

Twitter: Under New Ownership

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Elon Musk, along with a consortium of global investors, has taken ownership of Twitter, removing the company from the public markets and firing several senior executives. Musk has taken day-to-day control of the company, installing himself as interim CEO, and has signaled his intent to move quickly to make radical changes to the current Twitter experience.

While many of these changes have profound implications for the platform, Musk has a shaky track record when it comes to delivering on his plans. Companies should adopt a “wait and see” approach, and delay any immediate action in response to his ownership of Twitter.

What’s likely to change

Musk has signaled his intent to make changes that fall broadly into the following categories:

Account verification becomes pay-to-play

Musk and his associates have long argued that the main problem facing Twitter is the inability to distinguish between “real” accounts and “bot” accounts. Twitter’s existing system of verification (a blue check mark) has been historically limited to high-profile individuals or those with large followings. To date, gaining verified status, even for individuals in the public eye, has been notoriously difficult, opaque and seemingly arbitrary.

It is likely that the company will now move to a system whereby verification is available to everyone for a monthly fee (likely \$8). As well as granting the blue check mark, Musk has signaled that the Twitter algorithm could be amended to show heavy bias toward verified accounts, meaning that content posted from paying customers will have far greater reach. Musk believes this will help reduce the impact of bot and troll accounts on the platform. Of course, it will also make Twitter a true pay-to-play platform, where users who are not verified should expect their reach on the platform to be severely limited.

A public town square

Musk has spoken a great deal about his belief in free speech, and that he sees Twitter as a “town square” where a broad range of views should be acceptable. His perspective has caused a degree of alarm among those who fear that he will either erode or entirely remove Twitter’s approach to content moderation, and re-admit high-profile figures who have been previously banned from the platform such as former President Donald Trump.

Despite Musk’s rhetoric, his actions so far have been more nuanced. His [open letter](#) to Twitter advertisers stated that Twitter cannot become a “free for all hellscape,” and rather than firing Twitter’s trust and safety team, as many had predicted, he has publicly complimented their work.

Furthermore, he has not moved quickly to welcome back President Trump or others to the platform. Instead, Musk has indicated that he will copy Facebook’s approach and create an independent content moderation board to make decisions on suspensions and bans from the platform. No further details have been provided on this board, and it is likely that Musk wants to defer dealing with these issues in the short term, and instead focus on making changes to Twitter’s main product and boosting revenue.

New faces, familiar features

Most of Musk's comments since taking over the platform have focused on expanding Twitter's features and capabilities. Before closing the transaction, Musk said he admired the so-called "Super Apps" like WeChat that include everything from social networks to e-commerce and payments. On Twitter, Musk has [polled users](#) and subsequently directed engineers to evaluate the code to relaunch Vine, a proto-TikTok video platform that Twitter shuttered in 2016.

Greater transparency

Musk has previewed his intent to make the source code behind Twitter's algorithm public. This would be a radical step and would allow anyone to analyze the code and understand how the algorithm selects what content to promote and suppress. Musk has also promised greater transparency over "shadow bans," whereby the reach of a particular Twitter account or trend is limited without disclosing the change or suspending the account. This practice has long been criticized, especially by political groups who believe it is used as a way for Twitter to exercise political bias without the scrutiny that comes from publicly banning a user.

A word of warning

Anyone who has followed Elon Musk's career for the last decade will know two things: First, he is certainly a visionary who is capable of driving organizations to achieve great things and disrupt established markets. Second, he is notorious for grand predictions that either fail to materialize at all or take much longer than he estimates. This will almost certainly be the case with his ownership of Twitter. While some of the changes described above will happen, many will not.

What should companies using Twitter do now?

The short answer is, right now, not much. If Twitter rolls out a pay-to-play verification option, it will make sense for almost all companies to pay to verify their accounts. Companies should also closely monitor for any changes to Twitter's platform that impact ongoing campaigns.

Musk and his associates have made a lot of bold statements about their intent to radically change Twitter in other ways, but at the time of writing, nothing has actually changed. There is a danger of companies looking foolish if they go out on a limb to join protests against actions Musk has not yet taken, especially if doing so can be interpreted as taking a political stance. It is important to bear in mind that organizations who are rallying consumers in response to Musk's ownership of Twitter are almost certainly political actors with an agenda. Once companies have aligned themselves with these organizations, it will be difficult to disassociate from them in the future.

As ever with Musk, anything could happen. Brunswick Digital will continue to monitor the situation as it develops.

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