

# Social twits share the power of social at Chat Factory

 By Leigh Andrews

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Ever wondered what it takes to get social media and online presence right, as a business? Wonder no more, as Jodene Shaer, Chat Factory's 'social twit', shares a few industry secrets...

It took a while but the cliché of hard work and passion paid off, says Jodene Shaer, 'the social twit' at Chat Factory (yes, that's her official job title. Others in the company are called CreaTwit and Legit Twit Assist, so her title's not too bad.)



But life's not all about working behind a desk - especially when you work in the realm of social media. In fact, Shaer is a teacher at heart with a passion for demonstrating what a life of courage, consciousness and a sense of humour looks like through her [#ProjectMe blog](#) - it started as a daily life update in 2010 and has been kept active due to 'reader demand' - so clearly she's got a knack for this social thing. Here, Shaer chats to me

about what it's taken to get Chat Factory up and running and her hopes for the future of social business in SA...

## ■ **Let's start with the basics - Where does the name Chat Factory come from?**

**Shaer:** I've had great joy in naming a few businesses in the past, but I'm most proud of Chat Factory because I wanted to focus on the core of the business, which is the social of media. It's been an amazing process to take all I have learned from my personal experience of growing my brand online and turn that into a service offering. In fact, it took less than 48 hours for my business partner and myself to decide that it was time to start a dedicated online business and for the name, slogan and vision to be born. 'Chat' shows the down to earth philosophy that we believe should be an online voice. This makes us approachable to communicate with for your online needs, while the 'Factory' part of the name highlights all the cogs and mechanics it takes to build a successful brand online.

Everyone in my team has a 'Twit' title, starting with me as Social Twit. We each choose the 'Twit' title ourselves, from our roles and responsibilities. You can see I'm having fun, right?

## ■ **Right, we sure can! Next, tell us what exactly Chat Factory does and why it started**

**Shaer:** Well, I've co-owned a 'people development' business for over five years and through sharing my personal blog and our Lifeology teachings online, my popularity grew to a point where brands were asking for my assistance. I quickly turned my attention to what had worked for me, focusing on conversation and community, and I began offering social media publicity, strategy and eventually, account management.

After trying to figure out the most creative ways to make the social division of the business fit into change management, one day while sitting in the corner of an entrepreneurial event, surrounded by passionate young minds, my business partner and myself decided that it was time for the social online services to be a company on its own.

The focus is very strongly on community, engagement, online reputation and visibility. My passion lies in developing a brand strategy by creating an online persona. That's why my first service offering was social media publicity, where I co-ordinate the online strategy for events from socialising it to developing the hashtag, ensuring the visibility of the event online and getting the best social influencers, bloggers, tweeters and socially savvy celebs to the events.

## ■ **Sounds very involved. What's the basic work flow like - describe a typical day, if such a thing exists.**

**Shaer:** I'm so glad you said, "if it exists".

I've just done a few personality tests for the first time and I sighed in relief at discovering that organised chaos actually works. I have two mobile phones, which I have to force myself to avoid until I have had morning coffee and cuddled with my cats. Then it's about checking through all the client accounts to see if anything happened while we were sleeping, although I have an incredible CreaTwit, who manages the accounts and handles the engagement aspect.

I have worked passionately at creating my own personal online presence, so my focus then turns to my own accounts before the mayhem of the day begins. I receive all correspondence between my team and clients, culminating in at least 100 emails a day. I keep on top of those while dashing between meetings and clients and responding to the constant flow of online engagement I receive personally.

I always have a to-do list, but I don't get to look at it until about 6pm, when I get to miraculously cross off all the tasks I managed to get done as I made my way through the more immediate demands of the day. Through my personal hashtag [#ProjectMe](#), I share my life with the world and have at least one event I've been invited to or am working at, so I pretty much hold a phone for most of the day. I try to squeeze in a blog post a few times a week and, amazingly, I also make time for my incredibly supportive friends and family and my love for food and wine.



Jodene's fun profile photo, from [Chat Factory](#)

### ■ ***Great way to unwind. Broadly speaking what are the biggest challenges and highlights of working in this industry?***

**Shaer:** Let's start with one of the main challenges, which rolls off my tongue because it's a daily battle: Chat Factory is socially driven and less content focused, which freaks businesses out initially. Although we will always generate content that sells the offerings of the brand, I fight every day to keep the focus on the brand's engagement and the online persona. This means my team and I sit for hours and scrutinise the engagement that each post receives, proving to the brand that the generic, true reach is golden and that the numbers game of most likes, at any cost, or thousands of followers, is far less important than genuinely reaching a handful of individuals who are engaging with the brand. That's not to say that we don't have dedicated budgets for visibility across the networks, though.

Luckily, my highlights happen daily too, when our clients state: "It's your call, you are the expert". Chat Factory may be less than four months old, but it's five years in the making and it is thrilling to watch my personal formula for online success work for businesses and individuals.

### ■ ***Let's get into what that really means. Tell us more about the importance of building community and conversation as a business...***

**Shaer:** There's nothing more disheartening or frustrating than connecting with a business online, either because you're passionate about the brand or you're reaching out for support, and you are not engaged with in return. I was online in early 2009, when it was mostly international brands that I was watching, and they were following back, communicating with their customers and thanking them for the engagement. One of my favourites, in the early days, was [Pepsi](#), which literally had a number of down-to-earth community managers, who were chatting to the public at any time.

This business mindset makes perfect sense, however, it hasn't rung true yet in the South African space. It's been my focus to get businesses to understand that it's far more important to follow, watch, listen, respond and engage than it is to post any kind of marketing material. I have been very fortunate to have a handful of brands actually take the risk and follow my strategy, with results that have given them the confidence to eventually allow me to be the sole decision maker for their content, online persona and online strategy. In my personal capacity I have never **not** responded to a tweet, direct message or Facebook comment and, under my watch, neither have any of the online accounts I manage.

### ■ ***That begs the next question, on whether the state of the local online social compares internationally...***

**Shaer:** Yes, I have tried very hard to understand the psyche of South Africa online, because there isn't an open and engaging policy in comparison to international brands. In my talks and workshops, I ask if businesses only answer a certain number of phone calls a day or if they have a sign on their door that says no more than 20 people are allowed in at one time. They all look astounded, yet a large amount South African brands are simply not following their customers back and responding to their online engagement, which is as important as responding to that phone call.

What we still have to understand about the online space is that the customer determines what platform a brand should be on, and what their focus needs to be online. So if your customer is using Twitter instead of customer services or Facebook to find out about your service offering, best you be there and respond to their needs. Many businesses spend hours on content and ways to generate likes or make sales from a tweet, while an individual is waiting for someone to notice that they tweeted for assistance hours or, worse, days ago.

I have seen more local brands take cognisance of the importance of listening and being available to the customer, and I see more business engaging, which is very positive. I do, however, think there is a long way to go in shifting the mind-set from the focus on content to dedicated monitoring and engagement with the public.

Then, there's the drive for SA to understand the power of the hashtag. Internationally it's filtered into the entire marketing strategy and there is the understanding that it needs to be unique, for search ability and brand awareness, which is lagging if you look at the hashtags that local businesses are choosing. Through my hashtag #FollowSA, which exists to connect South Africans online so they can network offline and has been used daily for nearly four years, I've truly seen the potential to use it as a tool for growing community and conversation.

### ■ ***Let's go deeper on the biggest challenges and highlights of working in this industry***



Jodene's more professional profile shot

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My highlights happen daily too, when our client's response is, "it's your call, you're the expert". Chat Factory may be less than four months old, but it's five years in the making and it is thrilling to watch my personal formula for online success work for businesses and individuals.

### ■ ***So you're seeing the fruits of your labour. What's next for Chat Factory?***

**Shaer:** It's all happening so fast. We're going to keep doing what we do best, with a focus on finding more clients who trust the Chat Factory formula of community and conversation. Although the modern world of working remotely is fantastic, we are heading towards needing funky office space where we can brainstorm and write on the walls. I would love to create an intern program, giving young, enthusiastic individuals the opportunity to grasp the importance of online engagement and then send them out into the world to use the social platforms with the true essence of what they were created for.

Offering social media publicity and socialising an event online will always be thrilling for me, so I hope to see more businesses see this as a standalone service, where Chat Factory teams up with the PR and eventing to create a successful event for the client, online and off.

### ■ ***Is your personal blog involved at all? I've been following it for years!***

**Shaer:** Thank you, that excites me. It's a fascinating story to tell because my Project Me blog is my personal story about finding my purpose and turning dreams to reality, and Chat Factory is one of those dreams. Being determined to make a living by hanging out on Facebook and Twitter all day, when everyone around me thought that I was wasting time and not the smartest decision-maker is directly linked to my personal blog. My ideal vision is to grow Chat Factory into an internationally successful online social agency and share that success story with others. I'm also developing an eight-week online course and writing a book to assist others in living their #ProjectMe story.

### ■ ***Exciting times ahead. Thinking broader, what trends do you see as the biggest to come in 2015?***

**Shaer:** Paid-for content and visibility across platforms is something we have to conceptualise if we are playing in the online space, so I see the focus on working out budgets and new strategies. Social media is no longer free and it's going to take 2015 for this reality to settle in. I am ever hopeful that engagement will become a focus and we will see a trend in spiked online conversation between brands and the public. I firmly believe in the power of the hashtag and I see businesses starting to understand the need for a unique # that has longevity and can be filtered into traditional media and be part of the overall marketing plan.

There are emerging opportunities for less words and more visual in the online space and I see many strategies starting to focus on video. I don't believe it will be the high budget kind, but rather a creative eye and a clever [Vine](#).

To get chatting to Jodene, follow her [on Twitter](#).

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh\_Andrews.

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