

An Interview With Biz Stone, CEO & Founder Of Twitter

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book ever written on the subject of Social Media. And today we are here with Biz Stone. How cool is this? He is the co-Founder of *Twitter*, and we are going to be speaking about microblogging, but more importantly, the general communication utility that *Twitter* is, and Social Media. Of course we are going to be talking specifically about *Twitter*.

So, Biz, totally awesome, I'm so happy that you are here today; thank you.



BS: Thank you, Lon. No problem.

LS: Well, could you give the listeners, first of all, a little background about who you are and what you do at *Twitter*.

BS: Sure, I'm the co-Founder of *Twitter*, and before that I helped start a service called *Vanga.com*, which is a social-journaling service that we started in 1999 in New York City. They are still there, but I left and I ended up working at *Google*. I was specifically on the blogger team for a couple of years before I left there, and sort of got back into the "Start-Up" world with a project called *Odeo*. This is an audio on the internet; a podcasting service, and it was actually when I was at *Odeo* that *Twitter* was actually a side-project that we were working on that we fell in love with. This ultimately turned into its own company that just grew and grew and grew. That's where we're at today.

LS: And that's cool and I just love *Twitter* and just about everybody I know is Tweeting. And for those who for some reason grew up in a foreign country or something, what is *Twitter*? Can you explain to the audience what *Twitter* actually is?



BS: Yeah, it's really just a short messaging service, at the simplest level, but a communication utility. What it becomes now that we have so many people using it; it really becomes the pulse of what's happening with the people and the organizations that you really care about most. So on the one hand, you use it to just communicate; on the other hand, you look through it to find out what's going on.

LS: And that's interesting that you say you "look through it"; and what is the term I keep hearing that is called "Tweets" or "Tweeting." Can you tell me what that is?

BS: *Twitter* is the name of the service and it comes from the idea of the word that you can look up in the dictionary which is a "short trill, chirp, or burst of information"; referencing a birdcall. People are tricked into to calling it "individual updates." Every time I give an individual update on *Twitter*, I actually get saved and achieved on *Twitter*. It becomes its own individual webpage, and people have been referring to those individual updates as Tweets. This is the axis of Twittering, or sometimes I say, "Tweeting" because they are fond of that word "tweet."

It is nothing that we officially stated; people starting using it, so it works out well for us.

LS: So there's this whole vernacular that's kind of growing up around this technology.

BS: Yes.

LS: That's pretty cool. You say that it's a little webpage, it's a communication; so basically it's like a little text message, if you would; is that accurate?

BS: Yes, it's a short message, a short text message; people can...one of the key things about *Twitter* is that it's agnostic when it comes to what sort of device you prefer to use to interact with the system. So if you prefer to use SNS and mobile texting on a mobile phone, *Twitter* will work that way for you. But it also works over the web and it also works with several thousand right now, (more in the future), third party independent pieces of software that you can either download for Mac or a PC, or use with Slash. Basically we opened up our infrastructure; we created an API so that smart developers around the world can create custom interactive software to interact with *Twitter*.

LS: And that's something that I find really important because on my webpage, for example, I am able to pull in a widget that any Tweet that I'm sending out, or following, it just automatically rolls on my website. So if you want to know what I'm Tweeting about or *Twittering* about you can go to my website and you can see this continuous roll.

So I think opening up, I think that really helped the *Twitter* community.

BS: That was actually a big win for us. I mean we did it early on just to, sort of, scratch an itch. One of our very early developers wanted to be able to interact with *Twitter* a certain way, so we created a very simple HI; in fact what happened was the service is simple and the API was so simple that even a beginner API developer could jump in and build something on *Twitter* that worked very quickly. So it became popular to build on top of *Twitter* and what it did for us is that it created so much variety out there (of ways of interacting with *Twitter*) that it ended up just creating a lot of traffic and creating a lot of opportunities and options for people, which is great.

LS: Well, it really is a great tool for that reason. I could be in a different city speaking and all of a sudden I'll look at my cell phone and I'll know what other people (whom I'm following continuously) are doing, where they are and what they're thinking.

I can be sitting at my computer and I can see those same kinds of updates; so really whatever device I'm using, a cell phone, blackberry, or even the internet, that information is really transparent.

BS: Yeah, and it's really that mobile aspect that we were trying to get at early. *Twitter* was basically inspired by the "away" messages on IM, so if you ever used an IM tool, you see that your co-workers or your friends are in a meeting, out for coffee, or whatever. You can look at a group of 12 people and get a sense of what everyone's doing, what everyone's up to; but that's related to the computer and what they are doing on the computer. So when we took that idea and we just broke it out and we made it more mobile by adding the ability to interact with SMS we made it more social by building in more features.

Then we created, basically, new kinds of communications; a kind of "real time" group communications that really didn't exist before. And it's something that turned out that can be very useful for people.

LS: It really is. People really count in it, as do I. You mentioned that it's a short message. Is it true that this is limited to 140 characters?

BS: Right, we limit *Twitter* messages to 140 characters primarily based on the 160-character limit of text messaging, or SMS, because we need to leave room for the name in front of the message. This way you can tell who wrote it. But more important than that was the fact that we really wanted these messages to be able to work seamlessly across many devices. So if someone created a message on a phone we wanted it to be able to be gotten on a website, and vice versa.

LS: Excellent! And do you think that by restricting people to 140 characters, do you think it changes the type of messages; the thought that goes into it. My personal experience is that I do not see it as a restriction; I see it more as being more succinct.

BS: Yeah, I think so. One of the philosophies that we have here at *Twitter* is that the constraints inspire more creativity, and when you are faced with these kinds of constraints it forces us to think a little bit harder to be a little more succinct, and to be a little bit more concise than we normally would.

We see people do amazing things! We have seen people take that constraint and add even more constraints by *Twittering* only in Haiku form, and things like that. It's something we have taken to heart once we got behind the constraint. We took it to heart as a company itself, with regard to designing features in general and in setting up the office space; "How can we think and be within constraints and do a better job and be more creative."

LS: Yes, and I do think it makes it more creative. Samuel Clemens, who wrote under the penname of Mark Twain, said one time, "I apologize for the length of the message, given more time it would have been shorter."

BS: Yes! It's still true. If you are going to spend some time working on something, you know you can keep working and keep eliminating extraneous information until you really boil it down to its essence.

That and it's often just the idea of "lowering the bar" and going the other way and saying, "Look, it's only a sentence or two." If there is something going on right now you should just go ahead and write it. The fact that you don't really have to fill in multiple forms and it's not expected that you add a photo or anything like that, makes it very simple.

I think that's one of the reasons why folks are drawn to it. They realize that it's easy to use, and you'll find yourself using it more often. The photojournalism student, James Buck, who learned about *Twitter* in Egypt as a way to follow activism and protests there (and he was arrested by police while photographing one of these protests) didn't have much time to think when he was thrown in the back of a car. And the first thing he thought to do was to grab his phone and texted, "Arrested!" to his small network of people following him in Egypt and back here in the States; that was enough to alert his network. They got the Dean of the college and some lawyers together and got him out of that Egyptian jail.

But had he had it in mind, and he not been encumbered by the idea that he had to think about who to address it to, or which of his friends was this appropriate to send to and what was the subject of this particular email or communication; but because of this simple, "It goes out to whoever is following me," that also leads to that more immediacy in either use-case.

LS: Yes, that's really true because I would have to sit down and compose an email. I would look at "subject" and maybe a photo. I would be looking at a few minutes as opposed to just one simple word. That did in fact, alert his friends and network and he got assistance and was released as a result of that, right.

BS: Yes, and that's really the power of networks. Really, all we are doing is connecting the people together and they are doing the rest. But making it easier to do is, kind of, the trick. Making it, you know, making that the tool that you think of first during those kind of situations which we are seeing over and over again, really it just comes down to simplifying it. Because if you're anything like me, sometimes I'll sit down to write an email and actually stop and I go into something else because I can't think of a...I don't know what the title is going to be. I'm not sure which people I should cc. and so I'll say, "I don't have time for this right now, I'll do it later." In that situation you don't have time to do it later; you just have to do it without thinking, kind of.

LS: Well it makes it easier for us who are socially media-enhanced. With all of this data that is coming in from all these different streams where we can just take a look at a *Twitter* and it just, in 10 seconds or less, you can get the entire message and move on. It makes it easier to digest, I think.

BS: Yeah, and that's another thing that makes it, sort of, unique, too, is that you can be as connected as you want to be; so if you are really an enthusiast of Social Media and you really want to follow a lot of information then you can follow a lot of information in *Twitter* in real time. But a different kind of expectations go along with *Twitter* than go along with traditional forms of electronic communication, like an email or an IM. In email or IM you see people, you know, you get an email and you're expected to respond and it's kind of rude if you don't respond to an email or an IM message when they know you are online.

With *Twitter* you can be hyper-connected, if you want to, but you can also kind of step away. You can choose to not reply to people; you can walk away for two days and come back and there's not this concept of having to dig back out. So in many ways, I think, it's an evolution of the ability to stay hyper-connected, but also to build and control that information and to not get completely swamped by it. I think it's kind of a new thing that more and more people are going to be looking to as they just get totally overwhelmed with all this, you know, email and everything every day.

LS: Yes, it's true. I cannot mention any names, but there is a couple of Social Media experts that now I am friends with, but have interviewed. You cannot reach them anymore. Their cell phone message says, "Please don't leave me any messages, because I'm not even getting cell phone messages. I'm not looking at my email; I'm way too far behind, so don't email me. Just send me a Tweet."

BS: Yeah, because that's something you can just, you know, you can just scan it or you can skip it. I mean, it's just a different set of expectations. I think that's where it, kind of...especially when you are overloaded. It works out well for that.

LS: It hit a great psychological nerve. You mentioned "followers" and "following." Can you just quickly mention what that means?

BS: Yeah, it's just a...so the whole way *Twitter* works is it's "opt-in." The idea is that we ask a question and the question is, "What are you doing?" And whenever you feel like it you just answer that question; or you

know you don't have to stick to that format. That's just the way that we, kind of, prompt you to enter something. You know, "What are you looking at? What are you seeing right now? What's on your mind?"

You do that and you just send it through *Twitter* and then the people who get it are people who have chosen to follow your updates, or feed your updates. And the idea that as you move around throughout the world answering the question, "What are you doing?" the other people who are following you on their mobile phones or on land or one of these API projects, and that's all following your subscribing to your stream of answers to that question.

And what's great about that is you know then that the people who follow you have chosen to do so, so you don't have to be too worried about what you update; you know that they asked for it and you know that they have seen your other updates, so you can, kind of, let down your guard a little bit. You don't always have to be 100% on all the time.

And, again, it lowers that barrier and allows you to be able to freely to say, "I'm walking down the street." Or, "I'm at Logan Airport: or where ever it is and it allows you to be free enough that you can extract value from those later. And that's another thing that I, kind of, point to as one of the, kind of...unique to Twitter.

We've been seeing over the last 10 years that communication, itself, is just getting more open and the reason I think that's true is because people are getting value out of being open with their communications. It's more valuable to tell a potential group of people what you're up to and see what happens from that then to send, sort of, one-on-one messages.

LS: Yes, I like the fact that it is informal and conversational.

BS: Yeah.

LS: And one of the things that I found interesting when I did a little research was that Robert Scoble has over 21,000 people he is following, and 34,000 people that are actually following him. Those numbers are just amazing.

And then, of course, Kevin Rhodes has taken the prize, still. He is the founder of Digg and Pownce and he has 64,183 followers! Can you imagine building that large of a trusted network using your communication tool?

BS: Yeah, that a lot. And I think Obama is actually up to like 80 or 90,000 followers now, too. But, yeah, I think those are outlying cases, for sure, because most...I wouldn't say most, but you know we looked it up one time and 50% of people who use *Twitter* only follow 10 people and are followed by the same number. So when you talk about, like sort of these, sort of internet-famous or Twitter-famous people who get so many followers, that's a very unusual case. But it is a neat, sort of, position to be in when you have a question to ask of all those people and you want it answered in real time.

LS: And honestly, for *The Social Media Bible* through this process of developing the different chapters, often over the last six months I've used Twitter to throw out an idea; "What do you think of this?" Or, "Who can I get in touch with to talk about that?" And it has been a really incredibly good tool, because instantly I can reach a large number of people that trust me and that I trust. I get the answers almost immediately.

BS: Yeah, and I think that's the key, that, sort of, immediacy is really helpful. I mean, you might be able to do that sort of thing over an email, but it wouldn't be as immediate when you want that answer right now. Like, "I'm shopping for a phone right now at the AT & T store. Does anyone know what's a good one?" And you get the answer back from people who follow you. I think that is...it comes down to the immediacy of it, that it has this unique value.

LS: Absolutely. Can you tell me the typical demographic, the profile of a person who's using *Twitter*?

BS: Well, not really because we really don't ask for a lot of information. I mean, we can go back through and we can do some analyses, and we have done them in the past. We've done surveys. But we don't...we really just ask for the bare minimum in order to get started on Twitter, so the best I can do right now is, sort of, anecdotally say that it's such a wide range; it really is people like people from all over, all ages, and it's just sort of interesting to see that it's such a wide range. And in the future we may add a little bit more information, allow people to help give a little bit more about themselves, but for now it's really, just kind of freeform. We don't really have a lock on exactly what the physical demographic is.

LS: Yes, and based on my research, it is everybody! It is business people communicating on a business level; it is personal communication for recreation; it is families communicating with each other. I have even seen cases where college professors, university professors are communicating homework assignments and grades and information back and forth with their students.

Just about any application you can think of is really popular!

BS: Yeah, it's almost like, you know, it's...again when you go back to the communications utility aspect of it, it's like asking like, you know "What is a typical email user?" I mean, you actually could; you could probably get that but it would be a very wide range.

LS: Yes. Absolutely. Is there any statistics that you can share with our listeners here today?

BS: Umm, about demographics?

LS: Well, the number of users, or just how many people you have using it or how many people are signing up. How many are current users?

BS: We actually don't give out the total number of sign-ups or messages sent per day. We have, like I'm sure that would be an interesting stat about the 50%. We haven't seen a lot of growth, I mean, over the past 10 or 12 months, we've grown over 600%; and we tend to see a lot of usage around events. Any kind of shared event, whether it's a disaster like an earthquake or the Emmy's or these.... Especially these debates. We've been seeing record use of Twitter during the debates. People kind of sharing the debate in real time as they are watching on television, and kind of reacting to what the candidate are saying. Those are the record-breaking moments for us.

But we don't usually share absolute numbers, so I don't have much to share there.

LS: Okay. We talked about some of the applications; for example the student that was arrested in Egypt. There was another one that I read about, I believe it was on CNN where somebody had set up a specific *Twitter*

account that he could then broadcast during the San Diego fires; where he was, where the fires were. And everybody from Emergency Response to the Red Cross was actually using *Twitter* to understand where all the fires were, where people were trapped. It was a pretty useful tool.

BS: Yeah, and I think, again, it comes down to that real-time aspect. For example there was an earthquake a couple of months ago in Los Angeles and it struck at 11:42 a.m. PST; and also at 11:42 a.m. were the first *Twitter* updates coming in from people just all over Los Angeles, at school, at work, they were commuting...immediately reporting in and what it felt like, what they were seeing, what was the scene. That was in the first minute of the earthquake; and then nine minutes later the AP put out a wire. And AP is, sort of, known for the idea of a news wire that has been around for 135 years. And the idea has been that you get the news out very quickly. In those nine minutes we collected 3,600 individual Tweets with the word “quake” in them; and that’s, even if you take out, sort of limited idea of how short or long a Tweet is, you end up with at least a books worth of Twitter updates; at least 50,000 words or more of updates in those nine minutes about the earthquake. It is pretty amazing.

It comes down to that speed again; it comes down to what you were taking about with the wildfires. You have people out there kind of just reporting what they are seeing; it can be very useful when you take sort of, one’s zoomed-out look at it. You can say, “Okay, now we can, sort of, see if people Twittering, where they are seeing fires, where they are seeing smoke. They can, kind of, look at that and get an idea where these fires are moving; a very unpredictable thing.

LS: And it’s actually saving peoples’ lives.

BS: Yeah, ideally you just allow people to connect and they, kind of, do the rest. That earthquake is a good example, again, because people just really jump on their cell phones during this kind of event, and what happens is that A T & T went down, Sprint went down, Verizon went down; voice service for all the networks went down, but SMS can still get through because of its nature. So people are able to *Twitter* and connect with one another through this service.

Had the earthquake been worse, as it has been in other situations we probably would have next noticed people self-organizing and figuring out who needs what. Like what was happening recently in Atlanta with this gas shortage; people were using *Twitter* to communicate with one another about where they could access gas; where was there gas and where could they go and get it. And this kind of gets squared up on *Twitter* and we’ve now become a trend on the trend that we monitor. We looked into it deeper and we said, “Wow, there’s people who have decided to use *Twitter* to help each other find gas.”

The key is that this is being able to connect and then beyond that to be able to connect in real time to get these things taken care of.

LS: And on a little bit of a lighter note, one of the things that I recently discovered in research was that there are several conferences that are taking place lately, where a presenter was up on stage and actually had a monitor set with a *Twitter* feed; during his presentation he could actually read what the audience was Twittering so he could then tailor and customize the actually presentation to what the audience wanted to see, real-time, which the presentation was actually taking place.

BS: Yeah, I think that's a very interesting use case, too. The conferences and the...I was once interviewed by someone on stage and they were doing the same thing; they had the audience sending suggested questions to him on his cell phone and then we would just ask me.

I have a friend who is a director, a television and film director in Hollywood and he had a show...a new show that he had directed the pilot episode of, coming on last season. I went down to visit him at his house and I pulled up *Twitter* and I showed him what everyone was saying about the show as they were watching it. So for him, having worked on this thing for almost a year, or whatever it was, to be able to get that kind of "live" audience feel like you might get when directing a play or something was really interesting for him to see that.

LS: That's absolutely amazing. Can you tell our listeners where they can find out more information about *Twitter* if they want to go and begin Tweeting?

BS: Yeah, well a great place to start with *Twitter* is actually, ironically enough, not necessarily to get started right on [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com), but to go to search.twitter.com and get a sense of what people are talking about, what they're saying. Get a sense of that before you go and join, which you can do from [search.twitter](https://search.twitter.com) or from twitter.com; which is a mini-tour of *Twitter*.

I think we could do a better job of positioning *Twitter* as a relevant communications tool as we evolve and as the product gets a little bit better; and we do a better job of integrating search. But yes, search.twitter.com or elections.twitter.com is a great way to go if you really want a specific window on what's going on with these debates.

LS: Okay, good, good. And one last question. A lot of these companies are using this "Freemium" model. How do you cover the overhead? It is advertising-based; how do we pay for this?

BS: *Twitter* doesn't have any ads, but one of the things that happened with *Twitter* early on is it was just a project and it was very conceptual. We know we like the idea and we thought there was something to it and what happened for *Twitter* was it got popular very fast. That was great, that was a good problem to have, but it meant that we needed to...what we really needed to do more than anything else was...no matter what was going to happen and no matter what our plans were for creating a sustainable company, we knew that they depended on creating reliable networks. Something that could be used worldwide by a lot of people with a certain level of competence.

So the fact that we got popular early meant that we had to scramble to get to that liability; and that really where we've been 100% focused on. In the meantime, what that meant was, strangely enough, was running the company without focusing on revenue until we felt we were at a strong place with regards to liability.

So that's kind of the mode we've been in until recently; and now that we are in a good place with the network and the liability we now begin to turn our heads to other features; specifically how to make this a sustainable company going forward and how do we pay for that. Everyone's salary is all the hosting bills.

And where we are looking now is another area; we've been fortunate in having a lot of very heavy commercial usage of the service. A lot of companies, like Bell announcing that they've made \$500,000 on *Twitter* last quarter, and Comcast and this very interesting hybrid way of combining marketing and customer support together, and JetBlue using it to communicate with its customers, and Whole Foods.

And what we've seen with the NASA organization, although it is not a commercial effigy, just amazing success in achieving their goal of bringing...making the science market accessible to the U.S. citizens and the world. So we are seeing a lot of commercial usage and I think we are going to look to that as one of the early ways that this company becomes for sustainable.

LS: And I think that's great because I think everybody would be willing to pay something to keep this service going. Even the few times you get overloaded, everybody goes into *Twitter* meltdown.

BS: The key is again for this network to work, it wants to be large, and it needs to be something that's free and easy for a whole lot of people. So that's why a commercial usage is a little bit more interesting; because it is the big companies that are clearly using the service to earn money. It is very possible that they are willing to put a little money towards it.

LS: And it's reasonable to ask that; it's a reasonable business case. Is there anything else you would like to add about *Twitter* that you think our listeners might want to know about; something coming down the road, or your philosophy, or summarize?

BS: Well I mean.... I think just...there's a lot of philosophies, but just the idea that it really is not necessarily a social network, but it is a communications network with the social aspects. Sometimes it gets confused with some of the social networks out there, but I think we are a little bit different than that; I think we have a broader appeal, probably a little bit more of a compliment to these networks rather than another one of them.

LS: Absolutely, I agree. That's excellent, thank you so much. I would really like to thank Biz Stone, co-Founder of *Twitter* for being here today and talking about Twitter and communication and a little bit about microblogging, but they are the bigger picture. And honestly, Biz, thank you so much for being here today. Thank you.

BS: Thanks for having me, Lon.

This has been Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out our other valuable Social Media tactics, tools, and strategies that can be found in *The Social Media Bible* book and its companion website, www.thesocialmediabible.com.

For more information about me, Lon Safko, please go on over to my website at www.lonsafko.com.

And again, Biz, truly and honestly, thank you for taking the time here today. This is great!

BS: Thanks, Lon.