

HOW TO: Launch a Successful Twitter Contest

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Everyone loves a good contest, and [Twitter](#) is a valuable platform on which to run one. If your followers already like your brand, they'll typically be willing to enter a contest in exchange for the chance to win your products, recognition or prizes.

Launching, running and measuring a Twitter contest takes specific social media marketing skills. You'll need a deep knowledge of contest laws in your state, as well as the right tools to measure participation, viral sharing, brand impact and bottom line sales resulting from the contest. A Twitter contest should not just be promotional, but should further the business goals of your entire social media program.

If you want to launch a Twitter contest that boosts sales and brand recognition and helps your company reach specific social media marketing goals, there are a few proven strategies you can implement. Here are five steps to launching one with high impact.

Step One: Determine the Rules and Regulations

Before you launch your contest, make sure to map out the rules and regulations, such as who is eligible, what the prizes are, the time frame for the contest, and how will winners be determined. For example, will it be a "straight draw" sweepstakes, or will you let the community vote on the winner? Will participants have to complete a quiz or test? Include a link to some short and clear contest rules. Make sure your contest follows all the legal requirements in your state and country.

While Twitter contests are often thought of as footloose and fancy free, whenever you invite people to "enter for a chance to win," you have entered the realm of the legally regulated contest. Consult legal counsel before launching the contest. There are regulations on whether you call it a "[sweepstakes](#)," "contest" or "lottery," for example, and some states require official registration of your contest with state authorities. A general rule of thumb is to keep prizes under \$500 to avoid winners being required to pay taxes on their winnings.

It may seem obvious, but make sure your contest actually highlights the products or brand you want to promote. Sometimes you spend so much time getting the details right, you forget the big picture goal: to drive brand engagement or sell more of a certain product.

Step Two: Iron Out the Details

Your contest needs a name, start date, end date and clearly defined prizes. It's best to have one grand prize, a first prize, second prize and third prize, then a large number of much smaller prizes -- as more than one chance to win gives people more incentive to participate. For each prize, make sure to create a unique URL, so your analytics program can track which prizes are most compelling (clicked on the most). Sometimes, it turns out your first or second prize is more compelling than your grand prize, for example, and that's valuable information to have for your next contest.

Make sure your hashtag for the contest is clear and unique, such as #WinWin7 that was used by Microsoft for a contest inviting people to enter for a chance to win seven great prizes for seven days during the Windows 7 launch. Use your hashtag in all contest messaging, even when promoting it via e-mail, banners, mobile or other channels. Use your analytics software to measure how and where people shared the contest hashtag with friends and what direct impact the contest hashtag had on increased Twitter and website traffic.

Step Three: Promote Your Contest

Treat your Twitter contest like what it is: a serious marketing campaign. You need to plan, launch and measure the contest with the same precision you would any marketing campaign. Start by defining clear marketing goals (Is this a branding campaign? A sales push?) and ROI objectives, then create a calendar for the entire project, starting from planning through to launch, execution, measurement and post-mortem. Create a messaging road map listing every tweet, ad creative, [Facebook](#) update, mobile text message, etc. you plan to put out to promote the contest -- with dates for when the message will go out.

Make your messages catchy, but also plan what you want to say to drive the most traffic to the contest at key times; messages in the beginning of the campaign should drive participation (i.e. "Tweet this message for a chance to win a Free iPad!"), those at the end should focus on urgency ("Time's almost up -- enter today!"). Invite people to share the contest with friends to improve their chances to win.

Step Four: Ready, Set, Launch

Now that you've done all the planning, it's time to launch the contest. On your planned launch date, make sure there are no big news stories or other contests, promotions or one-day trends that would overshadow your contest. If all's clear, post your first tweet about the contest -- "Contest Will Start in 15 Minutes -- Get Ready!" -- and simultaneously launch any other marketing campaigns you are planning to promote the contest (external promotion is not required, it just helps make your contest all that more successful). Create a flurry of dialogue, tweets, retweets and direct messages on the first day of the contest. Start measuring activity in your analytics system right away,

because you'll want a clear picture of the entire contest from start to finish. Keep a log of every tweet you send out and every one that comes in.

Step Five: It's a Wrap

When the contest is done, it's time to award prizes and promote the winners. If your contest required people to take a quiz or complete a task, then the winner is the person with the highest score. Or perhaps your contest required the community to vote on the winner -- such as a vote for the best photo, video or logo created.

However the winner is chosen, as based on your rules and regulations, don't just let winners know they won by direct message and then disappear -- use the end of the contest as another chance to promote your brand and connect with your followers. Tweet out congratulations to all the winners.

Next, it's time to collect and analyze all your contest data. Search Twitter for every mention of the contest hashtag, then use social media analytics tools to see where else the hashtag was shared — Facebook, blogs, forums, mobile social networks, etc. Lastly, remember that the winners of your contest may become "super evangelists" for your brand, so make sure to reach out to them regularly after the contest with special promotions, offers and direct tweets that will encourage them to continue spreading good vibes about your brand or products in the future.

When done right, a Twitter contest can build your brand, dramatically increase your followers and fans, and create true customer evangelists who will continue promoting your brand to friends for months or years to come.