

The tweet life:

Using social media to make your life better

Written by

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Feel as if you're the last person to get with the world of social media? Afraid it's just not for you? Or simply given up on keeping up?

We're here to help.

Social media is all about interacting with other people via the Internet. You can do it on your laptop, but the real explosion is in the applications, or "apps," for smartphone — cellphones with Internet access — and other mobile devices. You know, as in "there's an app for that." Some come already loaded on your device. But most you download free or for a nominal fee from Apple's iTunes store, Android Market or website.

The ever-popular **Facebook** is arguably the world's most social network. The site gives you the ability to "friend" those around you or across the globe, post messages to your homepage or someone else's and share favorite links and pictures

What next? Chances are pretty good that you already know someone on **Twitter**. It's ubiquitous enough to be whatever you want. If you're into the news, follow media outlets and "retweet" interesting links to your "followers." If you're into finding like-minded people, say, antique collectors, follow groups and then interact with new contacts. Or just use the status bar to say what you think or are doing in 140 characters or less.

Have a few more thoughts you want to express? Start a blog! Everybody seems to have one these days, sharing insights and having a place on the Internet that's all theirs. Anyone can set up a blog on **Tumblr**. Post words, photos, videos, Web links, tunes and more from wherever, whenever. (A warning: It's highly addictive!)

There are quite a few video-sharing sites, from **Vimeo** to **DailyMotion**, but none is as widespread as **YouTube**. It's the place where viral clips take off, movie and TV studios show footage, and regular people can upload their own works and try to be the next YouTube star or show off videos of their puppy. Find other videographers and friends, "like" and "dislike" videos to your heart's content, or simply watch what the rest of the world is doing.

LinkedIn has become an essential social-networking tool for business types. Users can connect with co-workers past and present, recommend others and receive kudos in kind.

Now that you've got the basics down, here are some amazing (and free!) ways to make life easier, more fun and, yes, more social.

SHOP TILL YOU DROP

Deals: One of the most popular social-media offerings? Coupons. **Groupon** and **LivingSocial** are changing the ways we shop. LivingSocial delivers one-day deals to subscribers in their area. A Groupon coupon is available only once enough people sign up for it. With **Whrrl**, join a “society” of people with like-minded interests, share recommendations and win free movie passes, groceries and other deals.

Bargains: This isn't technically social, but this app is so cool we had to mention it. With **Google Shopper**, scan the bar code of an item or simply say the name into your smartphone, and it will send you the best prices in the neighborhood and online.

NOW YOU'RE COOKING

Recipes: The app **Ratio** helps figure out ingredient amounts for everything from sauces and pancakes to doughs and custards. And you can share your favorite recipes on Twitter and Facebook. Food Network's app **In the Kitchen** offers thousands of recipes, builds shopping lists and lets you divvy up cooking duties with friends.

Sell: Ready to turn your dough into dough? Sell your delectables on **Foodzie.com**..

PET LOVERS

Socialize: **Dogster.com** and **Catster.com** provide a place where you can not only share pictures of your pets and meet fellow animal lovers but also get info about breeds, health and food recommendations and where to find vets near you.

Adopt: The app **Petfinder** puts its powerful database of cute creatures in your palm. If you're in search of a new friend, plug in breed, gender, size and other features to find matches in your area, including pictures of adoptable pets.

Pet health: **Petside.com** offers a way to add your puppy or kitten to the site's timeline and receive e-mail about your pet's development.

GET FIT

Diet: With bikini season around the corner, **MyFitnessPal Calorie Counter & Diet Tracker** can help you get ready. It features the calorie, fat and nutrition content of 600,000 foods. Plus, you can find and input exercises, customize goals by age and gender, and connect with others for support.

Workouts: If you're OK with taking your Android smartphone on the trail or the track with you, use the **Cardiotrainer** app as your personal fitness buddy. Whether you're running, bicycling or hiking, it uses a pedometer-guided GPS system to figure out the pace, time, path and calories burned during your workout

Classes: The app **MINDBODY** locates fitness classes in your area by type and times. Soon you'll also be able to book classes and pay for them.

ON THE GO

Commuters: **Waze** is an essential for anybody with a commute. Drivers update traffic conditions in real time, and that crowdsourcing creates the best route available. The info is then fed to your smartphone for voice-guided navigation.

Travelers: If you're headed to a foreign country, the **Google Translate** app can help break down language barriers. Tourists can translate in 57 languages by typing or speaking text, and have the correct phrase said back to you with the correct pronunciation.

Be safe: Avoid texting and e-mailing at the wheel with **DriveSafe.ly**. The app reads your new text messages and e-mail aloud. Even better, an optional auto-responder is there to help if you really need to reply from the road.

At the pump: **GasBuddy** connects you to a community of cheap-fuel-finding people to find the lowest prices nearby.

SOCIALIZE

Dating: It doesn't get much more "social" than the online dating site **Match.com**. Use its smartphone app to check out possible mates, send messages and flirt on the move. **Skout** hooks into your phone's GPS and finds singles in your area. **Date Smart** lets you match interests and hobbies to create — you hope — the perfect date.

Video: Make video phone calls with **Tango** on several devices from Androids to the new iPad.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Share hot tips. **Tip'd** plugs you into a financial-thinking community where you can learn the latest business news and stock tips, then add your own.

Organize: We all could probably be better with our finances, and **Mint.com** puts all your accounts and bills in one place. Sign up for an account, and then get the app for your iPhone so you can track investments, confirm deposits and other transactions go through, and adjust your budget when you're out and about. That way, you can see if you can afford those fabulous shoes you're trying on.

Track your taxes: No one is happy with the IRS at tax time, but you may like the smartphone app **IRS2Go**. Discover tips before paperwork is due, check on the status of your refund and receive up-to-date info via IRS Twitter feeds.

EATING OUT

Places: The **Urbanspoon** app for iPhone and iPad uses your GPS location to tell you what eateries

are nearby and you can filter by cuisine, area and price. Feeling adventurous? Shake your device to utilize a “slot machine” that gives you a random eatery in the area.

Reservations: So now you have an option or two for where to eat. Use the **OpenTable** app to make your reservation and check out the menus. Search your intended restaurants’ availability. If they’re all packed, use the app to find other places in the neighborhood that have seating when you’re ready to eat.

Reviews: You’ve eaten, and it’s all good — or all bad. Now’s the time to log in to **Yelp**, via app or its website, to give everyone else the skinny on how it was. You can browse and see what others have said about local bars, eateries, clubs and other businesses in the area, as well as quick tips you can use on your next outing.

ENTERTAIN US!

Be a critic: **Goodreads** lets book lovers share their reviews and form book clubs, take quizzes and create virtual “bookshelves” of what you’ve read, are reading and want to read.

Check in: Tell the world what you’re watching, reading and playing with **GetGlue**, either via app or its website. You can like and dislike even celebrities at will, all while racking up special stickers for “checking in” to certain featured items. (Like actual stickers you can put on stuff? You can request up to 20 physical versions of the ones you’ve earned to be mailed to you.)

Music: Ever hear a great song on the radio but not who the heck it was? Point your smartphone or tablet at the music source and **Shazam** finds it. Then download it on Apple’s iTunes and send to a friend.

Video: A **Netflix** membership lets you rent DVDs or stream on your computer through the Internet and a gaming console. But the Netflix apps let you stream on the go straight to your mobile device or tablet. (You might not want to watch *Speed* on your bus commute, however.)

SHARING

Photos: Who needs a bulky photo album that you have to store somewhere in your house? Create an account on **Flicker** and share all your favorite photos online. And with **Instagram**, add your own artistic slant to your pics, then send to others and comment on theirs.

Scrapbooking: **Flipboard**, Apple’s iPad App of the Year, creates a digital magazine you can share with anyone.

JUST FOR FUN

Discover: Those looking for entertaining and helpful web links will want to stumble upon **Stumbleupon**. Visit the site or add it to your browser, and get to stumbling. Links will pop up that you can like or dislike, helping the site to direct you to the pages you'll be most interested in. (Fans of the site who tweet will want to look into **Tumbl.in**, a version of Stumbleupon for Twitter links.)

Play: More than 62 million people can't be wrong, can they? That's how many users play **FarmVille**, the mega-popular farming game that started as a Facebook application and is now on iPhones and iPad. Grow crops, help fellow farming friends by sending them stuff, and pepper your fields with a bunch of barnyard animals and other characters.

Test your smarts: If you can think you're smart enough to go one on one with that Jeopardy! Supercomputer Watson, then give **Qrank** a spin on your iPhone or iPad, or on Facebook. The game — one of G4's five favorite of 2010 — gives you 15 topical multiple-choice questions to answer and win points daily, and then see how you did against your friends, the rest of the country and even the world.