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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > The care and feeding of your online image

The care and feeding of your online image

Posted on April 12th, 2014 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



In 30-plus years as a public relations executive I've promoted what is currently called "reputation management." This involves measuring and monitoring the reputation of a business, brand or individual, encompassing both online review and response to content. In many cases it also includes soliciting customers for testimonials and responding to customer problems or complaints.

I recall when clipping services were the only PR monitoring game in town. You hired a service to "clip" editorial content that met your keyword specifications. Once a month, a packet arrived in the mail and the PR team sorted the clips to review them and measure return on investment. It was costly, time-consuming and cumbersome. By the time the clips arrived it was too late to respond, and an unresolved issue could chum into a full-blown firestorm.

Today, PR professionals enjoy the blessing and curse of working in real time. Instant inbox alerts have replaced clip packs, compliments of Google and other reputation management monitoring programs. The blessing? You know as it happens when news affecting your business or brand hits cyberspace. The curse? You'd better be prepared to respond immediately.

There are some murky reputation management practices. Some marketers write and post their own glowing content under fictitious names. A better tactic is simply to ask your happy customers to write a Google or Yelp review — ideally after a positive delivery or service call.

Some try to game the system and favorably skew results. An example: A company provides freebies on a new-product launch in exchange for guaranteed positive testimonials.

"Astroturf marketing" is another ploy. It positions "meat or sock puppets" (fictional people) within a targeted demographic. They lurk around online watering holes, such as blogs, chat rooms, forums, social media sites and message boards as regular Joes. They start conversations that are intended to promote a brand or post derogatory content about a competitor. I call them wolves in sheep's clothing.

Case in point: I was monitoring a client's Google reviews and stumbled on a suspicious post. The wolf was alleging wildly inaccurate pricing info and contrived service performance problems. A search of my client's service department database and work history revealed no such customer's name or problem. It happens more frequently than you might imagine.

What to do? Respond quickly and correct the pricing gaffe. In a professional manner, note that you are unable to document this particular issue, but would be more than happy to address it immediately if contact information is provided. Someone else reading the review will not be left wondering about the pricing and will appreciate your willingness to address the issue.

And then there are “content farms” that exist solely to pump out and load up as much content as possible to manipulate search engine optimization, or SEO. Google reportedly has been zeroing in on these culprits, slapping penalties on sites and operators that fail to adhere to acceptable fair practices.

Any clue as to how your business, brand or top executives are perceived online? I’d wager that many in our industry don’t know. The easiest way to start is to perform a Google search. Type in your business name, brands and the individual names of your top execs and see what rises. Tag the word “review” at the end of the specific brands to broaden the scope.

You might be surprised — even stunned — by the findings. (I’m providing a list of links here that may help you understand how to address these types of issues.) It’s frightening to see the power that disgruntled customers have as they leverage the Internet to wage war against a business. That’s why, on a daily basis, you must monitor your reputation.

Remember: Whatever a prospective customer finds online will create impressions. Negative content can damage your reputation and result in the loss of major revenue. Positive content, on the other hand, generates consumer confidence, drives retail traffic and delivers bona fide leads.

To illustrate, play prospect for a minute. Search for a specific brand of boat and the nearest dealer. Type in brand and location. What if the first dozen or so Google searches track negative on either the brand or the dealership, or both? What if the first search page is brimming with terrific reviews? Get my drift?

Another consideration: CEOs (and their brand watchdogs) must understand how their reputation directly links to the business and brand reputation. A CEO with a stellar online report card — industry leader, community goodwill ambassador, etc. — can significantly impact the brand for good. Heavy negative baggage has the opposite effect. Tap your marketing tool chest to promote positive CEO content.

If you don’t believe that individual searches under a person’s name yield major consequences, consider Wikipedia’s reference to a 2010 study by Microsoft in cooperation with Cross-Tab Market Research: “Seventy percent of companies have rejected candidates based on the candidate’s online reputation, but only seven percent of Americans believe it affects their job search.”

Whoa! The same synopsis featured data from CareerBuilder.com showing that 25 percent of human resources managers use search engine activities to screen candidates. In my own hiring I always cull social media sites, such as Facebook, to get a behind-the-resume glimpse of top candidates before deciding on an interview. I’m not alone.

The simplest way to monitor a business, brand or personal reputation is to sign up for Google Alerts and develop a set of keywords to monitor. It’s free, and you can choose the reporting frequency. I monitor nearly 100 keywords for a handful of select clients, as well as for myself and my business. You can also hire a reputation management firm for more sophisticated analysis. They often provide access to a detailed 24/7 dashboard that reveals not only the content hits, but also share of voice in the market, review summaries, targeted competitor results, latest social media posts and profiles, possible content errors, untapped opportunities and more.

Today’s PR execs must proficiently navigate this fast-changing cyberworld. No longer is PR confined to

basic brand, product or service through traditional channels. The paradigm has dramatically changed, and although the press release and product launch activities still have a seat at the table, today's requirement is much more expansive.

So how can you manage and improve your reputation and brand management activities?

1. Establish a reputation management program. Someone must passionately own, manage and monitor this critical function. If you don't have a knowledgeable PR pro on staff, hire a digital PR expert or reputation management firm. Hire only proven providers with experience in this discipline. Have them demonstrate the type of analysis they will provide and the results they have delivered. Always check references.
2. Have a proactive defensive strategy. Consider how you will respond to negative online allegations before they happen. Whether it's a legitimate or false allegation, establish basic parameters, protocols and procedures. Although specific messaging will be customized to fit the situation, knowing who is on point, what team needs to be involved and defining the process in advance will maximize your efficiency and minimize response time.
3. Have a digital PR/communications strategy and plan in place. To build and reinforce a positive reputation and to control as much of the search engine results page, or SERP, as possible, you must regularly distribute relevant brand content. This can range from press releases to regularly updated company blogs, white papers, YouTube videos, social media posts, photographs and more, each sourced and linked to the business whenever possible. Post frequently to respected websites and social media platforms.
4. More mobile. In the past year, use of mobile marketing has skyrocketed, thanks to the dominance of smartphones. With more people searching from their phones, it's a must to deploy mobile-friendly content.
5. Get creative. I'm reminded of Ellen DeGeneres' wildly successful "selfie," or self-photograph, at the Oscars. As the cameras rolled, Ellen cozied up with megastars as millions watched. It stole the show and became the buzz of the entire night. Her image eclipsed the retweet record held by President Obama to more than 3 million at last count.

Although I'm not suggesting that marine industry selfies will set the world atwitter, I do encourage you to strategically seize every opportunity to generate positive buzz for your business. Highlight special events and community service projects, celebrate team and individual achievements, shoot photos or videos of your execs at speaking gigs or when making charitable donations — just leverage all of the good things you're already doing!

Perhaps Warren Buffett summarized it best: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

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This article originally appeared in the April 2014 issue.