

Avoiding One-Click Participation

Steve Matthews | November 2010

As social media tools become easier and simpler to use, more of their value seems to be draining away. The last few years have seen an unmistakable trend towards social media tools and habits that push the absolute minimum of effort and commitment, with the result that the promise of social media — better communication, broader networks, stronger personal connections — is in danger of falling by the wayside.

Here are some examples of what I mean:

The new ReTweet (RTs): Time was, if you saw a tweet you liked, you copied-and-pasted it into your own screen, prefixed with an “RT @JohnSmith,” and tweeted it yourself. Now, like so many features that started organically within the Twitter ecosystem, the “ReTweet” function has been woven into the service’s functionality. Yes, the one-click RT button replicates the tweet, similar to before, but it has also removed our opportunity to add any kind of personal comment. The process may be easier, but the RT button isn’t always our friend. Another critique I have is that while the outbound RTs still gets woven into your readers timeline, the original tweeter often doesn’t see your support. The reason? RTs are no longer embedded within the Mentions tab, but now relegated to the Retweet tab. It doesn’t sound like a huge difference, but the “new Twitter” makes RTs far less visible.

Friday Follows (FFs): Another good idea when it was first created, Friday Follows allowed a user to recommend a single Twitterer, along with an explanation of why this person was a worthy add to your Follows list. Over time, however, #ffs have degenerated into a laundry list of “people you should follow,” without any accompanying explanation of why this person might be added. When I see a tweet recommending a raft of Friday Follows, I’m left to wonder: why should I follow them? Even Amazon, when suggesting a new book for you, explains what it saw in your previous purchase history that triggered the recommendation.

The Facebook “Like”: Earlier this year in April, Facebook made the switch from “Fan” to “Like” as a means of supporting a particular cause or organization. As you might expect, “Likes” have proliferated on Facebook to an astonishing degree. But merely “Liking” something on Facebook, without providing any further comment or explanation, can be another wasted opportunity. Even a single sentence of support or a short question to accompany a “Like” would go a long way toward taking a virtual relationship from “autopilot” broadcast mode to something more authentic.

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These new “one-click” social media options are meant to increase convenience, but what they often do is dilute the gesture of any meaning or context. Lazy participation is far too tempting for most of us to pass up — and yes, I’ll include myself in that statement. But just because social networking sites make lazy participation easier doesn’t mean we need to follow their lead.

The fraction of time it takes to draft a sentence of text can mean the difference between others echoing your voice, and blending in with the rest of the virtual crowd. This is an especially powerful tool when everyone else seems to be leaning towards the one-click gesture. With any luck, going against the grain like this can help you stand out from the mass of “me too”ers.

Beyond making deeper and more involved use of Facebook and Twitter as detailed above, there’s another method of participation I wish we’d see more of: people sharing their online reading experience. I find it to be a powerful, and not terribly time-consuming, way to offer something interesting about yourself. What’s inspired you today? What did you find genuinely useful or interesting? While on-page retweeting tools such as Tweetmeme and Twitter’s RT widget are a start, most users would benefit from sharing directly from an RSS reader or a Social Bookmarking application like Del.icio.us.

Social media is really about relationships, and relationships are only made possible through engagement, commitment and effort. The more you resist the temptation towards peripheral, superficial, “drive-by” social media usage, the more value these tools will generate – for *all* of us.

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