Chief executives spread their wings as fledgling tweeters

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When AirAsia flight QZ8501 disappeared on a trip from Surabaya to Singapore last month, the company’s chief executive, Tony Fernandes, took to Twitter to express his sorrow, post updates and rally his demoralised staff.

"I as your group CEO will be there through these hard times. We will go through this terrible ordeal together," Mr Fernandes tweeted. "Keeping positive and staying strong. My heart bleeds for all the relatives of my crew and our passengers (sic). Nothing is more important to us." Mr Fernandes’s tweets, complete with typos, came across as authentic and heartfelt, and won him praise in an otherwise bleak situation.

"It showed how powerful this medium can be when a CEO is dealing with a crisis," says Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief reputation strategist at PR firm Weber Shandwick. "It is a way of having a deeper, closer relationship with employees and customers."

Relatively few chief executives — especially at large companies — have joined Twitter. Only 14 per cent of the chief executives of the world’s largest listed companies are using the social media platform as a way to communicate.

Socialbro, a company that helps companies market themselves on Twitter, looked at the 223 companies listed on the FTSE 100, Nasdaq 100 and Dow Jones 30, and found that while more than 94 per cent had a corporate Twitter account, only 31 had chief executives who tweeted. Of these, only 20 were actively using the social media site.

"The low numbers really surprised me," said Linda Bolg, head of marketing at Socialbro. "I would personally always advise being on Twitter as it can raise the company profile and give a CEO the opportunity to set the record straight if needed."

Some business leaders may fear that Twitter turns out to be a passing fad or superseded by some other social media platform, although with 284m people now using it each month, such concerns are becoming harder to justify.
AirAsia Indonesia regrets to confirm that QZ8501 from Surabaya to Singapore has lost contact at 07:24hrs this morning

Ms Gaines-Ross says many chief executives are worried they will make a mistake, accidentally leak something about the company, or say something that provokes a backlash.

It is not an unreasonable fear. A number of people have lost their jobs because of ill-judged words on Twitter. Last November a Labour MP in the UK was sacked for a tweet that some thought sneered at working class people. Bluntly-worded tweets by leaders such as Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trump regularly provoke angry outcry.

But the power of being able to communicate instantly with potentially thousands of people has persuaded some to overcome their concerns.

"If I am honest, I was terrified at first. I set up the account but I didn’t do anything with it at first. I just sat there," says Jacqueline Gold, chief executives of Ann Summers, the lingerie chain, who is now known for her active presence. "Then I saw that, even though I wasn’t saying anything people were still starting to follow me, and I realised that they wanted to hear what I had to say."

Indeed, the appetite for Twitter messages from leaders is immense. Warren Buffett has only ever sent five tweets on Twitter — the last of them nearly a year ago — but still has more than 936,000 followers.

Now Ms Gold uses Twitter not only to talk to customers about the business but runs a competition every Wednesday to highlight up-and-coming female entrepreneurs. "I am passionate about empowering women in the boardroom and Twitter allows me to mentor women, albeit with only 140 characters, that I would normally not have been able to reach," she says.

A 2012 survey by Brandfog, a company that helps CEOs manage online reputations, found that people were much more likely to trust a brand if the CEO actively engaged on social media.

A Twitter presence can also be a useful recruitment tool, particularly when hiring younger members of staff.

"When young millennials are looking for jobs they will look at the company and the CEO on social media to see what they are like," says Ms Gaines-Ross. Companies and executives with a social media presence will seem more forward thinking. Nafisa Nathani, a communications consultant and self-described "millennial", puts it succinctly in an interview conducted over Twitter:

"No #millennial wants to work for a faceless corporation. CEOs are face to company. Social media helps to connect."

Will Critchlow, chief executive of Distilled, an online marketing agency, actively uses Twitter. "I’ve made client relationships, hired people I got to know here, and more," he says, adding that such connections can turn into sales.

The prospect of facing complaints directly from customers on Twitter may seem daunting. But they will be airing complaints on Twitter in any case and it is better to be there to hear and acknowledge them, says Ms Gold.

"If someone is really aggressive or a prolific complainer I would just ignore it, like you would a heavy breather phone call. But if it is a genuine complaint I will face it head on. It is really important to show customers that the CEO cares," she says.

For a guide on CEO tweeting it is worth looking at the accounts of Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, and Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla Motors, two of
the most popular CEOs on Twitter. Mr Musk has the most followers — more than 1.51m — but Mr Cook gets more engagement, with more followers retweeting or marking his messages as favourites.

“Tim Cook tends to share inspirational and behind the scenes content from Apple, while Elon Musk is slightly different — more hip, young and trendy, with a very human tone of voice,” says Ms Bolg.

Mr Musk’s recent tweet following a failed rocket flight displayed his wry style: “Next rocket landing on drone ship in 2 to 3 weeks w way more hydraulic fluid. At least it shd explode for a diff reason.”

Many tweeting CEOs sprinkle in liberal references to their favourite sports teams — Mr Cook tweets about the Auburn college football team that he passionately supports, Mr Fernandes’s feed is littered with pictures of Queens Park Rangers, the football club he owns, and Ms Gold publishes opinionated tweets about Celebrity Big Brother.

For those who are not ready to share this much, tweeting about company events and interesting articles is a safe place to start, says Ms Gaines-Ross. If executives are concerned about compliance issues she suggests getting a the company lawyer to check over the tweets in the first few weeks “until you get the hang of it”.

Tweeting too much about your own company and products is a no-no.

“If you are only talking about your own products or retweeting PR headlines, your Twitter followers will tune out,” says Ms Bolg. It is also advisable, if possible, to write your own tweets.

“I think you can tell if tweets are ghostwritten,” says Ms Gold. “It has to be in your own voice or customers will disengage.”

It is not an issue that CEOs can ignore, says Ms Gaines-Ross. Gradually, she says, it is becoming a common practice. “It is from a low base, but it is not going away, it is growing,” she says. “By 2020 it is going to be ubiquitous.”

Further reading: Economical Icahn

“Some people get rich studying artificial intelligence. Me, I make money studying natural stupidity.” Thus runs the Twitter bio for investor Carl Icahn, who has proved himself a deft user of the medium, writes Adam Jones.

Using the handle @Carl_C_Icahn, the activist has 203,000 followers, in spite of only tweeting 185 times. Many of his 140-character interventions are carefully weighed to support his investor campaigns. One such tweet in 2013 disclosed that he held a position in Apple and had been talking to CEO Tim Cook. It had more than 2,000 retweets.