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[Hashtags: A Tutorial](#)

Posted on March 31, 2011 by [Laura Gutierrez](#)

Twitter hashtags can be very useful when used properly. And by useful, I do not mean in a *selling* capacity. Most users utilize hashtags to connect, to learn, to *network*. Think of it as if you were going to a conference—you've all got an interest in [fill in the blank]. You're both on Twitter, that's Similar Interest #2. What do you talk about at conferences? Most likely the topic of the conference. My point? Know your audience (a reoccurring theme)—and in this case, that means knowing a bit about hashtags.

This post will give you a quick tutorial on what hashtags are, how to use them (there is no formal usage, only best practices), and some other practical tips (with a little help from my friends).

But first, a little background. (Feel free to skip and just go on to the tactical stuff.)

I'm attending the [Legal Marketing Association](#) (LMA) Annual Conference in Orlando, FL, next week. I've already connected with fellow attendees (new and "old") via Twitter. We use a hashtag to connect—#LMA or #LMA11, for Tweets relating to the conference—so that users who want to follow the conversation can do so easily.

In preparation for the LMA conference, I set up TweetDeck (read below for more info on this third-party app) so all tweets that have "#LMA" and "#LMA11" stream in one column so I can easily follow the conversation. Up until a few months ago, only a few unrelated tweets had the #LMA hashtag. Now, those unrelated tweets are about half of that stream. There's even been talk about changing the main hashtag to something else, because some people using that hashtag have no idea it was being used to connect a group of people.

It got me thinking—I wonder if those users know that the hashtag is being used by the Legal Marketing Association? If they followed the hashtag that they're using, they'd know. So, below is what you need to know when using and following hashtags. Add your thoughts below!



What is a Hashtag?

From the [Twitter Help Center](#):

The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages.

OK, true enough. My definition: A hashtag is a word or phrase with the “#” symbol in front of it. The # symbol allows the following word or phrase (with no spaces or other characters) to become a clickable link, which makes it easy for users to click on it (generating the latest tweets with that hashtag) or use it for a search column in a third-party app.

There are really two main purposes for using hashtags. One is for catching interest, “tagging,” using buzz or key words so that people searching for them can find them easily. The other is for groups—that could mean 3-day conferences, single-day seminars, or groups of people with shared interests (i.e., #legalchat, #brandchat).

Third-Party Apps

Find a third-party app that allows you to manage your account by adding columns, this is key when utilizing hashtags. Currently, Twitter(.com) does not have any tools for users to create and manage columns. Two great third-party applications: [TweetDeck](#) and [HootSuite](#). My preference is TweetDeck because it operates on my desktop versus a browser, like HootSuite.

DuetsBlog readers: do you have other third-party apps that give you the option to add columns? Let me know.

Tweeting for Business, Products

Hashtags can enhance your business and/or product’s visibility, but they can also turn consumers "off." Using more general terms, like "tissues" or "food," won’t attract an audience. And most of these keywords are not tracked. Because of the number of people using Twitter, it’s unlikely that users are following widely used terms—think of all the other stuff that gets thrown in with it (see my example/backstory above). It’s easier to track your product’s name or business (the brand, the trademark, etc.)—a word or phrase that is uniquely yours ("yours" not singular).

Note: Be careful when using hashtags for a product or service. It makes more sense for a business to be following hashtags than using them. Just make sure they are “saying” what you want your business to say. RESEARCH is key. Make sure it’s a word or phrase that users are tracking.

Tweeting for Networking

This is my favorite use of hashtags, to connect with my network. Also, it’s probably the most powerful (see my last post on [authentic presence](#)).



Prior to event:

- Ask if there is a hashtag. If there isn't one, make one up. However, research it first. There could be someone else, some other group, using it. Use search.twitter.com or [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com) to search—try the key word or phrase with and without the “#” sign. There are various “databases” of hashtags, like hashtags.org or wthashtag.com, through which users can edit the “meaning” of hashtags; but that requires the user to know these sites exist, and not every user does. Make sure it's not too long, either, for users to retweet (“RT”). You only get 140 characters (think: journalist headlines). Chances are, tweeters at the event are following the event hashtag, and have probably seen your tweets (if you've been using the event hashtag).
- Alert your audience/followers of the hashtag and what it's for, give them a reason to follow.
- Connect with fellow event tweeters (“tweeps”) and make plans to meet “IRL,” or in real life.

During the event:

- Use the hashtag when sharing information from that event. Give highlights of what's being talked about. Have a side discussion. Meet people at the same venue.
- Use it to get the “attention” of other tweeters at the event. Do you see attendees on their phone? Recognize any profile pictures? You already have something in common—Twitter—so introduce yourself by using your user name. Speaking from experience, it works (if you don't believe me, read my story from the LMA conference last year courtesy of [Heather Morse](#)). I have formed so many great relationships through Twitter (seriously). “Meeting” prior to the event or having a similar interest takes a lot of the fear out of being in a room with people you may not know.

After the event:

- Do what you would do after any other networking event, follow-up. This has nothing to do with hashtags.
- My friend [Nancy Myrland](#), via Twitter, suggests to:

reach out & say hello, write recaps of conversations taking place via that hashtag, [and] create then share lists of people using certain hashtags.

Don'ts

I've really got just one...as my friend [Lance Godard](#) said, “Don't overdo it.” [Jon Holden](#) illustrates (this came after my Twitter “call” for hashtag tips)—





@holdencalgary
Jon Holden

#Sounds #like #a #great
#article. #Can #you #send #me #a
#copy #when #it #is #live. #I #Love
#Hashtags.

Leave me your best practices in the comments.



Capella Tower | Suite 3500 | 225 South Sixth Street | Minneapolis, MN 55402
Main: (612) 604-6400 | Fax: (612) 604-6800 | www.winthrop.com | *A Professional Association*