

@doesyourairlinetweet? An empirical examination of the use of twitter by 50 international airlines

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Abstract

Purpose: To provide empirical evidence of the extent to which 50 of the world's largest passenger airlines use the social media site twitter.

Design/methodology/approach: Original empirical data on the presence and usage of 50 airlines' official twitter accounts was accessed.

Research limitations/implications: Research demonstrates the extent to which airlines are using twitter as a communications tool and suggests that some airline are not currently utilising twitter to its full extent.

Practical implications: The research provides information on current twitter use and penetration, thus enabling airlines to benchmark their performance in this social media channel.

Originality/value: The paper provides an original empirical insight into a growing phenomenon which is currently underreported in academic literatures.

Keywords: airlines, communication, social media, twitter, marketing

1. Introduction

The world's commercial airlines are undergoing a profound period of change. Structural alterations to global regulatory regimes have liberalised the sector and enabled new airlines to enter the marketplace and led to a wave of mergers, alliances, and acquisitions as incumbent operators have sought to consolidate their position and protect market share. These factors, combined with concerns about volatile oil prices, ongoing global economic uncertainty, and increased competition have meant that it is vital for airlines to capture and retain customers. The revolution in social media and the growing popularity of internet-based social networking sites including Facebook, Flickr, Google+, and Twitter, has transformed both the media and the messages that companies and customers exchange and airlines are no exception.

The increasing widespread use of these instantaneous online messaging systems by current and prospective customers poses a range of challenges and opportunities for airlines. This paper examines how 50 major international passenger airlines use of one of these sites, twitter, to discover the extent to which individual carriers have embraced this new form of communication. Twitter was selected for analysis because it is increasingly used by passengers to instantly communicate their (dis)pleasure at particular aspects of an airline's service, via the internet, to potentially tens of thousands of people. Twitter users thus have the ability to damage or bolster an airline's reputation in the press of a few buttons and so it is vital that airlines understand and effectively manage their online brand presence in this relatively new form of social media.

2. Twitter

Twitter is a real-time online social networking and microblogging site. It enables registered users to send and receive text-based messages, which are up to 140 characters long and known as 'tweets', to other users. Since its launch, in July 2006, the service has grown rapidly and twitter.com is now one of the ten most visited sites on the Internet. The service is available in more than 20 languages and, as of April 2012, had over 140 million registered users and was generating in excess of 340 million tweets a day (Twitter, 2012). Tweets can be read by anyone who has access to the Internet, but only registered users (who have registered a unique username) can write and share messages and subscribe to follow other people's twitter feeds. For ease of identification, usernames are often abbreviations of an individual's, or a company's, name prefixed by a '@' symbol.

Twitter was initially used by individuals to keep in touch with family and friends but, as the service grew, the site also became a platform on which users could share news and debate the latest consumer trends and political decisions with like-minded people. Community groups, charities, sports clubs, small enterprises and major multinational corporations were quick to appreciate the value and social and commercial advantages of being able to interact, in real time, with their friends, supporters, customers, clients, and/or suppliers and many chose to establish official accounts. Today, companies from a range of industrial sectors, including retail and transportation, use twitter to not only quickly and cheaply disseminate information to people who are interested in their brand but also to obtain real time consumer feedback on their products and services and respond to customer comments, complaints, and suggestions in real-time. Some businesses also use their twitter accounts to offer privileged 'inside' information on new products as well as exclusive price promotions and competitions to their twitter followers. As a result, many companies use twitter to develop an online social media presence that both compliments and reinforces the company's core brand values while existing and prospective customers use it to gain information on the company's products and service.

3. Airlines' use of twitter

Airlines were quick to appreciate the value of twitter and first began using the service in early 2007. US carrier JetBlue was among the earliest adopters and joined twitter as @JetBlue in May 2007. It is currently one of the most followed airline accounts on twitter with over 1.6 million followers. Other operators, including low cost carrier Southwest Airlines and full service operators American Airlines and British Airways quickly followed. By January 2012, over 195 airlines had established official twitter accounts although it was reported that only 90 of those carriers regularly tweet (Tnooz, 2012). Thompson (2011) reports that major airlines tweet, on average, four times a day, although the most prolific users, which include @KLM and @DeltaAssist, can post as many as 60 messages a day. As a result, it is believed that a relatively small number of airlines are responsible for generating the majority of tweets. Although twitter enables people who are following an account to respond to the airline's tweets, the ratio of outgoing to incoming messages is, at present, uneven. During the calendar month January 2012, the world's airlines collectively posted 248,344 outgoing tweets and received 47,212 incoming messages (Tnooz, 2012), a ratio of approximately 5:1.

Airlines primarily use their twitter accounts to post outgoing real-time service updates (particularly those relating to flight delays and cancellations), reinforce core brand messages and respond to passenger comments, compliments, and complaints (Simpliflying, 2011). Customers, on the other hand, use them to communicate their dis/pleasure with various different aspects of an airline's customer service. Indeed, in 2011, 99.9% of all incoming tweets airlines received concerned service issues. 71.5% referred to customer service centres, 10.9% to flight punctuality, and 7.2% to mishandled baggage. Issues with in-flight food and entertainment and comfort and security were responsible for 6.2% and 4.2% of all tweets respectively (Tnooz, 2012). While such surveys provide an insight into the content of outgoing and incoming tweets, empirical data detailing the scope of individual airline's twitter presence is lacking. In response, this paper quantified the extent to which 50 carefully selected major passenger airlines from around the world tweet, follow customers, and are themselves followed by other twitter users.

4. Method

To ensure a diverse range of airlines were examined, the ten largest passenger airlines (by passengers carried) in five world regions – North America, Europe, Latin America/Caribbean, Asia/Pacific, and the Middle East/Africa - were identified from Air Transport World's 2010 Airline Traffic Results (ATW, 2011) and used for the subsequent analysis. Google was used to determine the existence of and, if appropriate, provide a link to, the official twitter account of each of these 50 airlines. If an airline operated multiple official accounts, whether to serve particular aspects of its business or address different markets in which it operates (several Asian carriers had separate twitter accounts for their North American and European customers, for example), the main account was analysed. Usually this could be identified by the unadulterated use of the airline's brand name as the username (for example @BritishAirways or @JetBlue) but where it was not obvious, the account that had been running for the longest period of time was analysed.

For each airline, six separate pieces of information were recorded. Firstly, details of the number of passengers each airline carried in 2010 was obtained from Air Transport World's 2010 Airline Report (ATW, 2011). Google was then used to determine whether or not each named airline had a twitter account. If it did, the relevant twitter page of the main account was accessed and data on the account name, the number of tweets posted/received, the number of other twitter accounts the airline was following, and the number of people following the airline was obtained from the user's 'dashboard' (a box under the username which contains

data on user statistics) and recorded. The empirical data was collected during the last two weeks of April 2012. Owing to the large number of tweets the 50 airlines had collectively sent and received, the content of individual messages was not categorised.

5. Findings

Characterization of the air cargo supply chain

In 2010, the 50 airlines collectively carried 1.664.958.000 passengers (ATW, 2011). Nearly two thirds of these passengers (65%) were transported by North American and European operators while 21% flew with Asian/Pacific carriers. Airlines based in Latin America/Caribbean and the Middle East/Africa flew 8% and 6% of the total respectively (Figure 1).

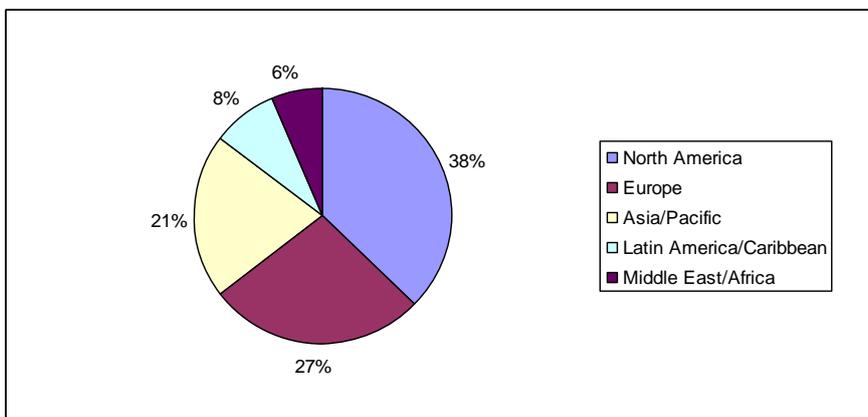


Figure 1. Proportion of passengers carried by world region (2010)

49 of the 50 airlines that were sampled had an official twitter account. According to the account statistics site whendidyoujointwitter.com, the first airlines in the sample to establish twitter profiles registered their accounts in the spring of 2007, eight months after twitter was launched. The pan-national Scandinavian operator SAS was the first airline in the sample to adopt the new technology and established their @SAS account on 17th March 2007. US carriers Delta and JetBlue followed on 19th and 30th May respectively. The domestic US low fare airline, Southwest, and Moroccan national flag carrier Royal Air Maroc were also early adopters, both establishing their accounts in July that year. 2008 saw relatively little activity with only three carriers in the sample, WestJet, Qatar Airways, and Cathay Pacific, registering accounts. 2009 and 2010, in contrast, saw by far the majority of airline accounts registered (Figure 2). Six airlines were relatively late adopters and did not

register their accounts until 2011. Air China was the last in the sample to do so on 3 December 2011.

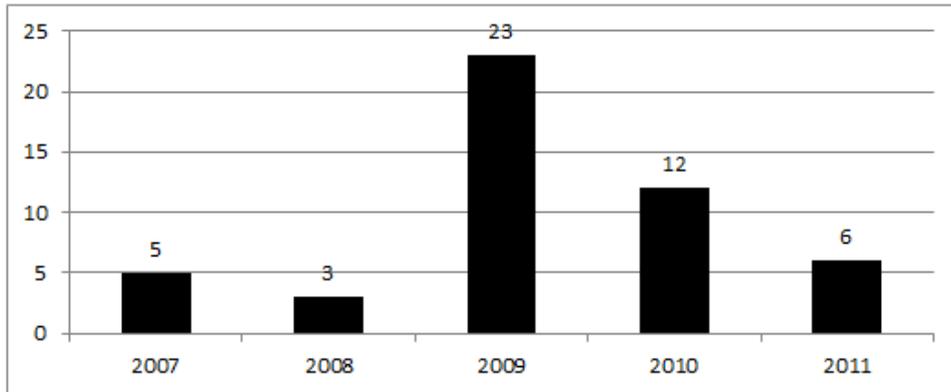


Figure 2. Temporal distribution of airline twitter registrations by year. Data derived from www.whendidyoujointwitter.com, April 2012 (n=49)

As of 23 April 2012, the 49 airlines that operated an official, corporately sanctioned, twitter account (as opposed to unofficial accounts which are established independently of the carrier concerned and which may variously be critical or supportive of it) had collectively sent/received 338,876 tweets (an average of 6,916 per airline). A small number of airline profiles were very active and supported a large number of tweets whereas others appeared to be dormant or, in the case of relatively new accounts, had yet to be used (Figure 3).

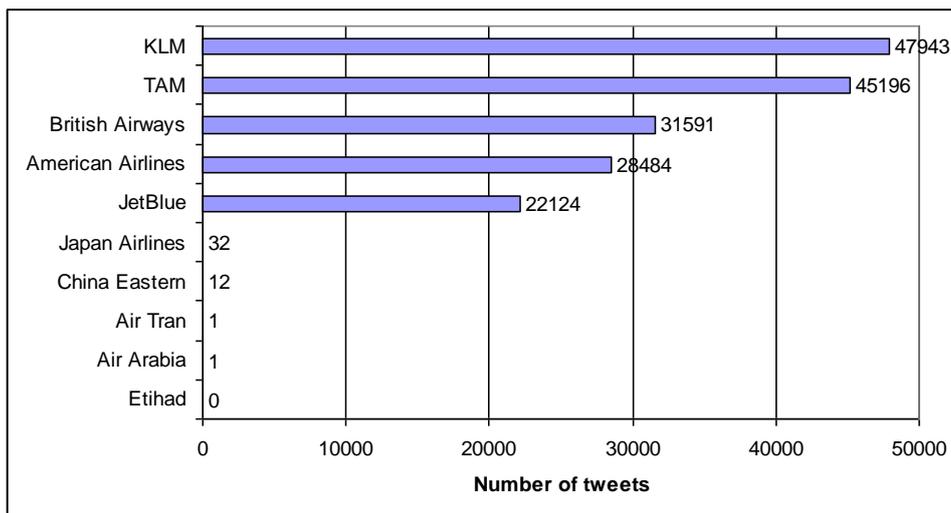


Figure 3. Airline accounts with the highest and lowest number of tweets. Data derived from individual airline's official twitter accounts and correct as of 23/04/2012

Although the number of tweets sent and received offers an indication of the size of an airline’s twitter presence, other metrics, including statistics on the number of ‘followers’ and those ‘following’ (in twitter parlance) also provide a measure of the size and likely impact of an airline’s twitter account. The metric ‘followers’ refers to the number of individual twitter users who chose to actively subscribe to, and thus receive updates from (i.e. follow), an airline’s twitter account. These followers may include both existing customers and those who are interested in the brand. The term ‘following’, in contrast, describes the number of other twitter accounts that the airline itself has chosen to follow. The ability to follow other accounts and view the tweets posted to and from them offers airlines a valuable insight into the demographic profile, geographic location, and opinions of existing and future customers as well as providing a platform through which new product innovations can be trialled, new customer relationships developed, and existing ones enhanced.

The 49 airline twitter accounts that were examined were collectively being followed by 6.552.240 other users (an average of 133.719 per airline). JetBlue and Southwest Airlines of the United States were the two most followed airlines, with over 1.67 million and 1.28 million followers respectively while China Southern Airlines, despite carrying nearly 76.5 million passengers in 2010, was only followed by 42 other users (Figure 4).

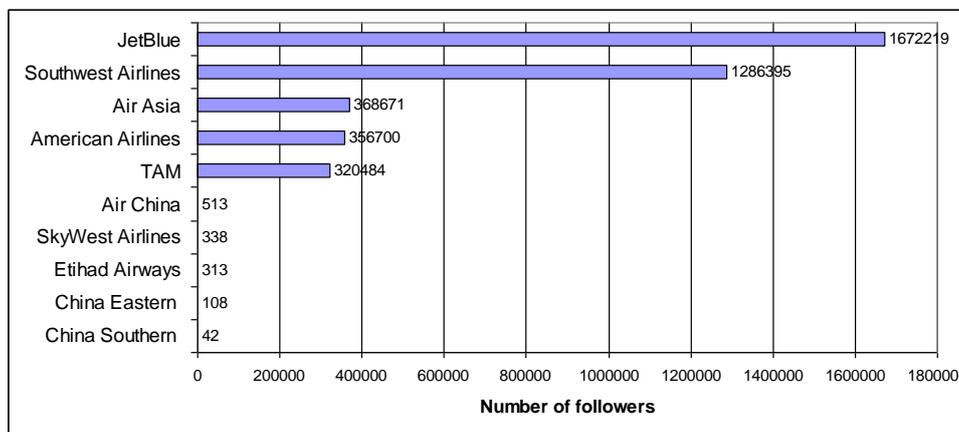


Figure 4. The most and least followed airlines on twitter. Data derived from individual airline’s official twitter accounts and correct as of 23/04/2012

As well as being followed by existing and potential customers, the 49 airlines themselves were also actively following 501.889 other users (an average of 10.083 per airline). The Mexican carrier Aeromexico was following the highest number of other users (162.790) while Emirates, Etihad, Lion Air, Thai, and Ryanair were not following any other twitter users’ accounts.

When expressed as a proportion of their 2010 passenger traffic, the total number of tweets sent/received and the total number of followers the airlines collectively have equates to 0.03% and 0.55% respectively. Such figures indicate that there is considerable scope for further development. JetBlue and Brazilian carrier Volaris were arguably the most successful at engaging customers on twitter as the number of followers each airline had represented 6.9% and 4.4% of their total 2010 passenger uplift. A comparison of the top 10 airlines ranked by 2010 passenger figures, the total number of tweets sent/received, and the number of followings, followers, and followers as a proportion of passengers carried is provided in Table 1. Considerable variation both by operator and by geographic region of origin is evident.

Rank	Passengers carried (2010)	Tweets	Following	Followers	Followers as proportion of pax
1	Delta	KLM	Aeromexico	JetBlue	JetBlue
2	Southwest	TAM	JetBlue	Southwest	Volaris
3	United/ Continental	British Airways	Volaris	Air Asia	Aeromexico
4	American Airlines	American Airlines	American Airlines	American Airlines	Air Asia
5	China Southern Airlines	JetBlue	British Airways	TAM	Southwest Airlines
6	Ryanair	Aeromexico	GOL	Delta	Aerolineas Argentinas
7	Air France/KLM	Qantas	Southwest	KLM	WestJet
8	China Eastern Airlines	WestJet	WestJet	US Airways	TAM
9	Lufthansa	GOL	TAM	Volaris	British Airways
10	US Airways	Air Asia	KLM	British Airways	Turkish Airlines

Table 1. Top 10 airlines ranked according to passengers carried, number of tweets, following, and followers, and followers as proportion of passengers. Data derived from individual airline's official twitter accounts (correct as of 23/04/2012)

Table 1 demonstrates that certain airlines, including early adopter JetBlue and Dutch carrier KLM, have a relatively strong twitter presence whereas other major airlines such as China Southern do not. Interestingly, some of the smaller operators in the sample had a more extensive twitter presence than many of the larger (and often more established) carriers, indicating perhaps that smaller operators are

more innovative, agile, and able to exploit new media and marketing opportunities more quickly than their larger competitors.

Despite the integral importance of the Internet to the low cost airline business model, there appears to be no clear relationship between the type of airline and its twitter presence. Although a couple of low cost operators, including Southwest Airlines, JetBlue, and Air Asia, do have well developed twitter profiles, other low cost operators, most notably easyJet, Ryanair, and Air Tran, at the time of writing do not. Equally, while some legacy or full service operators (including KLM and American Airlines) have very active twitter profiles, others do not. What is apparent, however, is that the geographic distribution of airlines' twitter use is highly uneven with some regions of the world making far more use of the service than others.

North American operators, for example carried 37% of passengers, generated 28% of tweets, attracted 71% of all external followers and were active at following other users (Figure 5). European carriers, in contrast, only flew 27% of passengers but generated almost a third of all tweets despite having fewer followers and following relatively small numbers of other users. Interestingly, and despite their relatively modest size vis-à-vis the Asian/Pacific, European, and North American operators, airlines from Latin America/Caribbean had far higher rates of twitter penetration (as a proportion of passengers carried) than the other operators combined. Despite only flying 8.3% of all passengers, they generated 27% of all tweets. Moreover, although they only attracted a relatively small number of active followers, these airlines were much more proactive at following other twitter users, accounting for 60.2% of the total.

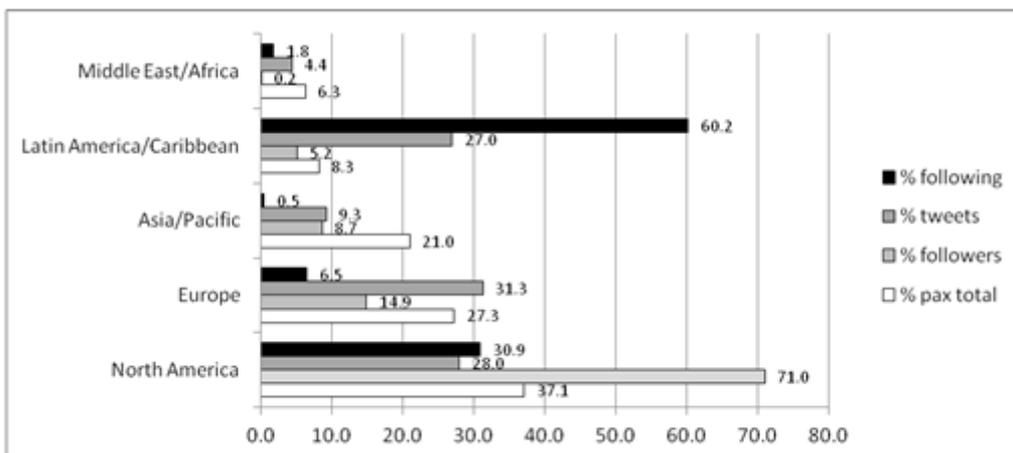


Figure 5. Comparison of twitter presence by world region

The 10 Asian/Pacific airlines, in comparison, carried over a fifth (21%) of the total passenger traffic but only attracted modest numbers of followers and tweets. Similarly, the ten airlines from the Middle East/Africa, which carried 6.3% of all passengers, generated very few tweets, had small numbers of followers and followed very few other users. Such geographic variations reflect, at least in part, different cultural attitudes towards the use of social media as well as regional disparities in the ease with which such sites can be accessed and used. Nevertheless, variations in twitter use, both by individual airlines and between different world regions have wide-ranging management and marketing implications.

6. Discussion and conclusion

By examining the extent to which a carefully selected sample of 50 major passenger airlines use twitter, this exploratory study has ascertained that the majority of large passenger airlines currently operate at least one official twitter account and associated twitter profile. This is both a dramatic and a recent development. In a little under 5 years, airlines have had to respond to a changing marketing environment and many have taken steps to exploit the new and instant customer communication, advertising and consumer relationship opportunities that online social media sites, including twitter, have created. The findings have shown that airlines' use of twitter is not merely restricted to the low cost operators (who conventionally have been quick to exploit new ICT and internet technologies). Indeed, the twitter accounts of many legacy or full service operators, including KLM and American Airlines, are used more intensively than those of some low cost carriers. This would appear to suggest that (despite some notable exceptions) both major full service operators and low cost passenger airlines recognise the commercial value of harnessing social media and have put in place the human and material resources that are needed to develop and exploit these new communication channels.

Interestingly, the findings also indicated that while significant regional variations do exist, the use of twitter by airlines is a global phenomenon and is not restricted to airlines based in North America and Europe. Indeed, as the data for Latin American/Caribbean airlines showed, smaller airlines (both full service and low cost) are demonstrating rapid uptake and innovation in their use of twitter and are enhancing their market profile and social media presence as a consequence. Understanding how different airlines in different regions of the world are currently using twitter, as well as identifying new opportunities for how they may productively do so in the future, will be vitally important for airlines who are

seeking to protect (and ideally expand) their market share in an era of growing costs, diminished margins, increasingly price-sensitive consumers, and continued competition.

The findings from this study indicate that while some airlines have been quick to adopt and exploit that twitter offers for targeted marketing and customer relationship development, other carriers have been much slower to react to the arrival and dissemination of social media. The modest rates of uptake and use exhibited by individual airlines and by carriers based in certain geographic regions indicate that there is significant potential for airlines to further develop, refine, and protect, their brand and their presence on social media sites. Failure to establish an official twitter account may lead to dissatisfied consumers (or enthusiastic but unregulated advocates) of an airline's brand to register their own accounts in an airline's name which may result in the airline concerned losing control of its brand identity and missing the opportunity to establish a strong official 'voice' in the medium.

Although this study only examined 50 airlines' use of twitter, further research could usefully explore the content of tweets to examine how different airlines use twitter and uncover the nature of the messages that airlines and their customers share. It would be instructive to investigate the social media strategies and differences in rates of uptake and use by airlines of different types of social media, including Google +, Facebook, and Flickr, and compare the use of such online media by members of airline alliances to identify points of similarity and divergence. Indeed, it is only by understanding the potential benefits and limitations of these new forms of communication as well as appreciating how, when, and why customers interact with each other and with airlines that carriers can devise effective, targeted, and profitable marketing and customer relationship management strategies.

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