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Look Who's Tweeting: An interview with ATF CTO, Andy Blumenthal



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As part of our ongoing coverage of how government officials are using new media and Web 2.0 tools, we sat down with Andy Blumenthal, the Chief Technology Officer at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to talk about this crazy new fad called Twitter. An avid Twitterer with 548 followers, Blumenthal is disproving the theory that generational technology gaps exist in the federal fray.

OMG: Is ATF using Twitter?

I am a devoted “Twittee” on my own behalf - I do not represent the ATF. It actually says that on my profile. Maybe you were too busy admiring my photo?

OMG: If you could only twitter the mission of ATF in 130 characters, what would you say?

Stop violent criminals and terrorists to protect our Nation.

OMG: When did you start Twittering?

Wow, it seems like forever that I’ve been using Twitter. Actually it’s only been a short time – around a year or less. But I’m up to 348 updates as of today. It’s interesting to go through them and see what I’ve been thinking during that time.

OMG: What is your Twitter handle?

totalcio, do you like it?

OMG: We do. Sounds like "the total package," but for tech.

What is your favorite alcohol, tobacco, and firearm?

That’s a good one. Actually it’s interesting when you think about firearms in particular – I love that the ATF has an unbelievable wealth of knowledge about firearms in every aspect, and use their knowledge and the laws to combat violent crime. Also, the ATF has an amazing vault with guns of every kind. About 80% of everything the ATF does these days involves law enforcement and regulation of guns and explosives.

OMG: Do you find Twitter useful? In 130 characters or less, tell us why?

Wow, you’re even tougher than Twitter – they allow 140 characters for a Tweet. In any case, here goes: I have a vision of how CIOs and leaders can fully achieve their potential, and Twitter is incredibly

useful in communicating that.

OMG: What made you decide to use Twitter?

I decided to start Tweeting as a natural extension of my blogs. Sometimes you just want to share a short thought or quote rather than go on for several paragraphs.

OMG: What were your favorite and most well-received tweets?

Honestly I love all of them. But one of my recent favorites is a Tweet from March 4th, “We need structure, not chaos; innovation, not bureaucracy, a grand vision for recovery.” It’s all about vision, which I am very passionate about. I hope that it was well-received; I didn’t do a survey, unfortunately.

OMG: Do your Tweets engage with the audience? Is dialogue encouraged?

They’re about provoking the audience into thinking. So yes, I do hope they provoke dialogue, although that would probably take place between the audience and other people they speak with. I’m not expecting them to contact me, although it’s nice when they do.

OMG: How do you decide what to Twitter about?

I take my inspiration from everywhere, but especially from the lessons one can learn from ordinary daily life as well as leadership books, magazines and newspapers, popular culture, and even spy novels. I am very definitive about not using Twitter as a platform for the ATF – I do not represent the agency at all.

OMG: Does the ATF approve of your Tweets?

I use my own judgment. Fortunately I have a great boss who trusts me.

OMG: Can any ATF employee Twitter or are there restrictions?

I think I should point out here again that ATF does not use Twitter. Also, employees do not have access while on the job. I would assume that like me, what they do on their own time and in a personal capacity is up to them, as long as they don’t try to represent the agency.

OMG: Who do you follow on Twitter?

A range of news sources, as well as government agencies and so on. I enjoy keeping up with what’s going on.

OMG: Do you follow Bureapat, our LTC and SES turned advice columnist?

If I say no, will you refuse to publish this interview? Also what is a Bureapat?

OMG: Dear Bureapat if the federal Dear Abbie. Bureapat solves problems and listens to complaints -- there is no shortage of either among federal workers.

Well, maybe I’ll check it out.

OMG: Do you look to other agencies to see how they are using Twitter? If so, which ones?

I try not to. My Tweets are really my own.

OMG: What other Web 2.0 tools is ATF using?

The Office of Science and Technology has teamed up with the Office of Public and Government Affairs to build a cutting-edge portal that will incorporate a range of Web 2.0 tools. It's going to start off internal and possibly grow into an external communication tool. We haven't decided yet whether we're actually going to let people Tweet. That may be a next-phase thing, depending on how it aligns with our mission. (We're not a bunch of private-sector Yammerers around here ☺)

OMG: Tell us about your blog, [The Total CIO](#). What did you expect when you started the blog? Has it lived up to those expectations?

In a way, it's a fuller-length version of my Tweets. As I say in my mission statement, it promotes a vision of IT leadership that is customer-centric, best practice-driven, and above all focused on mission excellence. I really mean that. And I am happy with every single one I write. I only wish I had more time to devote to it.

By the way, I also have a second blog called User-centric Enterprise Architecture. I actually didn't expect that one to be as popular as it is.

I think both blogs really speak to an interest in the IT community to go beyond the purely technical and tactical and think both more strategically and from the bigger picture.

OMG: Where do you see new technologies like Twitter and blogging taking the government, especially under the current administration which seems more technocentric?

In all seriousness, I am really encouraged at the direction that the Administration is taking in terms of promoting social media and citizen participation with the government. I am hoping to see the adoption of uniform technological, legal, communication, and other standards that will enable a much closer dialogue between the government and the taxpayer. The more two-way dialogue we have, the better.

OMG: Thanks Andy. See ya in cyber space.

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