pressing technology needs are, what they want to learn, and what they have not yet discovered. EdTechLN leaders stay on the pulse of emerging trends in technology and

new tools while constantly looking for opportunities to simplify Extension work.

Popular chat topics include

- live streaming,
- photography,
- podcasting,
- infographics,
- Instagram,
- digital scholarship,
- video creation,
- social media evaluation,
- content creation, and
- engagement.

To create a "room" for the #EdTechLN, the learning network began encouraging participants to use twubs.com. However, the EdTechLN leaders continue to explore other tools, including

- Tchat.io,
- Twitterfall.com,
- Hootsuite.com, and
- Tweetchat.com.

What the EdTechLN Learned in Its First Year of Hosting Twitter Chats

Unsure as to whether Extension professionals desired Twitter chats, the EdTechLN originally planned to test the idea only through 2015 and into 2016. However, due to the average rate of participation—20 to 30 people—the EdTechLN guiding committee realized that Twitter chats are an effective way to regularly engage members and others interested in technology use. The EdTechLN decided to move forward with holding Twitter chats on a regular basis. After hearing about the #EdTechLN chats, dozens of Extension professionals created Twitter accounts in order to engage with members of the learning network. By entering the hashtag #EdTechLN into tweetreach.com, one can see a free visual report of the accounts reached, impressions, activity, and top contributors in a given week. It is not uncommon for the EdTechLN to reach over 30,000 accounts during the week of a Twitter chat.

Participants in the #EdTechLN Twitter chats are learning new techniques and using those techniques to engage clientele. Several participants have shared relevant success stories:

- Ryan from Indiana 4-H (Purdue University) learned about Canva during a Twitter chat and created an infographic for his 4-H program (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Screenshot of #EdTechLN Twitter Chat Participant's 4-H Infographic Created in Canva



- After her participation in a Twitter chat on the topic of video creation, Amanda from Utah State University started a series of personal finance YouTube videos to engage her clientele (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

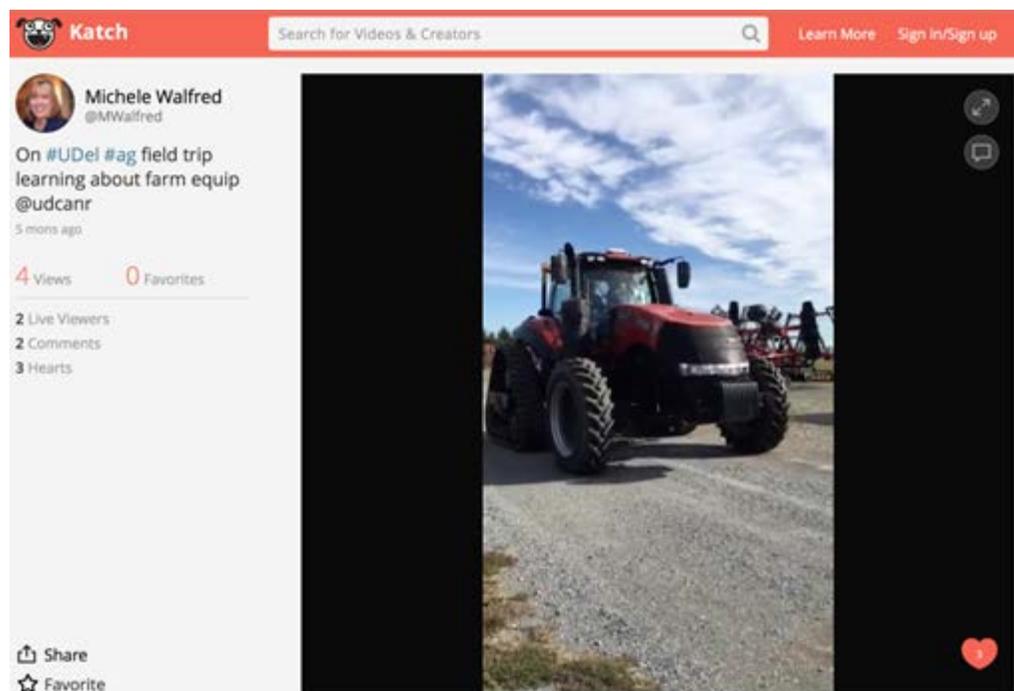
Screenshot of #EdTechLN Twitter Chat Participant's Personal Finance YouTube Video



- Michele from Delaware learned about Periscope during a Twitter chat and now engages a national audience by "livestreaming" behind the scenes footage of Extension events (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Screenshot of #EdTechLN Twitter Chat Participant's katch.me Account Where Her Periscope "Livestreams" Are Archived



Conclusion

To engage Extension clientele and other audiences, Extension professionals must seek out and use the current tools and methods of engagement. The EdTechLN has found this method useful for engaging with its members.

Moreover, not only have EdTechLN members embraced learning how to participate in Twitter chats to engage with the network, but they also have taken additional steps to implement new information from the chats in the Extension work they do every day. Some have even adopted Twitter chats as a method of engagement with their local audiences. As Gharis, Bardon, Evans, Hubbard, and Taylor (2014) noted, regularly using social media offers Extension professionals "the ability to reach out to new audiences, provide professional guidance and direction, and encourage peer-to-peer interactions while meeting the land-grant Extension mission of increasing knowledge, changing behavior, and assessing the impacts of their programmatic efforts" ("Introduction," para. 1).

If members of the internal audience you seek to reach currently use Twitter, or are willing to experiment with new tools and social media, the use of Twitter chats would be a worthwhile method of engagement and communication to explore. Through the use of Twitter, your audience members will easily form new connections and become comfortable seeking out one another. Twitter's inherent capacity for creating meaningful networks surrounding topics of interest provides Extension professionals and members of their audiences—both internal and external—opportunities to form virtual cohorts and connections that may not otherwise exist.

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