

Twitter and sober second thoughts

by BRIAN LOCKHART

The first time I heard the word 'Twitter,' and realized it was a messaging thing, I thought it was some new system that nine- or 10-year-olds were using to contact each other.

Seriously, how could a grown adult take something seriously with a name like that?

On top of that, with messages called 'tweets', there was no way I was going to sign on. I figured that there was absolutely no way I could work the phrase 'I was TWEETING today' into a conversation.

However, in the 12 years it has been on-line, the Twitter universe has grown to include hundreds of millions of users tweeting about everything from world affairs and sports to what they had for breakfast and the results of their morning toenail clipping routine.

Everyone from homeless people to world leaders tweet away about a myriad of subjects. I guess in one respect that is a good thing in that rich and poor alike can express an opinion. In previous decades public opinions were largely in the domain of those who controlled the press and in most cases the press wasn't run by a group sleeping over at the local YMCA.

I have used Twitter during hockey games when the Junior team I was covering was on the road during playoffs. One of the Club members would tweet out the goals, powerplays, and time remaining and I could follow along as the game progressed. For that reason, it was indeed useful.

If you want to express an opinion or share a two-ingredient recipe for lemon squares with your friends, go ahead.

With Twitter you are limited in how many words you can actually use in a post.

You must be concise and get all you want to say in a limited number of words. That can pose a real problem for a lot of people.

What may seem to be an innocent few words to you, may come off as something very negative to someone else.

I always thought of it sort of like when a person comes to work with a new haircut or style, and someone says 'Hey, you got your hair cut / styled,' but doesn't follow up with the obligatory 'looks good!'

It may have been meant it as a compliment, but without the 'looks good!' addition, that person will spend the rest of the day checking the mirror to see what doesn't look right about their new style.

The other problem with Twitter is that it's permanent. I'm pretty sure there have been more than a few tweets sent out by people after imbibing a few who realized the next morning that they had made big mistake.

When I think of effective communication, I am always drawn to a story from the U.S. Civil War.

President Abraham Lincoln was upset over the failure of one of his generals, George Meade, for allowing the Confederate forces an escape route by not pursuing them after a battle.

Lincoln blasted Meade in a letter for his actions, stating that if he had used the 20,000 veteran troops at his disposal, backed up by several thousand more new recruits, he could have surrounded the Confederate army who had an impassable river at their back and were in the disarray of a retreat.

The Federal forces, Lincoln concluded, could have ended the war in a single day by annihilating the Confederate forces.

Lincoln, however, did not send the letter. He placed it aside for a couple of days, then re-read his words.

It dawned on him that Meade, as commander, had just been through the bloodiest battle of the war at Gettysburg. He had witnessed death by the thousands over three days of heavy and bloody fighting.

It was no wonder that the general did not have the stomach to order his troops to again attack and continue with what most likely have been a slaughter.

Lincoln mulled this over then wrote a second letter - the one that was then sent to the general.

In this second letter, Lincoln congratulated Meade for his leadership and success at the Battle of Gettysburg and refrained from negative content. That sober second thought most likely made a huge impact on his general and the future campaigns of an entire army.

Maybe when it comes to Twitter, especially when messages are sent out as a means of international diplomacy by high-ranking officials, there should be an automatic delay to provide a buffer zone for that sober second thought.