

Chapter 1

Understanding Online Reputation Management

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When Facebook requested permission to get its initial public offering, the company didn't put electronics or shoes as its product. It listed information about our personalized preferences as a commodity to sell to advertisers. Google uses the topics people search on to target demographics and sell advertising.

These days your identity is more than just your personality or your vital statistics. It's a valuable commodity. It can be bought and sold, damaged, tarnished, or even hijacked. It's good advice to post nothing online that you don't want your grandma to read, but make one little mistake and all the privacy settings in the world won't do you any good.

That's why people all over the world are talking about online reputation management and, in particular, online privacy. Technology is moving far faster than legislation, however. The United States has taken the least amount of action in getting social networks to limit the amount of information they get from you and how long they store it.

In this book, I share important ways for you to protect your privacy as well as craft a strategy that promotes and protects both your personal and private brand names online.

Throughout this book, I share war stories, anecdotes, and tips for keeping your name safe and well respected, as long as you don't publish those ferret juggling pictures from last year's New Year's Eve party.

What Is Online Reputation Management?

Online reputation management is the process of ensuring that the right information appears when people look you (or the name of your brand) up in search engines like Google, Bing, or Yahoo!, or on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. The idea is to minimize negative content and to promote flattering content.

To achieve this goal, you must monitor search engines and social network and do what you can to mitigate negative comments. When you find negative content, you decrease its visibility by creating enough positive content so that the negative content appears to go away. Or sometimes you can get the relevant webmaster to remove offensive content.

But the best way to eliminate negative content is to make sure it never appears in the first place. In fact, in this book I present a system of online reputation management that focuses on building a positive and proactive fan base before a crisis ever happens.

Effective online reputation management means getting involved with social networks, monitoring those networks closely (rather than just depending on automated monitoring systems like Google Alerts), and responding as quickly as possible in the event of great breaking news or a crisis.

Being proactive

Once upon a time online, before social media networks became mainstream, brands could address negative comments by tracking links and performing damage control. Today, if a crisis isn't handled correctly, a brand's image can be brought down in a matter of hours, (yes, hours!) and take months, if not years to recover.

These days, people do most of their socializing (and talking about brands) on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, and Tumblr, to name a few. Your best bet is to be positive and proactive. Start by:

- ✓ Claiming your brand on these networks
- ✓ Posting quality information and/or entertaining content periodically
- ✓ Monitoring networks
- ✓ Responding warmly to visitors



Social media strategy is this simple on a day-to-day basis. Having a crisis strategy and team in place makes dealing with any issue that may arise ten times easier.

Don't limit yourself to Google Alerts!

Google Alerts is a way to stay informed whenever your name, brand name, or some key terms you specify are discovered via search engines online. (I show you how to set them up in Chapter 5, as well as teach you a few tricks for using Google Alerts more efficiently.) Most

people think that Google Alerts covers every mention of your name online, including mentions on social networks. Not so! However, you can use monitoring tools to catch every mention. I show you how to do this in Chapter 5, too.

In this book, I show you how to pay attention to what people are saying about you online so you can address *why* they're saying it, rather than simply covering it up with positive information.



Maintaining a strong and healthy reputation online makes you more resilient to viral attacks (pun intended).

As new media evolves, the strongest brands will be those that listen closely to what people are saying and who respond quickly with messages that show they are listening and that they understand. Such a response can go a long way. Validating the commenter's point of view can even build a lasting, durable relationship.



People expect to be heard and understood online more than ever. Smart brands recognize this growing trend and make room for it in their approaches to online reputation management.

Transparency is for brands, not people

Before the dawn of the Information Age, companies used to be able to shield themselves from scrutiny via receptionists and PR departments. No longer! The public today expects organizations to be as transparent as possible in all their dealings, especially financial.

This doesn't apply to everyone, however. The public expects transparent communication online — but only for brands. This may sound strange, but it's true. The public demands openness from brands, but still respects the privacy of the individual.

Individuals, then — even entrepreneurs or celebrities who may consider themselves to be a brand — don't have to be transparent. In fact, for individuals, being transparent is a bad idea. Don't confuse "authenticity" with being transparent. Keep your common sense online.

I suggest you identify three areas you're willing to be open about online; the rest can be just for you and your close friends. Limiting your public identity in this way is less confusing for people trying to understand your message. And besides, a little mystique can be very appealing!

Dealing with negativity

Ideally, anyone searching online for you will see warm, glowing comments about you and fascinating articles that demonstrate your expertise. Often, however, this is not the case. Occasionally problems can arise that cloud how your name looks online. Here are some real-life examples, in escalating order:

✔ **Remarks from disgruntled friends or business associates.** It's a fact. You can't please everybody all the time and you'll go crazy trying to. Some people just aren't going to be happy no matter what anybody does to try and make it better. Some of them may voice out online.

✔ **Leaked personal information.** I interviewed a schoolteacher who was fired when a picture of her holding up a wine glass appeared on the Internet. It didn't matter that she only held the wine glass for a toast at a dignified, off-hours gathering of adults. Even though she wasn't drinking at school or advocating that her little kiddies in the classroom partake, school officials fired her immediately.

Also, I interviewed a woman who got fired when the law firm she worked for discovered the photograph of her tattoo she'd posted on her "completely private" Facebook profile. It wasn't even a racy tattoo, by the way!

✔ **Group dynamics gone sour.** On message boards and social networks, groups can gang up on you. A close friend built a successful web forum but was kicked off when a jealous outsider succeeded in turning the group against her. The outsider hijacked the creator's own forum and kicked her out.

✔ **Embarrassing viral videos.** When someone gets the bright idea to upload an embarrassing video, it can make even his employer look bad. If such a video also divulges unflattering corporate secrets, it can inspire viral outrage.

✔ **Disaster strikes.** During the BP oil spill crisis, online outrage gushed as hard as the leak did — and for much longer. You can bet BP has a solid online reputation management policy in place now, but things would have been much better if the company had been prepared for such a crisis ahead of time.

Beware of Yelp!

Many people believe that they can minimize negative comments by writing positive comments and reviews that look like real customers posting to online forums or review sites like

Yelp. It isn't quite that easy. Most sites are well aware of fake user comments and use screening measures to keep their sites relevant and reliable.

Monitoring with Aggregators

If you're responsible for managing your own reputation, as well as that of a brand online, social aggregators will save you a surprising amount of time and energy.

What are aggregators? Glad you asked! In simple terms, aggregators monitor and measure social media.

The thing to remember is that aggregators make your life more convenient by collecting your social network activity information all in one place so that you can monitor all your major networks easily.

Here are the commonly monitored social media channels:

- ✓ Facebook profile
- ✓ Facebook brand page(s)
- ✓ Twitter
- ✓ LinkedIn

An API (application programming interface) application integrates your primary social network accounts for you. For the API to be able to access a user's actions from another platform, the user (you) has to give permission to the social aggregation platform, like Facebook, by specifying your user ID and password for the social media to be syndicated. This built-in security keeps someone else — like your competitors — from creating an account with an aggregator and obtaining all your information.

Social network aggregation services allow you to organize or simplify your social networking experience. With them you can finally stop logging on and off from Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn all the time and start managing them all in one place. Most give you the capability to schedule messages across different networks at the same time, although make sure you tailor your message to fit the personality and culture of the network — updates about Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+, for example, tend to be a real bust on Facebook. You want to remain interesting, not become a spammer and clog the newsfeed with irrelevant information.

Figure 1-1 shows my HootSuite account. I show you lots more about setting this popular aggregator up in Chapter 5.



Figure 1-1:
HootSuite
panel.

Using Analytics

Analytics can tell you a lot about the kinds of people who are coming to visit you online and what they do when they get to your site. Analytics applications invisibly track the way visitors respond to the material on your site, including

- ✔ **What site your visitors came from:** This can be very useful information when you're aiming to redirect traffic from a specific location to your site. For example, most of my "referring traffic" comes from Facebook. This means that the work I'm doing there to raise awareness of my site is working.
- ✔ **How long visitors stayed at your site:** This is valuable because short visits may signal that you need to reconsider the appeal of your content.
- ✔ **How many pages they visited:** This also relates to how appealing your content and general message is. The more compelling your message, the longer people tend to linger at your site.

The most popular analytics service in the world is Google Analytics, because it's free, relatively easy to set up, and is supported by fantastic tutorials online. I tell you much more about Google Analytics and how to set it up in Chapter 6.

Although the information Google Analytics provides has an unbeatable price, the responsibility for interpreting that data rests largely on your shoulders. If analyzing information makes you head hurt, you may try a paid analytics service.

Generally, paid analytics services are for large businesses. These services can give you a wealth of understanding into your organization's many online activities, including

- ✓ Your site's web data and audience measurement
- ✓ Your advertising effectiveness
- ✓ Your social media strategy's effectiveness

Even if you're running a small business, paid services are worth a look. Often they provide some general analytics information for free.

Here are some of the more proven online marketing research sites you may consider checking out:

- ✓ ComScore (www.comscore.com)
- ✓ Compete (www.compete.com/us)
- ✓ Hitwise (www.experian.com/hitwise)
- ✓ Forrester Research (www.forrester.com)

Tracking Your Trends via Social Media Measurement Tools

On social media sites, topics “trend” daily, even hourly. On social media sites, people respond quickly to jokes or news items by adding their own voices or interpretation. During a presidential election, for example, polls, political discussions, cartoons, and jokes will trend almost constantly. *Trending* means that a topic has become — for at least a little while — extremely popular online. When a topic trends it

- ✓ Ranks more highly on Google
- ✓ Becomes a hot search term on Facebook
- ✓ Gets retweeted much more often

All of this means that if you can align your organization with a trending topic, you can get more attention than usual.

It's always a great idea to be current with what's going around online. Keep your eyes open for when you can associate your brand with a currently trending topic, especially when that topic is central to your business. This approach can help you to spread the word about your brand to more audiences online. Even if you're in a very conservative business, this can still work, given the right situation.

Here are some of my favorite hunting grounds — er, places where you can look for “trendspiration” — though there are too many to list here:

- ✔ **Google Trends:** You can look up multiple search items at once, which holds interesting search possibilities, such as “your brand, hot trend” to see what emerges if your brand is linked with that particular hot trend. It also offers Google Insights for Search. You can find Google Trends at www.google.com/trends.
- ✔ **What the Trend:** Helps you find out what's trending on Twitter and why. It's a busy interface, with hot topics from around the world. I like how you can just click on a country to see what's trending there right now. Check out What the Trend at www.whatthetrend.com.
- ✔ **Topsy:** Clean interface, real-time search available at www.topsy.com, where you can look up
 - Everything
 - Links
 - Tweets
 - Photos
 - Videos
 - Experts
 - Trending
- ✔ **Trendistic:** Fun graphics for visualizing how many times the term you enter has been used on Twitter recently. For experimental purposes, I tweeted “femmepreneur” a few times over the past few days and then checked “femmepreneur” on Trendistic. It found all the instances I generated. You can play with this tool at www.twittereye.com/content/trendistic-0.

Taking Advantage of Memes

A *meme* (rhymes with “theme”) is a specific kind of trending topic. It’s a catchy jingle, slogan, icon, or ad tagline that spreads from person to person within a culture. As with trending topics, relevant memes are also brilliant choices for when you have Madison Avenue eyes but a thrift-store marketing budget.

Some different memes:

- ✔ Sometimes the most unexpected videos, such as the “Honey Badger” voice-over video, can become memes. That video spawned jokes, cartoons, and even a line of t-shirts saying “Honey badger don’t care.” For whatever reason, the video just hit a popular nerve. (You can check out this video, and its somewhat salty narration, at www.youtube.com/user/czg123#g/u.)
- ✔ Advertising slogans can morph into memes. People sometimes turn corporate ads into “culture jams” that use the ad to mock the brand’s own controversial practices. In 2010, for instance, when Greenpeace activists wanted to criticize Nestle’s environmental practices, they uploaded fake ads and videos modeled on Nestle’s own advertisements.
- ✔ Sometimes odd or goofy behavior can itself become an online meme, such as the 2011’s strange online craze for “planking” — that is, taking photographs of oneself lying down in unusual locations. “Catbreeding” is another such meme, in which people take photos of cats (or other creatures) wearing headbands made of bread. Who thinks up this stuff?

You can use a trending meme to your advantage if you can figure out how to tie it in with you or your organization. For example, if your organization sells organic tuna cat treats, you may be able to work one of your cat treats into a “catbreeding” photograph instead of a slice of bread.

Memes are an extremely viral way to market a brand or idea, but they can also spread negative information about that brand or idea just as quickly. In Chapters 14 and 15 I give you specifics on dealing with developing and full-blown crises. However, if you’re in an industry that doesn’t ruffle a lot of feathers, and if you deal with emerging problems quickly and transparently, you will most likely never have to handle this kind of issue.



Before you go wild connecting with the next hot meme, please keep in mind that once you release one out into the wild (upload it online) you can’t take it back or control what else people will do with it. Handle memes wisely!

Qualifying Different Approaches

Although the same approach to online reputation management can be scaled for any size brand, you need to decide and define how you want to organize your online reputation management time and energy. Here are some common ways that companies organize their own systems.

- ✔ **Flying solo:** Most solo entrepreneurs at least need to choose a social aggregator, set up Google Alerts, and (no kidding) use a timer. I prefer kitchen timers because they're kitschy, but better yet, because they're a physical, finite signal that says "playtime" is over for the moment
- ✔ **Creating an everyday team:** Always consider how many people you need to monitor your brand online from day to day. With the right tools (see Chapter 5) and the right strategy (Chapter 2), you may be surprised how easily and affordably you can do this. I show you how to create your team in Chapter 3.
- ✔ **Organizing special teams:** You may discover that you need to have special teams in mind to support your everyday team. It's good to consider these:
 - *Crisis management team:* People who will pitch in during a crisis. May consist of everyday plus a few pinch hitters who thrive under pressure (more about this in Chapter 4).
 - *Geek group:* People who will maintain your hardware, software, and networking. You will at least need a designated geek, er, technical expert. I go into more detail about this in Chapters 3 and 4.