

Health Literacy Online Supplement: A Guide To Hosting a Twitter Chat

Lessons Learned From
@healthfinder

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Contents

Introduction	1
Choose a Topic	2
Determine Your Goals	4
Pick a Hashtag	5
Determine Roles	6
Prepare the Moderator	6
Create a Moderator’s Guide	10
Before	10
During	10
After	11
Involve Special Guests	12
Promote the Chat	13
Before	13
After	14
Best Practices and Lessons Learned	15
Twitter Chats and Beyond	17
Special Considerations for Those with Limited Digital Literacy	18

Introduction

The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) currently runs the @healthfinder Twitter account, which provides actionable health and wellness information to a continually growing number of Twitter followers—more than 74,000 after its first Twitter chat at the end of October 2010. At the start of 2012, the community includes more than 156,000 followers.

Each year, ODPHP participates in and cohosts a health literacy Twitter chat through its @healthfinder account in honor of Health Literacy Month. In 2010, the chat featured special guest Dr. Cynthia Baur, the Senior Health Literacy Advisor at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Dr. Baur was joined by an influencer panel that represented a variety of perspectives important in the effort to improve health literacy. More than 160 participants attended the chat, with more than 1,000 tweets and approximately 50 resources shared. The chat's total potential reach was more than 500,000. In 2011, ODPHP partnered again with Health Literacy Missouri and a variety of local, state, and Federal health agencies to host the chat, increasing its potential reach to almost 800,000.

In addition to hosting the #healthlit chat, ODPHP has participated in other Twitter chats, including AIDS.gov's Twitter Town Hall for National HIV Testing Day and Health Literacy Missouri's Twitter Town Hall on Health Literacy. Each week, @healthfinder also hosts prevention and wellness chats focused on a central topic or theme.

Drawing on the experience gained from @healthfinder's engagement with individuals and organizations via Twitter as well as participation in and hosting of Twitter chats, the healthfinder.gov team developed this document as a resource for those planning to implement a Twitter chat.

This document serves as a guide to developing a Twitter chat. Information includes choosing a topic, determining roles, creating a moderator's guide, marketing and promoting the chat, and deciding on post-chat follow-up activities. Lessons learned and best practices are interwoven throughout the guide.

Choose a Topic




The first step to running a successful Twitter chat is to develop a focus for the chat. The focus is the basis for all tweets, conversations, and outreach. Twitter chats can be interwoven into one's content strategy—either as a long-term approach or as a short-term task. Before hosting a chat, it is recommended that you participate in someone else's chat to get a feel for how they work. Some ways to identify a Twitter chat topic include:

- Keeping up to date on current events and trends
- Tracking offline events and conferences
- Listening to and being aware of the issues important to your stakeholders
- Following event- or topic-based hashtags and identifying emerging areas of focus

Example

The health literacy chat occurred as a result of the launch of the *National Action Plan To Improve Health Literacy* (<http://www.health.gov/communication/hlactionplan>) and the launch of ODPHP's *Health Literacy Online* guide (<http://www.health.gov/healthliteracyonline>)—along with the timeliness of Health Literacy Month. In addition, through its presence and activity in social media, the healthfinder.gov team was aware that its community wanted information, resources, and direction on how to take action and improve health literacy. Increasingly, the community is focusing on issues surrounding digital literacy and how that intersects with health information online.

Before announcing each chat, the healthfinder.gov team connected with some of its community members to gauge interest. The team discovered that people knew limited health literacy was a problem, but usually that's where the conversation ended. This circumstance provided an opportunity for ODPHP and CDC to offer insight and action steps to guide the community on how to address the problem.

Resource: If you're not sure what a hashtag means or stands for, visit hashtag.org (<http://www.hashtag.org>) . You can enter a hashtag you are curious about and the Web site will provide its definition. You also can see how certain hashtags are trending using Trendistic (<http://trendistic.indextank.com>) . What the Trend (<http://www.whatthetrend.com/top10>)  can help you identify the top trends on Twitter for the past 30 days as well as the past 24 hours.

Determine Your Goals

After determining a topic, the next step is to determine the goal of the chat. Some questions to ask include:

- What do you hope to accomplish during the chat?
- Who is your target audience?
- Who needs to be a part of the conversation (e.g., content experts, partners)?
- Why is this topic important to your target audience, and why would they want to join your chat?
- What is the main message or take-away you want people to remember from the chat?
- What action do you want people to take after the chat?
- What resources do you have to offer as additional information?

Pick a Hashtag

Once you have determined the goals of your chat, it's time to determine what your hashtag will be. A hashtag uses the pound sign (#), followed by a short set of words or numbers. Each tweet relating to the chat will include the hashtag, which enables participants and onlookers to view all chat-related tweets. For example, during the first health literacy Twitter chat, the hashtag was #healthlit, and all participants included #healthlit within or at the end of their tweets. The hashtag continues to be used today—2 years after its initial creation.

Resource: You can find health-related hashtags currently being used thanks to the Healthcare Hashtag Project (<http://www.foxeppractice.com/healthcare-hashtags>) . The project also lists an up-to-date calendar of current health-related Twitter chats (<http://www.foxeppractice.com/healthcare-hashtags/tweet-chats/>)  and conferences (<http://www.foxeppractice.com/healthcare-hashtags/conferences/>) .


Determine Roles

Roles of those involved in the chat should be defined and confirmed in advance. Regardless of the role, it is important for people to be both proactive and responsive. Watch for tweets that pique participants' interests and work from there. If a participant asks a question, answer it. Depending on how many people are involved in the chat, it can be difficult to keep track of each tweet, which is why it is helpful to determine roles beforehand.






It is recommended that those involved in running the chat be physically present in the same room during the chat. If the chat is being moderated by more than one Twitter account (cohosts), then it is beneficial to have all hosts present in the same room—or at least sharing a conference phone line. Each person should have his or her own computer, be logged in to the appropriate Twitter account, and be given a role. Some potential roles include:

- **Director:** The director oversees the overall chat operation. He or she directs questions to the responders, watches the clock, keeps an eye on the live chat stream, and makes final decisions on issues and questions that come up. The director is also the main person everyone else in the room communicates with during the chat.
- **Moderator:** The moderator is responsible for sending out any prewritten or planned tweets developed from the moderator's guide. He or she also keeps the director informed of tweets posted.
- **Monitor:** The monitor tracks questions asked by participants during the chat and assign these questions to the responder(s) to answer. Depending on the anticipated number of participants, you may need multiple monitors.

- **Responder:** The responder answers questions asked by participants. He or she answers questions as instructed by the monitor and from watching the chat stream as well. Depending on the number of topics involved, chat length, and chat size, multiple responders may be needed.

Resource: The simplest way to view a chat as it is happening is to go to Twitter.com (<https://twitter.com/>)  and type in the hashtag you want to follow in the search bar. You will see a list of every tweet that uses the hashtag, with the most recent tweets at the top.

Tools outside of Twitter.com are also available:

- Tweetdeck (<http://www.tweetdeck.com>) 
- Tweepchat (<http://tweepchat.com>) 
- TweetGrid (<http://tweetgrid.com>) 
- Monitter (<http://monitter.com>) 
- Twubs (<http://twubs.com/>) 

During your chat, it is recommend that you use a few different tools, as the tools often have varying lag times and some may crash or go down during your chat—especially if your chat starts “trending.”

Prepare the Moderator

The most important role is that of the moderator. The moderator facilitates discussion and encourages others to participate. This work includes:

- Announcing the start and conclusion of the Twitter chat
- Announcing any logistical items, such as how to participate or what to expect
- Announcing and sharing the hashtag
- Asking participants to follow and use the hashtag to participate
- Welcoming participants and encouraging others to join
- Introducing any special guests
- Communicating the format of the chat
- Asking the main questions
- Identifying questions of other participants and integrating comments and questions into the discussion
- Answering questions or providing follow-up when appropriate
- Providing additional resources and action items
- Concluding the chat and thanking everyone for their participation

It is up to the chat moderator to drive conversation. Start by asking participants a question and having them answer it. Also allow them to ask questions, and answer if you can. The idea is to generate a casual but informative conversation about your chat topic.

Below are some examples of tweets sent out by the moderator during one of the @healthfinder health literacy chats. Note that some questions drive conversation, while others are comments and information regarding the chat topic (health literacy):

- Q1. Why is health literacy important to you—What made you want to participate in today's chat? #healthlit

- Q2. How does health literacy apply to the work done by you and/or your organization? Share your story with us. #healthlit
- Only 12% of adults have proficient health literacy. Q5. What does this mean as more people go online for health information? #healthlit
- A key health literacy online strategy is to engage users with interactive content. Q9. How does your Web site do this? #healthlit

In essence, the moderator ensures that the chat runs smoothly and that goals are met.

Create a Moderator's Guide

The moderator's guide is a planning and preparation tool that lists what to tweet and when. Tweets should be planned for and written to send before, during, and after the chat. Because the chat is a live medium, the moderator guides the conversation; however, some tweets may need to be tweaked, re-ordered, or deleted, depending on the direction of the chat.

Before

Tweets sent before the chat should create anticipation for the chat and promote it. Some preplanned tweets can be shared with partners and participants as a way to promote the chat. We discuss how to promote a Twitter chat in more detail in a later section.

During



Tweets sent during the chat should direct and guide the conversation. The chat should open with a welcome message tweet and invite attendees to introduce themselves. Then, the format of the chat should be shared with participants as a way to set expectations. In the beginning of the chat or at any point, special guests or partners can offer a welcome message or a "keynote" by sending out a set of tweets that were prepared in advance. Doing so helps ensure that each organizations' main messages and action items are communicated. In addition, a special message also can help set the tone or provide a point of transition or conclusion.

It's important to note that while it is good to be prepared, do not be afraid about going "off script." Chats are successful when they are genuine and actually create a dialogue versus a one-way conversation. Be flexible.

After

Tweets sent after the chat can reinforce key messages, action items, or key resources shared during the live chat. Post-chat tweets also can remind participants of the next chat, if one is planned.

An archive of all tweets from the time of the chat should be shared with participants. As an extra step, a summary or reflection of how the chat went should be posted online and shared via Twitter with the hashtag that was used during the chat. This way, people who weren't able to participate can learn about what occurred.

Resource: Some Twitter management tools, such as Hootsuite (<http://hootsuite.com>)  will let you create an archive of your Twitter chat. In place of such a tool, Archivist (<http://archivist.visitmix.com>)  will create an archive of tweets for you, let you export your data, and provide basic analytics.

Involve Special Guests

Consider reaching out to key content experts or people of influence to your community. Ask for their participation in the chat as special guests or panelists. Guests could include bloggers, media, public servants, organization leaders, or celebrities—it all depends on the chat’s central topic and its goals and objectives.

Because a Twitter chat is held through Twitter itself, the best way to get in touch with possible participants is by using Twitter’s “direct message” feature or through email. The initial email should be brief and to the point. It should:

- Have an enticing subject line.
- Begin with a personalized introduction.
- Describe the goal of the chat.
- Explain why the recipient should join the chat and why the chat is relevant to his or her interests.
- Include the date and time of the chat.
- Ask for a reply if the person is interested in participating.
- Offer to send a participant’s guide for more information.

The participant’s guide explains the chat’s purpose and goal, and clarifies the participant’s role. The guide should also provide sample promotional content that a participant can send out beforehand.

Promote the Chat

Depending on how the chat is set up, promotional efforts may vary. Since it is a Twitter chat, individuals and organizations will need to have a Twitter account to participate.


Before

You have already determined your target audience, so the next step is to reach and engage them in the Twitter chat. To get the word out, consider tweeting about the chat about 2 weeks before the actual chat. In addition, provide people and organizations that you reach out to with promotional tweets that they can easily copy, paste, and post to Twitter themselves. In addition, it is okay to ask people to re-tweet (RT) any promotional tweets shared on your organization's own Twitter account.

You will also want to reach out to organizations that are interested in your chat's topic, including nonprofit organizations and Government agencies, many of which are on Twitter. Organizations will likely get involved in the chat as a way to promote their own interest and involvement in the topic. If an organization agrees to participate, you can send them the participant's guide and ask them to help promote the chat through their own communication channels and network of followers.

Additional promotional channels may include listservs, newsletters of organizations that agree to participate, and your own communication channels, such as email distribution lists.

After



Chances are that a lot of information bounced around during the chat, but many times these good tips and resources can get lost among other tweets. It is important to archive the tweets shared from the live chat. A good tool to use is Archivist (<http://archivist.visitmix.com>) . Archivist lets you download the actual tweets into an Excel file to use for data collection and analysis purposes. Specific data points offered by Archivist include:

- Tweet volume
- Commonly used words
- Most popular URLs tweeted
- Number of tweets versus re-tweets
- Most involved participants

Once you have an archive of the tweets, read through the archive and extract resources relevant to your topic. You can compile this list of resources into a document to share with others or to revise as online content.

Last but not least, be sure to follow up with participants and thank them for their time. You also can take this opportunity to reiterate key messages or action items. The follow-up could be as simple as sending a tweet or email, or it could include a certificate of participation or another creative idea. Regardless of the type of follow-up, doing so will help develop a relationship with your participants and help to continue the conversation even after the chat.

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

- Start planning early. Take the time needed to develop fully the details and scope of the Twitter chat. For the moderator's guide, especially if cohosts are involved, it is best to start putting together materials at least 1 month in advance.
- For certain chats, sometimes it makes sense to collaborate with another organization to cohost the chat. In that case, it is important to coordinate with your cohost in terms of who will tweet what content and who will answer which questions. While cohosting a chat may make planning more complicated, the outcome will often be a larger participating audience and more widespread engagement in the topic.
- Put together a fully developed plan that identifies the chat's goals and objectives, the intended target audiences, needed collaterals, and outreach activities. Attach a schedule to the tasks outlined in the plan. If you are cohosting the chat, have all cohosts involved in the development of this plan. Doing so will help refine the focus and messaging of the chat.
- Do a search on Twitter.com, hashtags.org (<http://hashtags.org>) , or tagdef (<http://tagdef.com>)  to see if the proposed hashtag is already being used. For the #healthlit chat, #healthlit was already being used; however, for @healthfinder, this was an added benefit. The hashtag was in use by communities @healthfinder hoped to reach and engage.
- In the moderator's guide, anticipate questions that participants may ask and prepare tweets in advance that include responses to those questions.
- It is a good idea to involve people of influence to your community and special guests into your Twitter chat. Doing so promotes the chat by tapping into people with relevant networks to engage their followers in the chat's topic.


- When reaching out to organizations to ask for their participation, the healthfinder.gov team has found success by initially asking via the direct message (DM) function on Twitter. Once a connection is made, the goal should be to move the conversation to email to allow for a greater exchange of information. Note: *You can only send a DM if that account follows yours.*
- Consider having a conference call to review the chat format, roles, and expectations with all involved. A separate call may be appropriate if you plan on including a special guest panel.
- Before, during, and after the chat, consider re-tweeting participants' tweets. This way, you will show that your organization is listening and values involving others in the work related to the topic at hand. In addition, sometimes participants tweet messages that your organization agrees with—re-tweet these messages. Doing so helps communicate common ground and shared opinions among the community.


Twitter Chats and Beyond

Twitter chats are one type of event you can host on Twitter. Other types of Twitter events include live tweeting from in-person or online events, Twitterinterviews, and Twitter Town Halls. CDC defines a Twitterinterview and a Twitter Town Hall as:

- **Twitterinterview:** Arranged in advance, a Twitterinterview is a type of interview in which the interviewer and interviewee conduct the conversation through tweets. Using a predefined hashtag at the end of each Twitterinterview tweet allows followers to track the discussion.
- **Twitter Town Hall:** Arranged in advance, a Twitter Town Hall is a forum that allows followers to submit questions via Twitter about the topic to be discussed during a live town hall event. Questions can be submitted via Twitter in advance or during the event. Responses are delivered through tweets during the event, and can be responded to live during the discussion. Followers can monitor the discussion if a predefined hashtag is included with each tweet.

Example

Don't be afraid to try new things and be creative. As the technology evolves, how we use it will, too. Some organizations are blurring the lines between a Twitter chat and other types of events. For example, Kaiser Permanente's Center for Total Health hosted a Bloggers Roundtable on September 16, 2011 (<http://centerfortotalhealth.org/2011/transcription-available-0916-round-table>) . The roundtable took place in person, over the phone, and on Twitter. It was a combination of an in-person meeting, teleconference, and Twitter chat.

Resource: Explore using CoverItLive (<http://www.coveritlive.com>) . CoverItLive offers a number of features to enhance a Twitter chat and can help provide an archive of your chat.

Special Considerations for Those with Limited Digital Literacy

- Realize that not everyone may be familiar with Twitter. In the participant's guide, provide text explaining what Twitter is, why it is being used, and how to use it. The guide will be an important tool in communicating expectations for participants.
- Ensure that your moderators know how to use Twitter properly and effectively beforehand. This helps avoid confusion and creates a better experience for all.
- Be careful about the use of acronyms and abbreviations. Condensing a tweet into 140 characters can be tricky; use two tweets if needed. It is better to have two tweets than end up with a tweet that is hard to read or understand.
- At the beginning of a chat, provide instructions that will aid participants in joining the conversation. For instance, if there is a certain hashtag you want people to use, let them know what that is.
- Label the order of questions and consider using brackets to identify specific content (i.e., Q1. Q2. [Video] [Question] [Take Away] [Resource] [Take Action], etc.).
- Be mindful of time. Allow enough time for people to respond, but do not go over time. Realize you may need to skip over some of your questions, if needed.
- During the chat, provide actionable content and engage participants by asking them to introduce themselves. Ask open-ended questions. Remember that a chat is a two-way conversation.
- Identify a Web site or blog that can be used to post information about the chat before and after the actual chat happens. Information you post there can include a mini-version of your participant's guide, including the goals of the chat, how to participate, and how to promote the chat.
- Review the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion's *Healthy Literacy Online* guide (<http://health.gov/healthliteracyonline/>). Many of the health literacy principles discussed there can also apply to communications supporting your Twitter chat.