

# Can Twitter be Used to Advertise 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Products?

## A Collaborative Paper by



**Executive Summary.** Advertising 3<sup>rd</sup> party goods on a corporate Twitter feed is a delicate matter. Done right, it may contribute meaningfully to the conversation, but done wrong it may violate social norms and result in lost followers. Partnering with Allrecipes.com, Psychster Inc. designed a multivariate scenario experiment using embedded video to test who and what should be tweeted, and whether 3<sup>rd</sup> party brands should be named. In all, 621 respondents completed the study, resulting in these findings:

- Advertisement tweets tested in this context were generally liked by respondents.
- Advertisement tweets made by a Company were more likely to be clicked than identical tweets made by a Fan or an Employee.
- Tweets about Coupons were more likely to be clicked than tweets about Recipes, which were in turn more likely to be clicked than tweets about Products.
- Retweets were more likely to be clicked than original tweets.
- Displaying a 3<sup>rd</sup> party brand in an advertisement tweet resulted in no significant decrease in clicks or liking.

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### Attribution.

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**Background and Research Questions.** A striking aspect of social media such as Facebook and Twitter is that organizations are adopting it almost as fast as individual users. As of this writing, about 12% of Americans use Twitter ([Jasra, 2010](#)), but organizations as diverse as Allrecipes.com, United Way, CNN, and Volvo Cars of Brazil are using it to build fellowships around their offerings.

In microblogging, as with instant-messaging and social-networking before it, norms of behavior evolve rapidly with increased use. For example, retweeting is now often interpreted to be a sign of endorsement and friendship ([Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010](#)). Lists of the dos and don'ts of tweeting (e.g. [Bartelby, 2009](#)) and stories about celebrities who incur the disfavor of their followers by advertising (e.g. [Black, 2010](#)) also serve to reinforce and propagate these norms.

Navigating social media norms can be even trickier for organizations, who are encouraged to join the conversation but do so with the hope of some return. Certainly, maintaining a social media presence is not without costs, which organizations may look for measurable ways to offset.

Thus, for companies such as Allrecipes.com, who has established a large Twitter following and also maintains the world's largest ad-supported cooking site, it is quite reasonable to wonder if Twitter may be used as a platform to advertise relevant goods from 3<sup>rd</sup> parties such as Kraft, Pillsbury, or General Mills. All parties recognize that this must be done carefully, especially given the research that among individual social media users, promotional posts are a leading reason why people unfriend others (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). If advertising has this effect, then any revenue it generates would not be worthwhile in terms of lost fellowship.

This study was created to test whether there were any scenarios under which Allrecipes users would accept tweets promoting 3<sup>rd</sup> party goods, and then to identify what tweets are most well-received and clicked through most often.

**Key Question:** Are there any circumstances under which 3<sup>rd</sup> party brands can be successfully advertised on Twitter?

**Secondary Questions:** Does the success of the advertisement tweet depend on who and what was said?

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**Methodology.** Psychster Inc. designed a multivariate scenario experiment in which respondents were randomly assigned to view 1 of 24 videos, and then to answer questions about their reactions.

The video variations depicted a user following the Twitter feed of one of three people (the Allrecipes company, an employee of Allrecipes, or a fan of Allrecipes). That person tweeted (either an original tweet, or a retweet) about one of three things (a coupon, a

## Who posted the Tweet?

1. **Allrecipes** (the Company). Bio: “Tweets from Allrecipes.com, inspiring you to stir things up.”
2. **AllrecipesChris** (the Employee). Bio: “Tweets from Chris, social media community manager for Allrecipes.com.”
3. **HomeCookChris** (a Fan). Bio: “Tweets from HomeCookChris, avid fan of Allrecipes.com.”

## What was Tweeted?

1. **A Coupon.** “Check out this coupon BRAND is giving away for a free pie crust - it’s good for two! URL.” Clicking took respondents to a pie crust product page on the BRAND site with a button to get a coupon.
2. **A Recipe I Made.** “I just made an apple pie with this great BRAND crust – it was yummy, you’ll want two! URL.” Clicking took respondents to a recipe page on Allrecipes.com.
3. **A Product I Enjoyed.** “I just ate an apple pie with this great BRAND crust – it was yummy, you’ll want two! URL.” Clicking took respondents to a pie crust product page on the BRAND site.

## Was it a Tweet or a Retweet?

1. **Original Tweet.** Tweets were as above.
2. **Retweet.** Tweets began: “RT @Alex.”

## Did the Recipe Tweets show a 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Brand Name or Not?

1. **Branded.** A nationally recognized pie crust brand appeared in place of BRAND in the recipe Tweets above. On clicking, the logo for that brand appeared on the recipe page.
2. **Unbranded.** The word “pastry” appeared in place of BRAND in the recipe Tweets above, and no logo appeared on the recipe page.

recipe they had made, or a product they had enjoyed), in which they may or may not have named a 3<sup>rd</sup> party brand. **See the insert for details about the variations.**

To maximize realism, the videos used screenshots of Twitter, Allrecipes.com and a real pie crust product page. They showed an animated pointer to depict the user’s actions, and red circles to draw attention to important elements, such as the tweeter’s bio. The narration also emphasized the different variations, one example being, *“The scenario is: you are on Twitter following the tweets of AllrecipesChris. Her bio says: ‘Tweets from Chris, social media community manager for Allrecipes.com.’ You see that the latest post is a retweet and is as follows [circled]. Please take a moment now to look over this tweet, and anything else on the screen, before continuing [pause]. Next, you click on the link [in the tweet], and it takes you to a recipe page on Allrecipes.com. You notice this recipe is sponsored by BRAND.”*

Although 36 total variations were possible, it was illogical to show the 12 unbranded coupon and unbranded product variations (i.e. “check out this coupon no-name company is giving away”), so these were eliminated leaving 24 variations. This partial factorial design required that we isolate some variations to analyze the factors manipulated in the study, not unlike analyzing two separate studies. Specifically, when we analyzed the impact of who tweeted and what was tweeted, we looked only at the branded tweets. Similarly, when we analyzed the impact of tweets vs. retweets, and of displaying a 3<sup>rd</sup> party brand or not, we looked only at the recipe tweets.



**Respondents.** The study was fielded in September, 2010. Respondents included **116 Allrecipes users** who responded to a promotional creative calling for Twitter users (without incentive), and **505 panelists** selected from a panel company if they were over 18 and had ever used a cooking website and Twitter. The survey terminated respondents if they reported that they had never used Twitter.com or seen Twitter posts, or if they reported they were unable to view the video and hear the sound (only 7% could not, primarily because their computers lacked speakers).

Of the registered Twitter users, **60% had their account for less than a year**, on average they had **166 followers** and **followed 210** others, and they reported making an average of **8 tweets per day, 4.5 of which were retweets**. Respondents were 65% female, and 60% were 35 years of age and under.

**Metrics.** After viewing the video, respondents first rated the likelihood that they would **click through the link** shown in the tweet. This metric was chosen for analysis because it was equally applicable to tweets about coupons, recipes, or products, and it was highly correlated with respondents' intent to purchase. Next, respondents rated how much they **liked the tweet**. This metric was correlated with how much

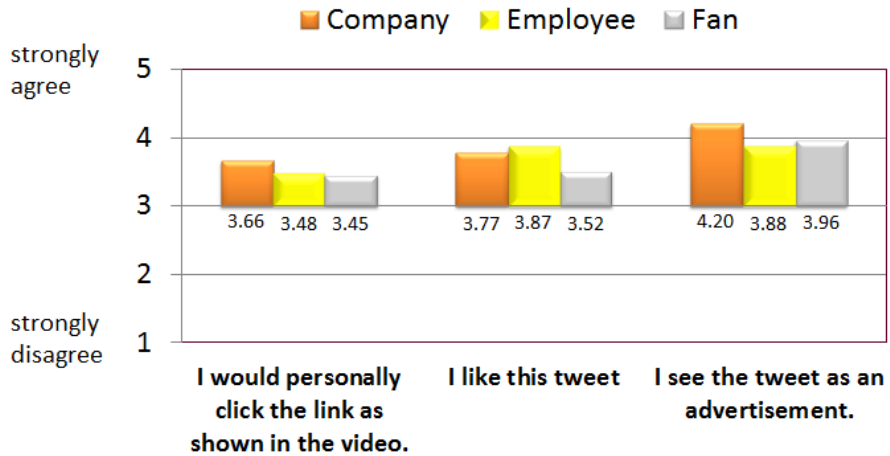
respondents liked the tweeter, how likely they were to follow or un-follow her, and how likely they would be to retweet the post. Finally, respondents rated how much they **viewed the tweet as an advertisement**. This metric captured unique information about how promotional or "spammy" users perceived the tweets to be.

**Key Metrics  
(5-point agreement ratings)**

1. I would personally click links and interact like shown in the video.
2. I like this tweet.
3. I see the tweet as an advertisement.

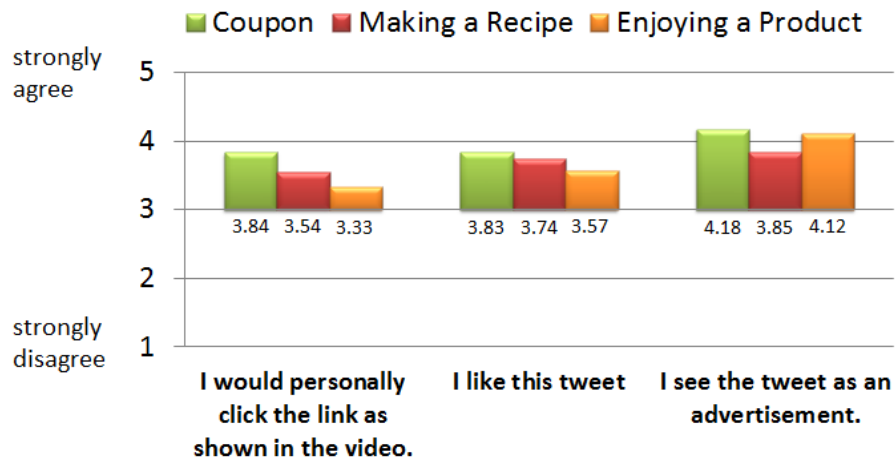
**Results.** Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant differences depending on who tweeted,  $F(6,784)=3.23, p < .01$ , what was tweeted,  $F(6,784)=2.92, p < .01$ , and whether it was an original tweet or a retweet,  $F(3,391)=2.58, p = .05$ , but no significant effect of displaying a 3<sup>rd</sup> party brand,  $F(3,333)=1.07, p = .36$ . None of these main effects were qualified by any significant two-way or three-way interactions.

Figure 1: Impact of who tweeted the ad.



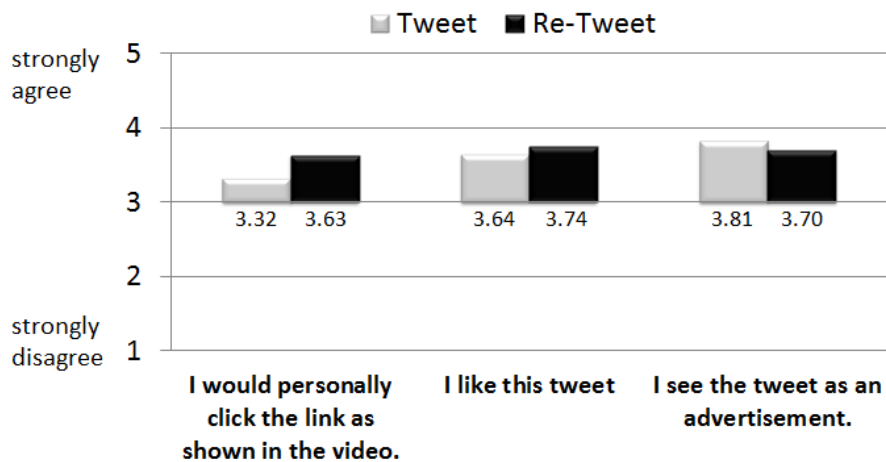
© Psychster Inc. 2011. n=409.

Figure 2: Impact of what was tweeted.



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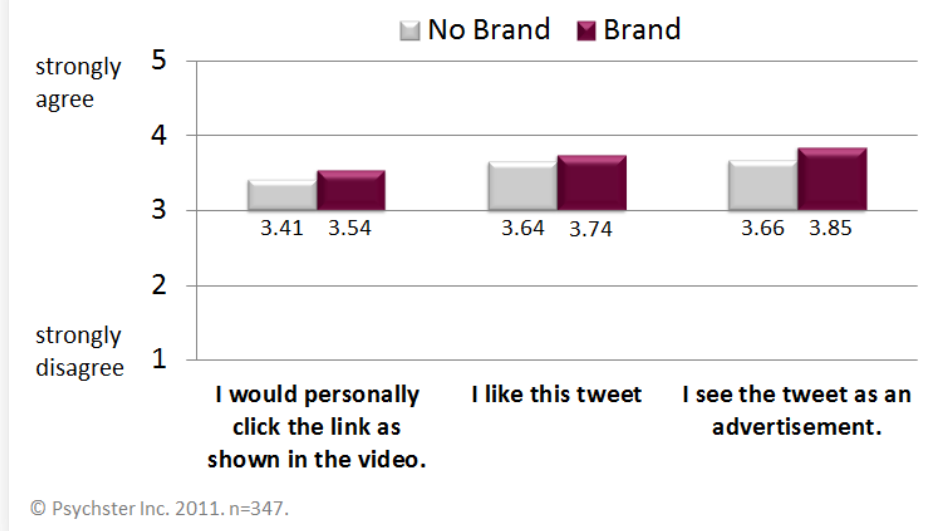
Figure 3: Impact of tweet vs. re-tweet.



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- 1. Advertisement tweets tested in this context were generally liked by respondents.**  
Across Figures 1-4, all mean liking ratings were above the midpoint of 3 on the 5-point Likert scales, revealing no variation of tweeter, tweet, or branding that caused a truly negative reaction.
- 2. Advertisement tweets made by a Company were more likely to be clicked than identical tweets made by a Fan (and marginally an Employee).** This was in spite of the fact that tweets made by a Company were more likely to be seen as ads than those made by an Employee or Fan. Also, tweets by an Employee and a Company were significantly more liked than tweets by a Fan. (See Figure 1, where any difference greater than 0.30 was significant at  $p < .05$ .)
- 2. Tweets about Coupons were more likely to be clicked than tweets about Recipes, which were in turn marginally more likely to be clicked than tweets about Products.** Again, this was in spite of the fact that tweets about Coupons and Products were more likely to be seen as ads than tweets about Recipes. Tweets about Products that the tweeter had recently enjoyed were liked the least. (See Figure 2, where any difference greater than 0.26 was significant at  $p < .05$ .)
- 3. Retweets were more likely to be clicked than original tweets.** (See Figure 3, where any difference greater than 0.28 was significant at  $p < .05$ .)
- 4. The tweets most likely to be retweeted were retweets (more so than original tweets), tweets about Coupons or Recipes (more so than Products), and tweets made by a Company or Employee (more so than those made by a Fan).** (These differences were all significant at  $p < .05$ . We chose not to graph them because the pattern was very similar to the liking ratings across the tweet variations.)
- 5. Displaying a 3<sup>rd</sup> party brand in an advertisement tweet resulted in no significant decrease in clicks or liking.** (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Non-significant impact of branding.



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**Conclusions.** The advertisement tweets tested in this context were generally well received. In interpreting whether this result generalizes to other contexts, we should carefully consider the unique aspects of these scenarios. First, the apple pie that was advertised in all tweets tested here was **highly relevant** to Allrecipes users and followers. Many prior studies including those from Psychster Inc. (2010) have shown that ads which are relevant to a user base perform better than those which are irrelevant; e.g., soup ads perform better on cooking sites than car ads. Second, commercial messages about products may be simply more accepted by a fellowship formed around food, than by a fellowship formed around humor, politics, or other interests. Third, unique aspects of the sample, such as loyalty to Allrecipes, may have influenced the results, although it should be emphasized that only 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the sample was recruited from Allrecipes and the majority came from a panel. Lastly, specific aspects of the video scenarios, which were created to maximize realism and ecological validity, may have influenced the results, including but not limited to the wording of the Twitter handle, bio, tweet, recipe page, or brands.

**Twitter followers can appreciate and engage with advertisements of 3<sup>rd</sup> party brands, depending on who tweets and what is tweeted.**

That said, the clear suggestion of the study is that Twitter followers can appreciate and engage with advertisements of 3<sup>rd</sup> party brands, depending on who tweets and what is tweeted:

- **In this context, advertisement tweets should be posted by a company or an employee, rather than a fan.** Advertisement tweets by companies were more likely to be clicked, and tweets by employees were liked more, than tweets by fans.
- **Tweets should offer a tangible benefit (coupons), or portray the tweeter engaged in the same activities as the followers (making recipes), rather than merely pushing products.** The least liked, least likely to be clicked, and spammiest tweet was, “I just ate an apple pie with this great BRAND crust – it was yummy, you’ll want two!” However, when the tweeter offered a coupon, or had herself baked the pie, the tweets were better received.
- **If a tweet refers to a relevant 3<sup>rd</sup> party product, displaying the brand will not always hurt followers’ reactions, and may help it.** Although not significant, all three metrics trended in the opposite direction, that is, branded tweets were more favorably received than unbranded tweets. Clearly, the health of the brand would have a big impact on this outcome. However, this study documents at least one example of a branded advertisement in a Twitter post being accepted by followers.

- **Corporate tweeters should retweet their followers' own tweets about products, as well as post original ones.** Everything else held constant, retweets were more likely to be clicked than original tweets. Although we don't recommend false or planted retweets, retweeting followers' posts can increase engagement, balance community and corporate interests, and ultimately create a healthy, sincere context for advertisement tweets.
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**Psychological Processes at Play.** Why did advertisement tweets made by companies and their employees perform better in this study than similar tweets made by fans? There are some psychological forces that make companies more influential; specifically, their authority lets us expect consistent, quality goods without devoting the cognitive effort to vet them all over again (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Other psychological forces, however, should make fans more influential; specifically, they are similar to the audience (Goethals & Darley, 1977), and they should have less vested self-interest that might discount the sincerity of their promotions (Kelley, 1972).

However, in this study, the balance of these forces ultimately favored the company and its employee. One wonders if a norm has developed allowing commercial tweeters to say commercial things, but restricting social tweeters to saying social things, but that is question for further study. As well, it isn't always easy to distinguish between commercial and social users, and we often encounter users on Twitter who appear to be non-commercial, but who eventually post some form of persuasive tweets. With this uncertainty, a healthy national brand might win out over an unknown personal brand in persuading us to engage.

Retweets, however, imply that at least one individual endorsed a brand, and that should be more persuasive than the brand alone. Our finding that retweets were more likely to be clicked supports this view. Research on conformity (Asch, 1956) would suggest that the persuasiveness would increase up to about 4 different people retweeting it, and then level off. Whether that curve fits retweets is another good question for future research, as with the question about what happens when a corporate Twitter retweets a product tweet to numerous followers.

All things considered, social media marketing, like search marketing, tends to favor sincere content that makes a real contribution to a community, and the results of this study confirm that view. Tweet about a coupon, or a recipe you made, or a truly great product, and you should remain in good standing with the norms evolving on Twitter.

**To view the videos used in this survey, please contact the authors.**

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