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Using Twitter for Official Duties at the Department of Commerce

You should use Twitter to connect with and inform your audiences and clients, extend the reach of your bureau's existing messaging, provide an informal human voice to your office or program's role and help your bureau achieve its mission.

Using Twitter in an official capacity is subject to the same rules, regulations and requirements that exist for all other communications and activities as well the [Department of Commerce's Social Media policy](#).

To help you better learn what Twitter is and how it can be used, the Office of Public Affairs suggests establishing your own personal account, following people that talk about topics that interest you and are unconnected to your official role or work (eg personal friends, college sports, cooking & dining, etc) and simply watching, reading, and clicking for a while. This will let you see how others use Twitter in the context of things you know and care about. When you reach your comfort level, begin to engage with other Twitter users and learn some more. This should be a much more comfortable environment to learn in than an official account.

When you are ready to start Tweeting in your official capacity, the following best practices should help you be effective and stay within established limits.

Applying for a Twitter Account

- Twitter accounts must be applied for through the Department of Commerce Social Media Application process at: <https://socmed.my.commerce.gov/>.

Requirements

- Multiple individuals must be able to access, post to and/or delete from all official Twitter accounts at any time.
- Use an office e-mail address, rather than a personal address. For example, The Office of Digital Strategy generally uses webmaster@doc.gov. Using a personal account (i.e. Bob-Smith@DOC.gov) can lead to complications when the account holder leaves DOC.
- OPA will monitor official Twitter accounts on a spot basis to ensure compliance with the guidance in this document. If compliance with the guidance in this document is not maintained, OPA may revoke approval for Twitter accounts and/or disable, deactivate, and close non-compliant accounts.

Best Practices

Do:

- The 140-character limit forces us to be pithy, clear and catchy. Have some fun and be personable with phrasing, but always in good taste. If in doubt whether your words may cross the line, ask a colleague for a second opinion.
- Try to stay at least 10-20 characters below the 140-character limit—this facilitates retweeting (see below), which requires enough characters beyond the original tweet to include your @username (plus "RT" and a space, if they are manually retweeting you). It also allows for comment. Think "120 is the new 140."

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- Tweet as often as you are comfortable and have something to say.
- Content is king: provide information, insight, and clarification.
- Respond to questions, but stick to your area of expertise. People might ask you questions you can't answer; refer them to someone who can.
- Respond to complaints if you can help someone, but avoid arguing with people trying to bait you (referred to as "trolls" on the Internet).
- Reply and retweet – the more you engage, the more people will respect you. See the sections below for specific guidance.
- Solicit tweet suggestions from others in your office who are knowledgeable about your subject.
- Phrase questions so that they are open ended - ask for thoughts or ideas.
- Link to more in-depth content, such as a webpage, podcast, news release, etc. Use GSA's go.usa.gov or Bit.ly's URL shortener for .gov links. OPA can help you create a go.usa.gov account.
- Cover only one point and provide only one link per tweet. To direct people to more comprehensive information, link to a page that then links to multiple pages.
- Check your spelling. You can't correct errors. While there is an option to delete your tweets, they aren't really deleted.

Don't:

- Tweet about things you wouldn't talk about under other circumstances (same as email: if you don't want to see it on the front page of the newspaper, don't tweet it).
- Lobby, promote political viewpoints, or endorse commercial products or services.
- Procrastinate about whether to tweet. Timeliness matters.
- Be the sole source of non-temporal information. "The doors to [*big trade event*] are about to open" is okay, "We export 300% more widgets than China" is not if we don't have published data that supports the claim.
- Argue, push personal opinions, or get into long-running debates.
- Let your account languish.

Following other accounts

- Follow some of Commerce's other accounts:
<https://twitter.com/CommerceGov/bureaus/members>
- Following your colleagues, @CommerceSec, and @CommerceGov is ideal but not required.
- Follow any official U.S. Government accounts that you wish. The more closely those accounts focus on your subject areas, the better for everyone.
- If you wish to follow non-U.S. Government accounts, such as subject matter experts and thought leaders, establish criteria for what you will and won't follow. Document that criteria and use it. When in doubt, seek guidance from Commerce's Director of Digital Strategy.
- Do not follow candidate, election, campaign or other political accounts.
- Review the accounts you follow from time to time. If no longer valuable, stop following. Keep a record of what you've decided and why.

Retweeting

- Retweet (repost someone else's tweet) posts that are relevant to your subject, even from accounts outside DOC or ITA. Copy and paste the tweet into the Twitter update box, preceded by typing RT, (a space) (@sign) and the originator account name. For example:
 - RT @WhiteHouse Exports are growing and supporting more jobs.
<http://go.usa.gov/randomcharacters>

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- You can also use the retweet function built into Twitter. Keep in mind that you can't edit the tweet if you use this function.
- If the retweet exceeds the 140-character limit, it's okay to slightly shorten the original tweet—provided you don't in any way change its meaning. You can use “MT” for modified tweet to show that you made modifications.
- If enough characters are available, you may include a short comment about the retweet by adding a dash at the end and typing your comment. For example:
 - RT @TradeGov New report on trade benefits released <http://go.usa.gov/randomcharacters> - [Wiget producers] can see fun facts about your industry here!

Or

- Watch this before attending a trade show! RT @ExportGov new video: “Why You Should Attend Trade Shows” <http://go.usa.gov/randomcharacters>
- Don't claim another's tweet as your own – if you're retweeting use the RT!

Replying

- Public comments to you will begin with @[your account name]; you can find them by clicking on the “@Connect” tab along the top of your Twitter homepage.
- For a public reply, click the “reply” link under the tweet or begin your tweet with the @ sign and the account name you're replying to.
- Twitter provides a direct message feature similar to email. It is private and not public. This feature only works for people who follow you and you follow. NEVER USE THIS FEATURE. Your communication should be in public. If you need to follow up in a private manner, please direct them to contact you via email or phone. Never ask a follower to put their personally-identifiable information in a tweet.

What is the # for?

- The # plus the word following it is called a **hashtag**. A hashtag is a word or acronym used to describe a tweet in order for people to easily follow the conversation. People attach these terms to their tweets so when others search for a trend, category, or event, relevant tweets will appear. For example, **#patent** will provide references to tweets dealing with patents, **#sb44** referred to Superbowl 44, **#ipad** refers to Apple's iPad, and **#gfail** is often used when Gmail is down.

What are those short web links?

- If you're sharing a link on Twitter, you're limited to 140 characters. A URL weblink can quickly eat up those characters and limit our actual message. A shortened URL such as <http://ow.ly/3qT9o> or <http://go.usa.gov/1u7> saves space.
- Even better, they allow us to easily track how many people are clicking the link. That lets us better analyze how many people are taking action on a communication/message we put out.

Questions?

Please contact Mike Kruger, Director of Digital Strategy, at mkruger@doc.gov