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and your business. For instance, try to pick something that defines your service or your specialty; conversely, be sure to stay away from cute or clever names that don’t really define the scope of what you want the page to represent.

After you’ve carefully chosen a username, you need to start building your group of followers. The key to getting followers is to follow users yourself, so you should start by finding like-minded people or potential customers. Visiting search.twitter.com allows you to search through the site as if you were using a regular Internet search engine. This can be extremely helpful, as you can begin to find people in your area by typing in phrases like, “mortgage in Los Angeles.” In a matter of seconds, you’ll have a list of potential clients. Likewise, you can enter searches such as, “financial planners in Los Angeles” and find potential industry partners in your area.

As you find matches to various searches, simply follow the people with whom you’d like to work. After that, these users’ tweets will appear in your feed. Twitter allows your communication to be direct and personal; even if a user has chosen not to follow you back, you can still contact that user just the same. Keep an eye on your feed and be sure to reply to users when you think that you can make a business connection based on what they’re tweeting.

Also be sure to incorporate hashtags into your Twitter usage. As you may already know, a hashtag — that is, a number sign (#) — is used to mark keywords or topics in a tweet. Twitter users utilize this symbol before a relevant keyword or phrase to help it show more easily in a Twitter search, allowing other users to click on the hashtag and see every other tweet marked with that keyword. Hashtags can appear anywhere, but in general, you shouldn’t use more than two in a single post. In addition, make sure that you’re attaching them only to relevant topics.

**Helpful tools**

If you’re worried about spending most of your day reading and responding to tweets, fear not; there’s a variety of free software that allows you to streamline the social media process. Twitter aggregators, for instance, allow you to enter keywords and only receive tweets if those words appear. Using these tools, you can set up searches that focus on, for example, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) loans or Federal Housing Administration (FHA) products. Any time a user on Twitter posts a tweet with the words “VA loan” or “FHA loan,” you can make the program automatically have your account follow that user. Tools like this can help you save time and energy. Software like TweetDeck, Twitscoop, Twitpic and StockTwits serve similarly useful functions. Mortgage brokers and originators can use these free services to make Twitter work for them around the clock, gaining exposure even while they sleep.

**Effective posts**

Once you have a basic understanding of how Twitter works and some of the different tools at your disposal, it’s time for you to put your fingers to the keyboard and start tweeting. To ensure successful marketing, it’s important for you to keep your tweets professional and interesting. If you have followers that you consider personal friends, consider opening a separate Twitter account for communicating with them. You certainly never want personal tweets to turn potential clients away; remember, Twitter is helping you build a brand — your brand. It’s crucial to keep that brand strictly professional.

It’s important to use relevant keywords in your tweets, as Twitter users often will seek out specific topics. Think of which keywords your potential clients or networking partners may be searching for and use those keywords in your tweets. Similarly, you can include such keywords in your profile.

Try to view tweeting as blogging on a much smaller scale. Remember, each tweet can only be 140 characters long, so you’ll have to carefully consider what it is you want to say. Avoid irrelevant or uninteresting posts and be careful not to give so much information that your potential clients and business partners no longer need you.

You also can think of Twitter as a way of driving business to your company’s website — a free marketing tool that sends people relevant information in real time. If you can get thousands of followers to retweet your posts or pass on links to your website, Twitter can quickly become an example of the “and they told two friends” phenomenon. In short, it can become a brilliant marketing tool that draws traffic specifically to your website.

Twitter may not ever be your best friend, and you likely will never want to hear about what time your neighbor walked his dog, but hopefully, the preceding information can give you an idea of what Twitter can offer for your business. To recap: Choose a name wisely; use free, aggregate software to your advantage; post clear, concise and relevant information; and make sure to follow people that will be advantageous to your business.

Additionally, don’t forget that the best way to get a lot of followers is to do a lot of following. Although this may be counterintuitive to a mortgage professional with a leader’s mentality, when it comes to using Twitter, being a follower is a good thing. With that in mind, tweet away — and remember, it’s all in the name of improved business.