# Social Media Guidelines and Best Practices

## CDC Micro-blogging Requirements and Best Practices

### Purpose
This document has been designed to assist and provide information to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) employees and contractors on the process for creating micro-blogging profiles, requirements for planning and design, and best practices for participating and engaging on Twitter, the micro-blogging site in which CDC currently participates.

Twitter is often used for emergency and timely communications; therefore, CDC encourages the strategic use of Twitter to effectively and inexpensively reach individuals and partners with timely health and safety information. This document has been designed to assist CDC employees and contractors who wish to participate in Twitter.

### Background
Micro-blogging is a form of blogging that allows users to send brief text updates to a Web site that aggregates these messages for viewing by either a friend list or the public. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messages, mobile Web sites, audio, the Web site hosting the micro-blog, or other sites that are supported by an Application Program Interface (API). While there are several micro-blogging sites, the remainder of this document will focus on Twitter, one of the most popular micro-blogging sites.

Twitter is an online social networking and micro-blogging Web site that is used to provide information, commentary and descriptions of events, and highlight certain audio and video content. Twitter users send updates, or 'tweets,' which are 140 characters or less in length. Individual users can 'follow' another user's updates.

In 2007, a year after Twitter was founded, the New York Times called it "the fastest-growing phenomena on the Internet" (http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/business/yourmoney/22stream.html). Twitter has grown even more since then; a Forrester Research study found "the growth rate for Twitter was 752%, for a total of 4.43 million unique visitors in December 2008; in the start of 2008, Twitter had only around 500,000 unique monthly visitors" (http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2009/01/11/a-collection-of-soical-network-stats-for-2009/). According to a February 2009 Compete.com study, Twitter is the third largest social network by monthly visits, following only Facebook and MySpace (http://blog.compete.com/2009/02/09/facebook-myspace-twitter-social-network/).

For consultation on creating and maintaining a Twitter account, or to start participating in Twitter, contact the Division of eHealth Marketing (DeHM) at NCHMInteractiveMedia@cdc.gov.

**Twitter Terms**

The following are common terms related to Twitter activities:

- Tweet: an individual post or update on Twitter
- Follower: a Twitter user who subscribes to follow another user
- @ Reply: A response to a tweet that is sent out. Using the "@" symbol and username creates a direct link to that user's profile
- ReTweet or RT: The act of reposting another user's tweet and giving them credit, usually by using the phrase "RT @username" or "ReTweet @username"
- "#" or Hashtags: A way to categorize posts around a certain topic; individual Twitter users create a hashtag that can be added to posts on a specific topic

**Clearance**

Participating in Twitter requires approval from DeHM and the Associate Director for Communication Science in your Center or Office. You can obtain DeHM clearance by emailing NCHMInteractiveMedia@cdc.gov and providing a plan, strategy and completed checklist.

All tweets or Twitter posts must be approved by your Center's normal clearance channels. All new Twitter profiles should be topic or campaign based and not for individual staff or programs.

**Security Requirements**

Due to security concerns related to participating in Twitter, all participation must also be cleared by the Office of the Chief Information Office (OCISO.) To facilitate this process, contact your Center's Information System Security Officer (ISSO). All participation must occur off of the CDC network, such as an off-network laptop with a wireless Internet card or other wireless Internet service, if available. When logging in and posting tweets, please only use http://twitter.com/ and not unapproved third party tools, such as TweetDeck or HootSuite, to avoid additional security risks by logging into outside sites and giving out usernames and passwords.

Refer to the Social Media Security Mitigations for more detailed security information.

**Planning Requirements**

To use resources effectively, a collaborative planning meeting should be arranged to discuss:

1. Target Audience(s):
   As with any communications activity, it is important to define your intended target audience(s) in order to develop and communicate messages that resonate with your audience and prompt them to take action. Since Twitter posts can be viewed beyond the original audience, it is necessary for each tweet to stand alone and contain all necessary information. The profile name and biography will appeal to the target audience and people will follow based on interest in the topic.

2. Objectives:

It is also important to have clearly defined goals and objectives before beginning any Twitter participation. Do you want to highlight content, spark action, or encourage awareness of an issue?

Some examples of tweets that have been used successfully by CDC Twitter accounts are included below:
A. Stay healthy! Send family and friends a hand washing eCard: http://is.gd/uL0Z #swineflu Please share!
B. Access important CDC info including H1N1 flu via the mobile CDC Website at http://m.cdc.gov
C. Have Swine Flu questions? Please call CDC INFO at 1-800-232-4636 for all health questions. Available in English & Spanish 24/7.
D. #AAAIDS Act Against AIDS. Every 9.5 minutes, someone is infected with HIV. Learn more: www.nineandahalfminutes.org
E. Update 6/3/09: 11,054 cases of novel H1N1 flu, 17 deaths, 52 states/territories affected: http://tr.im/niJR #swineflu
F. Links to official H1N1 flu web pages for all 50 states plus DC are available on the CDC website: http://tr.im/m8rS

3. Twitter Decisions
   When determining the focus and structure of your Twitter profile, it helps to answer the following questions:
   a. What Web sites will you be linking to?
   b. How will you promote your participation in Twitter?
   c. How will your Twitter participation be evaluated?
   d. What metrics or usage data will be collected?
   e. Who is responsible for creating and clearing posts?
   f. How often will you be adding new tweets?
   g. What design aspects are important to include (Profile image, background and biography)?
   h. What are your measures of success for Twitter participation?
Please see the Best Practices section below for guidance in answering these questions.

4. Content
   a. All tweets should be 120 characters or fewer
   b. The text within individual tweets should be short and simple and include links to related information available on CDC.gov and other appropriate external Web sites.
   c. Include a link with each tweet, and shorten the URL using an approved Web site that shortens URLs (http://tinyurl.com, http://is.gd, http://tr.im).
   d. Include a short biography and image for the Twitter profile.
   e. Set a regular posting schedule in order to gain active followers.

f. Tweets can be posted in both Spanish and English. If you are going to post in Spanish, please also tweet in English at the same time, describing the content of the Spanish tweet.

5. Branding
All Twitter participation will be identified as being an official CDC presence. A URL to CDC.gov should be included on the profile page. Individuals should not have profiles as official representatives of CDC.

Please see the Best Practices section below for additional information.

6. Promotion
To promote your Twitter profile and participation, the following is recommended:
   a. Including a thumbnail and link in campaign materials.
   b. Sending content-specific GovDelivery email updates.
   c. Promotion with other CDC social media efforts.

Please contact DeHM to discuss other creative promotional ideas for Twitter participation.

7. Evaluation
All efforts should be evaluated by reviewing the metrics, articulating the lessons learned, and determining whether the effort was successful and met project goals. Omniture code should be added to each URL to aid in evaluation. Please see the Best Practices section for additional evaluation metrics.

8. Using Twitter at CDC
CDC employees and contractors should not use personal Twitter accounts to post messages on behalf of the agency. CDC employees and contractors should follow the CDC Enterprise Blogging Policy as it relates to Twitter (not accessible outside the CDC network).

**Best Practices**
1. Profile Name, Image and Biography
It is necessary to create a profile name that is short, concise and conveys the subject matter. CDC Twitter usernames should start with "CDC" for credibility. When Twitter users share the information that you send out they do so by attributing it to the specific username by using the "@" sign (@username).

Profile Name Examples:
Good examples
   - CDC_eHealth
   - CDCemergency
Bad examples

- JohnatCDC (Individual Person)
- Envhealth (Overly abbreviated, no mention of CDC)

Each Twitter profile includes a squared thumbnail image, with a maximum file size of 700k. The thumbnail image should be easily identifiable as CDC, such as the CDC logo with the name of your profile or a CDC program description.

The biography is a 160-character description of the profile. This biographical statement should also be the first post from a new profile. This statement should also provide a link to the commenting policy on CDC.gov.

2. Length of Each Tweet
   Each tweet should be 120 characters or fewer, including spaces, punctuation and URLs. The posts should be short and concise and still engaging. This character limit facilitates retweeting.

   To test the length of a text message, go to http://nchm-dvss1.cdc.gov/count.html and paste or type your message in the box provided.

3. Schedule and Frequency of Twitter Posts
   It is important to set a tweeting schedule that defines a frequency of posts per week. Posting frequency varies depending on the type of content, but if the posts are too infrequent, it will be difficult to gain active and engaged followers.

   Make sure to post at least once per day to provide updated information during an emergency or news-worthy event, but be wary of posting too frequently. This could contribute to a sense of panic, especially for emergency topics that are also in the news frequently and are already hot topics on Twitter.

   Each Twitter account should retweet the posts of other CDC Twitter accounts when there are relevant or interesting posts.

4. Abbreviations
   It is helpful to abbreviate a Twitter message as necessary in order to save characters. Use standard abbreviations but do not over-abbreviate a message. An over-abbreviated message is seen as less credible and can be difficult to read and understand for those who are less familiar with Twitter.

   Some common abbreviations:
   - US for United States
   - Info for Information
   - & for And
   - Msg for Message
   - IMPT for Important
   - b/c for Because
   - w/ or w. for With
   - Pls for Please
   - RT for ReTweet

   Please note: Do not use the "@" symbol. This is used to refer to other Twitter users by their username. In an individual tweet, @username becomes a link to that user's

profile. Additionally, do not use the "#" symbol, as this is used to refer to a hashtag; users can categorize Twitter posts around a specific topic using a hashtag.

5. Linking to Additional Related Content
   Make sure to include links to related information in each tweet. Please use an approved Web-based tool to shorten URLs, such as:
   - http://tinyurl.com
   - http://is.gd
   - http://tr.im

   Be sure to check the shortened URL and verify that it is operational prior to posting on Twitter. Omniture tracking codes need to be added *before* URLs are shortened.

   Please do not use URL shortening Web sites that host all links on their server, such as http://ow.ly.

6. Best Practices for Creating Viral Tweets
   - Engaging Topic
   - Time of Day
   - Encouraging followers to share
   - Use of "Please"

7. Be Aware of Your Mentions on Twitter

8. Followers
   Followers on official CDC Twitter profiles may be seen as endorsements. Thus, it is important to consider each follower you add to your profile.

9. Evaluation
   Please track metrics for evaluation, such as number of followers, updates, retweets, and mentions in other Twitter posts. Keep track of mentions outside of Twitter, such as in blogs, Web sites or articles. Add Omniture tracking codes to CDC.gov URLs and keep track of clickthroughs from Twitter to CDC.gov. Please contact NCHMinteractivemedia@cdc.gov for further training and guidance for using Omniture codes within Twitter.

**Example**

CDC's eHealth Twitter profile: http://twitter.com/cdc_ehealth



Appendix A

- Twitter Checklist

# Social Media Guidelines and Best Practices

CDC Twitter Checklist  - When completed, please send to NCHMInterctivemedia@cdc.gov

Name:

Phone:

Email:

CIO:

☐    Profile Name (must start with CDC)

☐    Biography (160 characters max):

☐    Web site URL:

☐    Posting Schedule

☐    Who has permission to post? (List names):

☐    ADCS Approval

☐    Division Approval

☐    ITSO/OCISO Approval

☐    NCHM DeHM Approval

☐    Social Media Security Package Reviewed (CDC Username):

☐    Metrics and Omniture plan

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☐    First 5 posts cleared and reviewed by DeHM (Fill out table below)

| Topic | Tweet | Characters |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction | | |
| Topic 1 | | |
| Topic 2 | | |
| Topic 3 | | |
| Topic 4 | | |
| Topic 5 | | |