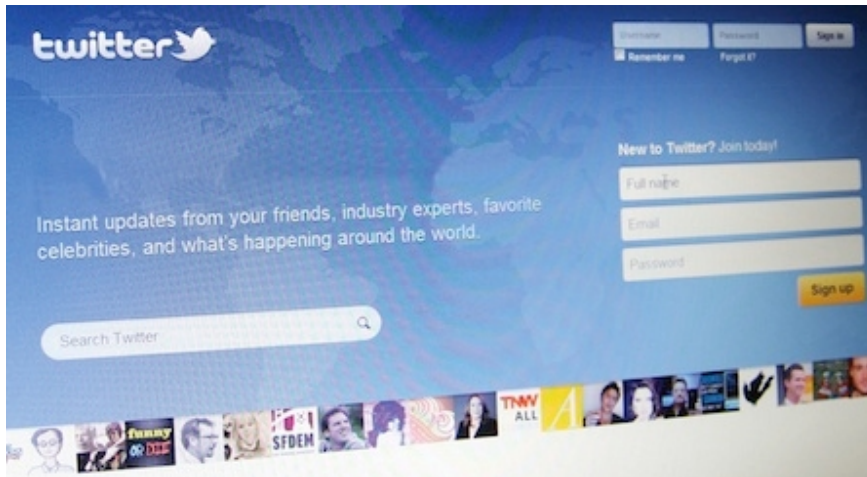


Racing and the social network

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Imagine this scenario: racing fans socialise with industry people, have direct access to the game through these contacts and perhaps eventually become racehorse owners themselves by partnering with professionals they've met socially.

This is a universally desirable model for growing the game on many different levels, from sparking interest in the sport to betting horses to following and owning thoroughbreds, and it's an organic way in which things happened in the "old days" when the racetrack was the hub for social activity and the introduction to the sport. These days racecourse attendance is down from the past in many parts of the world, but international racing chatter is getting louder on Web 2.0 via social media. And the concepts of the "old" model are a new possibility again through a borderless medium that puts a premium on being social and forthright.

Though still in early stages, there are signs that social media can positively impact racing, just as it has other industries.

Take racing partnerships or syndicates, for example. They are by their nature social gatherings, or "tribes," in the parlance of author and social media authority Francois Gossieaux' concept of "Hyper-Sociality." Gossieaux wrote in his manifesto "The Seven Myths of Hyper-Social Organizations (Why Human 1.0 is Key)" that the Web 2.0 world is "solidly Human 1.0," which is to say that the technology is actually subservient to the growing numbers of people using and interacting honestly through it. Gossieaux wrote: "Social media is what has enabled the hardwired Human 1.0 behaviors to scale to levels never seen before in business. We call it Hyper-Sociality. Through being Hyper-Social, we can help others and be helped. We can form tribes again – except that this time our tribes will not be bound by geography and we can belong to multiple tribes at the same time."

On a strictly business level, racing partnerships are an affordable means of racehorse ownership because they spread the costs associated with the purchase, training, and veterinary maintenance and treatment of equine athletes. They are, therefore, an excellent vehicle for entry into the sport for fans who want to take the next step and become participants. They are run top down with a managing partner in charge, but many syndicates do give partners some voice in the process. And there's solidarity in the shared voices of support for their runner in combat down the lane.

Many partnerships have succeeded brilliantly in this mode of social/business operation, which seems tailor made for Gossieaux' Hyper-Sociality of Web 2.0.

These entities interact with their partners socially at the track and recruit them through traditional channels or by word of mouth or through the publicity of their successes. Most of these partnerships, however, require substantial cash outlays to join and generally attract fairly affluent middle class to wealthy folks who are probably middle-aged and older and who probably don't participate in Web 2.0 – the domain of a generally younger crowd.

Social media and racing, however, are engaging each other, and it's a plus for the game because this means more interaction and shared information between fans and professionals, and free publicity for racing from sources that weren't household words in the business just years ago. Twitter, in particular, has shrunk the global game, and race results from around the world are now "tweeted" within seconds of finishes, many times with photos, video, and pedigree links posted by amateurs and professionals. In the spring issue of *European Trainer*, I noted Twitter as "one of 11 to watch" in 2011. But I've been stunned myself by the medium's growth since I wrote the piece at the beginning of the year. Every day, it seems, new people with an interest in the game join Twitter, and many European trainers especially have embraced the medium at rates far greater than trainers anywhere else.

Given this trend, it was only a matter of time, then, for a racing partnership to catalyse through social media in all its Hyper-Social glory, and it did in April.

Though based in New York, I officially joined the first Twitter racing partnership when I wired a very affordable £420 to a bank in England to become one of 60 members of #Twitterhorse, as he had become known as. It might as well be the #Twitterhose tribe, because there's plenty of chest-thumping bonding taking place amongst us, several of us from outside Britain but as welcome in the syndicate as any of the locals.

The idea started one morning on the spur of the moment when a few people – notably James Knight (@jamesaknight; Head of Racing at Coral bookmakers) and Eamonn Wilmott (@ewilmott) – floated an idea on Twitter to buy a two-year-old in training from a breeze-up sale and were immediately deluged by would-be investors from around the world, mostly punters or fans with opinions and a desire to join the ranks of ownership. With the aid of bloodstock agents Alastair Donald and Ed Sackville (@SackvilleDonald), Wilmott – who runs *Horses First Racing*, with Jeremy Gask (@jeremygask) as trainer – set a budget of £20,000 and scoured through potential prospects at two breeze-up sales. They eventually landed on a Dark Angel colt out of Call Later, by Gone West, Lot 31 at the DBS auction, for £21,000. The buyer was listed as Sackville/Donald Twitter Horse.

Now named Trending (@Trending_Horse) – "trending" is terminology for a popular topic on

Twitter – the colt’s every move has been documented, and a regimen has been planned for a summer debut under trainer Gask. Everything, from training to soliciting colours for the partnership silks, has been discussed with the tribe by the tribal leaders, and opinions have gone back and forth. There’s even been an open house for partners to visit Trending, and Wilmott keeps everyone informed through Twitter and an email newsletter. Though it germinated on Web 2.0, the #Twitterhorse partnership is functioning in exactly the same manner as a traditional partnership that established syndicates such as Highclere or Team Valor International might have begun, except there are more members in this Trending tribe, they operate at a more affordable price range for the commoner, and they do their bonding and business over the internet waves.

Whether the #Twitterhorse partnership, a small step for racing on Web 2.0, turns into a giant step for racing in general by spawning other like partnerships remains to be seen, but there’s no turning back from the medium that created the discussion: Twitter.

Su-Ann Khaw (@inkmarksofsu) runs Suez Thoroughbreds, an Australian-based partnership that campaigned Group 1 winner Allez Wonder, who was recently sold for Aus\$1,000,000 to top the Inglis Australian Easter Broodmare sale. Khaw is a ubiquitous presence on Twitter, an advocate of it, and finds practical use in it. “In regards to discussing races or requesting results over real time, it's phenomenal,” she says. “To speak to people of similar interests around the world, all watching the same champions make history, how good is that?! Plus, breeders looking at sending mares to shuttle stallions may seek advice from NH and SH peeps in a more casual and comfortable setting than sending an email to agents or a farm. It also opens a platform for healthy discussions, and a combination of opinions.” Khaw noted that the democratic structure of Twitter allowed for interaction between fans and industry insiders, something that had never been available on such a scale before, and she appreciates the transparent nature of the discussions. “It doesn't matter who you are in the industry, if you're caught tweeting a statement that lacks credibility, someone will beg to differ and call you out on it,” she says.

Indeed, credibility is part of the package of what Gossieaux alluded to in his “solidly Human 1.0” statement about Web 2.0, and it’s the reason Messrs. Knight and Wilmott got the responses they did from people around the world, just as Messrs. Harry Herbert and Barry Irwin do for their well-established Highclere and Team Valor partnerships. Without credibility, none of us would have wired money to join the #Twitterhorse venture in the first place.

Credibility on Twitter requires sincerity, honesty, social skills, and the ability to connect with others, just as in face-to-face interactions. Michele Lee Amundsen (@ThePaperTyger) is a US-based editor/writer and a racing fan who follows many industry insiders, including Khaw, on Twitter. She says: “The accounts that really have a presence and tweet often create a real draw for fans. Whether it's a professional athlete or a beloved writer, making a connection with the fan base is hugely important. I don't mean just tweeting when you have a new book out or your horse has a race but actually connecting with the fans and people who care about your cause. Su-Ann does a spectacular job and we all feel like we know her horses and are thrilled to cheer them on when they race; similarly with the gang at Raffles Racing (@RafflesRacing) and their horse Shamrock [@Gr1Shamrock, a Group 1 winner in Australia]. With all the issues that confront horseracing, open and worthwhile communication that makes fans feel like they are in on the action is more important than ever. From small stables that are looking for syndicates to the clever horse Twitter accounts, there are connections to be made and fans ready to be won over.”

Several fans in the US were won over by the medium after hitting Team Valor International's 20-1 Animal Kingdom in the Kentucky Derby. The colt had entered the classic with only four starts, three on the all weather and one on grass but none on dirt. However, Bruno DeJulio (@DeJulio), on the scene at Churchill Downs for quite a time before the Derby, tweeted regularly that Animal Kingdom was training better than most of the other runners on track and looked the part, while Uncle Mo, the two-year-old champion, was unimpressive. In fact, DeJulio stated several times that Animal Kingdom was handling the surface with aplomb. He was right, and those who followed him on Twitter and had the nerve made money.

It's access and information flow like this that's giving the medium credibility, too.