



Online Reputation Management Guide

The following guide will show small businesses how to assess, build, track and monitor their online reputation. In most cases, you can follow these simple steps to easily grow your personal brand and/or small business.

Introduction

Two decades ago, an executive made a very public and damaging mistake. They spent years regretting that decision and abandoned their profession. They found a new, honest career and in 2007 took a promising job. In 2008, a coworker dug up their past on Google. They were instantly terminated.

In 2008, a business owner found their personal beliefs exposed to the public. There was an immediate and hostile reaction that cemented itself at the top of the search results for both their name and the company's. The company's bottom line suffered.

In 2009, an industry leader found that they were the subjects of a disparaging article from one of the world's major news networks. In a matter of hours, the article was ranking in the search engines for the company's name. Clients started calling inquiring about the news report, asking "are the allegations true?" They weren't, but their reputation was tarnished.

In 2009, a small business found their former employee posting negative remarks on an industry-specific forum with an anonymous username. A day later, the forum was ranking second on Google for the company's name. In the midst of an economic recession, responding to their accuser wasted precious time and energy.

What do those situations have in common?

Neither the executive, the business owner, the industry leader nor the small business were proactive in managing their online reputation. The executive's name only appeared in legal documents from two decades ago that were now public record online. The business owner had no presence online outside of small news blurbs and people searches. The industry leader only had a brochure site and a number of casual references. The small business was only mentioned online in their flash site, a handful of press releases and on competitive research sites.

When prospective customers, clients or employees are searching for you, what do they see? Is a hate site or Rip Off Report the number two listing for your name? Or, is there a news report telling the story of your incredible growth in the industry?

Let's assume the old AOL click data percents from 2006 are still accurate:

Traffic Distribution By Google Ranking

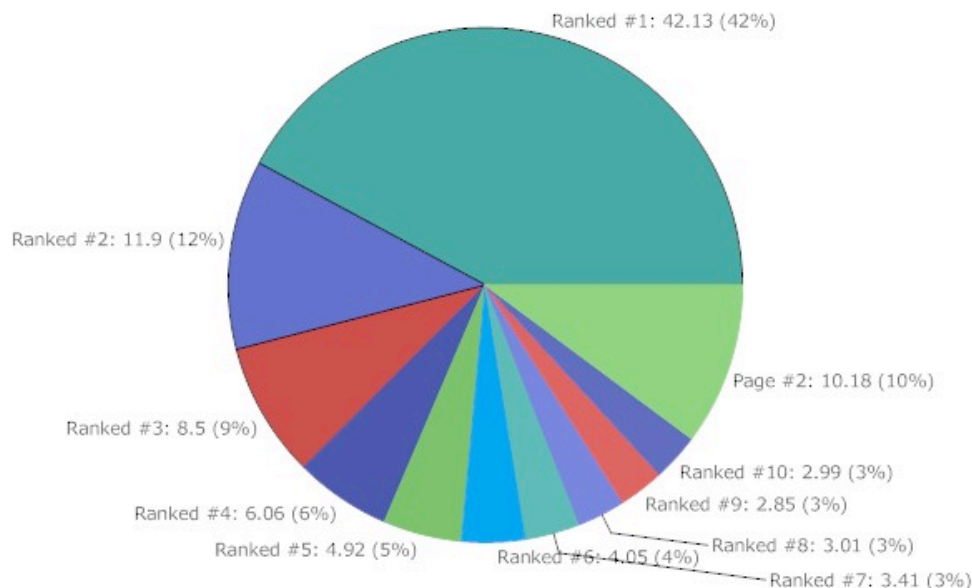


Photo credit: *SEO Book*, Google Ranking Value: <http://training.seobook.com/google-ranking-value>

How many of those users are absorbing the top ten search results before they click? With embedded videos, indented news results and other Universal Search listings, users' eyes and clicks are getting drawn deeper down the page. If they see a sensational or negative result, how much more likely are they to click on that versus the positive? And, if you don't have a negative listing, how many of the results are relevant and within your control?

Why do you need an online reputation?

If you don't control your brand online, someone else will.

Consider recent advancements on the major search engines in:

Universal search

<http://searchengineland.com/google-20-google-universal-search-11232>

Personalized search

<http://searchengineland.com/google-ramps-up-personalized-search-10430>

Enhanced search results

http://developer.yahoo.com/searchmonkey/smguide/sm_overview.html

Rich snippets

<http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2009/05/introducing-rich-snippets.html>

There are more opportunities than ever before to quickly rank negative or slanderous results. If you don't protect yourself, someone can easily post a comment, make a video, create a blog post, file a complaint, promote your competition, develop a hate site and more. Or even worse, an angry employee will leave the company with revenge on their mind and wreak havoc with yours. Managing your online reputation isn't shameless promotion, it's a means of defense and best practice.

Who cares about your online reputation?

Your online reputation can be seen in a number of ways. Whether you're seeking employment, selling a product, looking for an investor or trying to score a date, someone is going to turn to a search engine to learn more about you. The most common groups are:

- ✓ Consumers
- ✓ Business partners
- ✓ Stock holders
- ✓ Marketers
- ✓ Journalists
- ✓ Prospective employers
- ✓ Co-workers
- ✓ Personal contacts

How can a negative online reputation affect you?

The results of a negative online reputation may be as subtle as a user clicking on a competitor's search result instead of yours or as damaging as an industry-wide boycott of your products and/or services. Besides the obvious financial implications of having a company's credibility called into question, there are potential legal ramifications that could dominate your time and cripple your financial sustainability, as well. This will often cement trusted news and legal results in the top search rankings so that even if a case is dismissed or resolved, you'll be living with the consequences for years to come. Things like, determining who is responsible for the negative reputation, if you'll have to reposition or remove certain employees or dealing with potential losses in workforce, add further monetary, morale and growth consequences.

How do you assess your online reputation?

Most users won't look past the first page or two of search results, so you only need to look at a couple pages for each keyword on the major search engines. Start with simple searches on Google, Yahoo and MSN for all that apply:

- ✓ Your Name
- ✓ Company
- ✓ Brand(s)
- ✓ Product(s)
- ✓ High profile employees
- ✓ Handles/usernames

Given advancements in personalized search, results can show large discrepancies based on your location and search history, especially when searching for vanity terms you look at often. To get the most accurate search results, first log out of your account on the search engines or, if you're searching on Google, use a shortcut for disabled personalized search:

<http://yoast.com/tools/seo/disable-personalized-search-plugin/>

How do you decide whether you need to build or fix your online reputation? Once you've searched for the relevant keyword phrases on each search engine, use a simple spreadsheet or list to determine whether you need to manage your online reputation. A basic sample is provided on the following page.

ONLINE REPUTATION ASSESSMENT

Search engine: _____ Phrase: _____ Date: _____

Position	URL	Type*	Sentiment**
1			
2			
3			
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8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
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*Type – Document what type of search result is appearing: Web site, news result, blog post, video, image, local listing, PDF, social profile, directory, etc.

**Sentiment – Document the sentiment of the search result. If it is about you or your company, is it positive, negative or indifferent? Document the search result even if it is not about you.

Now that you've recorded the top thirty search results for each relevant keyword phrase and search engine, tally the results. You want to record how many were negative, indifferent and how many weren't about you. These numbers will tell you whether you need to build or manage your online reputation.

The Potential Problem

If you find that you have a number of search results ranking for your name/company that aren't about you (especially in the top 10), you will need to start building your reputation. Even though there isn't an obvious problem, you still need to worry. If you haven't actively grown your search results, then it's much easier for something to creep to the top when someone does have a problem with your company or personal brand. By not being proactive about creating your online reputation, you leave yourself vulnerable for someone to do it for you.

The exception to this is when you share a name with a celebrity, politician, another company, etc. Unless you have a reputation management disaster, it's unlikely that you or others will be able to rank well for your name when you share it with a high profile subject. With that said, people will still want to find you online, so consider how others will refine their searches to locate you. Will they add an industry, location or product to the search terms? Filter the search results to locate oddities and a significant lack of results, both of which can negatively impact your reputation.

The Not-So-Obvious Problem

If there are a number of search results that are about you, but they're indifferent, you still need to focus on growing your online reputation. Why?

When consumers, shareholders, employers, the media, etc. are seeking information about you, you want them to find relevant and positive results. If the search results are crowded with indifferent Web sites detailing competitive research and company profiles, the user isn't finding something that immediately wins them over. It's to be expected that you'll have a Wikipedia entry if you're a big business, or a directory listing, but if that's the majority of your search presence, how is the information gatherer supposed to build a positive impression of you? They've simply recognized that there's nothing glaringly wrong.

Also, how many of those results are within your control? For example, a Web site you own, a social profile you registered, a local listing you've verified, etc. The more results you see that are within your control, the better. Of course, high profile and positive news results or interviews can only help lend credibility to your brand, but the more results you physically manage, the more control you have over your perceived reputation online.

The Obvious Problem

If someone reports your company to a consumer watch group, a competitor follows you around leaving negative comments or an angered customer devotes hours to publicly hating you, then it's pretty obvious you have an online reputation management problem. Is that negatively impacting the search results though? If you find a number of, or even one, negative search result, you need to fix it.

The most common reputation management problems come from (ordered by least to most severe):

- ✓ Squatted usernames
- ✓ Squatted domains
- ✓ Doppelgangers
- ✓ Job changes
- ✓ Name changes
- ✓ Negative comments
- ✓ False information
- ✓ Fake profiles
- ✓ Trademark infringement
- ✓ Bad news coverage
- ✓ Legal documents
- ✓ Complaint sites
- ✓ Competitor attacks
- ✓ Hate sites
- ✓ Personal scandals
- ✓ Corporate scandals
- ✓ Industry perceptions

What should you do about those problems? Seek professional online reputation management services if you don't already have someone that can effectively fix the situation. Contact Outspoken Media: <http://outspokenmedia.com/services/online-reputation-management/>

Build Your Reputation

The following are simple steps you can take to build your own online reputation.

Protect Your Name

The first step to building your online reputation is to register your username. Purchase all relevant domains and TLDs. If you haven't yet, also register your username with these five essential social networks:

- ✓ Facebook
- ✓ MySpace
- ✓ LinkedIn
- ✓ Twitter
- ✓ Naymz

Everyday a new social network pops up and if you don't act fast, someone else can claim your name. Nearly every client we've worked with has had a situation where one or more social networks didn't have their name available and it was causing a major gap in their brand strategy. In many of those situations, the individual that registered the brand's username was an affiliate, an angry customer or just someone squatting on the username hoping to get cash from the real owner.

Building your brand is difficult when you don't have the same handle across each of the social networks. Unfortunately, individuals and business owners don't have time to chase after those names. Use a service like <http://knowem.com/> to quickly check and register your name, handle, company, products, high profile employees, domain, etc. across more than two hundred social networks. You can also subscribe to their monthly service and KnowEm will continue to build your profiles as new networks surface on the Web.

Set Privacy Settings

Once you've secured your username, you need to protect it. If it's a personal account, manage your privacy settings. With the widespread adoption of social networking, more and more users have found themselves facing a reputation disaster at the hand of drunk photos, inappropriate remarks, slanderous statements or other poor decisions. Most users don't realize how their social profiles are getting indexed in search results or how they appear to users outside of their network. Familiarize yourself with the settings of each network you belong to.

Facebook

You can control whether your Facebook page appears in the search engines by selecting “create a public search listing for me”. Edit this by going to:

Settings > Privacy > Search > [select search visibility]

You can now also control the types of information displayed on your Facebook profile if it is indexed in the search engines. By default, your profile picture, friend list, link to add me as a friend, link to send me a message and pages you’re a fan of are public.

If you want to build your online reputation, keep your profile public and everything visible, but be aware of what you’re using as your profile picture and whether anyone would be shocked by your choose of friends. You can find more information about Facebook privacy settings here:

10 Privacy Settings Every Facebook User Should Know

<http://www.allfacebook.com/2009/02/facebook-privacy/>

How to Block Facebook Photos

<http://gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/05/how-to-block-facebook-photos-of-yourself/>

MySpace

MySpace is less advanced than Facebook when it comes to privacy settings, but you can still control how much the public is seeing. If you want your profile to remain private go to:

My Account > Privacy > [select “profile viewable by”]

Twitter

Twitter accounts rank very well if you use your real name as your handle and/or in your profile. Keep in mind that users can find you if they have your email address and tweets are constantly scraped and archived. You should be very cautious about what you tweet unless you’re selective about your friends and make your profile private:

Settings > Account > [select “Protect my updates”]

LinkedIn

LinkedIn has the most robust controls for the types of information you can show on your public profile. You can choose which fields get indexed in search engines or you can turn your public profile off entirely. Find these settings from:

Account & Settings > Public Profile Settings > [select view preference]

Online Reputation Monitoring

Tools to Track Your Online Reputation

Set up alerts and feeds to catch every mention of your name, company, brand, employees, domain, etc. You want to get notification before a problem escalates or enters the top search results. There are hundreds of tools that can help you manage your online reputation, but as a small business owner or individual, the following are the most comprehensive and user-friendly solutions we've found.

Feed Reader

Set up a feed reader to help you view the custom feeds you'll be tracking for your keyword phrases. Your reader can be as simple as a gadget on your iGoogle home page or a full feed service like Google Reader: <http://www.google.com/reader/>

Google Alerts

<http://www.google.com/alerts>

Set up Google Alerts for free to track Web results, news, blogs, video and groups. Subscribe via email or through a feed.

Yahoo Alerts

<http://alerts.yahoo.com/>

Set up Yahoo Alerts for free to track news by keyword, stocks, local news, feeds and more. Receive notifications via email, Yahoo Messenger or mobile.

Twitter Search

<http://search.twitter.com/>

Formerly known as Summize, Twitter Search makes it simple to search Twitter for any mentions of a particular keyword phrase. There is also an array of advanced search parameters that let you search by location, sentiment, dates, links, a particular person and more. Subscribe to the feed for your search results.

Technorati

<http://technorati.com/search/>

Use Search Technorati to find mentions of your blog or specific keywords across other blogs. Subscribe to the search results feed and get notified of new mentions.

BackType

<http://www.backtype.com/>

One of the most robust comment solutions is BackType. With it, you can claim your comments on blogs, find comments that mention a particular keyword, view all conversations from a particular post or article and subscribe to those conversations.

Social Mention

<http://socialmention.com/>

Social Mention is similar to Google Alerts, but specifically tailored for social media. Since Google Alerts can be buggy, Social Mention helps catch immediate conversations around a specific keyword. Subscribe to the feed, get email alerts or download the Excel file.

BoardReader

<http://boardreader.com/>

Track conversations across forums and message boards with BoardReader. You can refine results by date, from a particular domain and by relevance.

Q&A Tracking

<http://answers.yahoo.com/>

If anyone is asking questions about you, your company or a particular keyword, you can track those on certain Q&A sites like Yahoo Answers. Do an advanced search for a particular keyword and then subscribe to the RSS feed at the bottom of the page to allow you to keep track of future mentions.

Trackur

<http://www.trackur.com/>

Trackur pulls keyword mentions from a variety of sources, not just Google Alerts, but its biggest use comes from the ability to save, sort, tag, share and subscribe to particular feeds. It costs less than \$20 a month and is perfect for small businesses.

Get Involved

Now that you've secured your username, set up your profiles and created ways to track your keywords, you have to dive into the conversation. What's being said about you? If there isn't much, it's time to get involved. Besides building your credibility, each of the following suggestions will help strengthen your rankings in the search engines.

Build your professional and personal networks. Find your coworkers, friends, clients and business partners, then befriend them. Get involved in their conversations, answers questions, keep them informed of your life or business, etc. Do this on:

- ✓ Professional sites like LinkedIn, Naymz and Plaxo
- ✓ Personal sites like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace
- ✓ School-related sites like Classmates and Reunion
- ✓ Corporate sites like BusinessWeek, Crunchbase and FastCompany
- ✓ Review sites like Yelp and Amazon
- ✓ Media sites like Flickr, YouTube or Vimeo
- ✓ Resume sites like Emurse, Resume Social and Rezume
- ✓ Bookmarking sites like StumbleUpon, Reddit, Digg or Mixx
- ✓ Popular industry blogs
- ✓ Industry-specific social networks, forums and groups
- ✓ Local social networks, forums and groups
- ✓ Special interest or lifestyle social networks, forums and groups

Position yourself as an authority in your space. When you become an authority, the community is more likely to link to you, send business opportunities, refer you to the media, etc. Here are several ways to grow your authority:

- ✓ Start a group, organization, MeetUp or TweetUp
- ✓ Participate in Q&A sites like Yahoo Answers or ChaCha.com
- ✓ Optimize your corporate profile on the company site (if applicable)
- ✓ Create a personal Web site
- ✓ List your business in relevant local listings
- ✓ Make videos
- ✓ Make podcasts
- ✓ Create a personal blog or Tumblr
- ✓ List your blog in relevant blog directories
- ✓ Write guest posts on popular industry blogs
- ✓ Conduct interviews with industry leaders on your blog
- ✓ Get interviewed on other's blogs or podcasts on sites like Odeo
- ✓ Speak at industry events and/or conferences
- ✓ Get quoted in local, regional and national news
- ✓ Donate to charity
- ✓ Sponsor an event or conference
- ✓ Receive nominations and awards
- ✓ Promote news-worthy information through press releases

Prevent Reputation Problems

As you grow your presence online, you'll find that there is more to keep track of. This isn't a bad thing, but you do need to monitor and manage it to prevent potential problems. You can do this by using different social media management tools, being accessible to your customers/clients, responding to customer service inquiries, owning your negatives, building credibility and responding to criticism.

Social Media Management

- ✓ Use tools like <http://hootsuite.com/> to manage multiple Twitter accounts.
- ✓ Use <http://ping.fm/> to distribute tweets to multiple social profiles at once.
- ✓ Use <http://disqus.com/> to track your comment threads.
- ✓ Use <http://www.atomkeep.com/> to update multiple profiles at once.
- ✓ And, keep an eye out for SocialStream to aggregate multiple social accounts:
<http://hcii.cmu.edu/M-HCI/2006/SocialstreamProject/index.php>

Be Accessible

Most reputation problems start because the user isn't able to effectively communicate with the business or individual. Then, in frustration, they turn to "simpler" channels like Twitter, blogs or complaint sites. To help combat this, display accurate contact information on and off-site. If you can't respond within 24 hours, tell users that you will get to them within a specific time frame. Provide multiple forms of contact information. Some users will not want to contact you through email or the telephone. Make both options available to them.

Invest in Customer Service

If you don't have the budget for a costly contact management system or call center, build a Web-based customer service portal on site. Use tools like <http://www.suggestionbox.com/> or <http://getsatisfaction.com/> to help you do this.

Own Your Negatives

Why would you ever purchase the domain [companyname]sucks.com? Because if a user is searching for an alternative to your brand or looking to express frustration, wouldn't you like a chance to win them over? By ranking for your negatives, you give your company one last chance to convince a user why they should stay with your service or give your product another try. You should also purchase negative domains so that others can't make a simple hate site and rank on domain relevance.

Another important way to own your negatives is to create a Frequently Asked Question or customer service area on your site that asks questions with those phrases in the text like "What are some alternatives to [product name]?" Then give them a different version of your product or services or send them to a friendly partner's site.

Build Credibility

Do you have client or customer testimonials? If you don't already have those testimonials, make an effort to collect them in the future. Then, post those testimonials on the site. You can also track positive mentions on sites like Twitter or LinkedIn and add those to your site. Give customers the ability to add product reviews. In short, engage your community to give them recognition for finding you and build your credibility to prospective users in the process.

If you belong to industry-specific associations or groups, establish trust by displaying those logos on your site. Do the same with quality rating services like the Better Business Bureau and security logos. And, give your users a guarantee (that you can keep), so they feel more secure with their decision.

Respond to Criticism

Once you start monitoring your online reputation and you discover there are negative comments being made, how should you respond? If someone is genuinely upset, contact them and try to resolve the issue. Don't get defensive, just apologize and give them something comparable to the situation whether it's a promise that they'll be treated differently in the future, a refund or free products/services. If the user appears to be a troll, a response may not be the best solution, learn how to respond to negative reviews:

<http://outspokenmedia.com/reputation-management/respond-negative-reviews/>

And, print out the Air Force Blog Assessment to help you assess users:

http://www.flickr.com/photos/jeremiah_owyang/3154057414/sizes/o/

If you find yourself facing a serious reputation management problem, contact us for professional online reputation management services:

<http://outspokenmedia.com/services/online-reputation-management/>

The ORM Industry

Stay informed about the latest online reputation management and monitoring news, products and techniques. Here are some industry books, additional guides and articles to read if you can't get enough ORM.

Guides & News

Online Reputation and Buzz Monitoring Buyer's Guide 2008 by Econsultancy

<http://econsultancy.com/reports/online-reputation-and-buzz-monitoring-buyer-s-guide-2008>

Online Reputation Management by Elixir Systems

http://www.sempo.org/learning_center/articles/ElixirSystemsOnlineRepMgmt.pdf

Online Reputation Monitoring Beginners Guide by Marketing Pilgrim

<http://www.marketingpilgrim.com/online-reputation-monitoring-beginners-guide.pdf>

Reputation management articles on the Outspoken Media Blog

<http://outspokenmedia.com/more/reputation-management/>

Guide to Social Media Analysis by Social Target

<http://www.socialtarget.com/research/>

Recent ORM news: <http://www.reputation.me/>

Books

18 Immutable Laws of Corporate Reputation by Ronald J. Alsop

<http://books.google.com/books?id=ED8vQTTc3L4C>

Radically Transparent: Monitoring and Managing Reputations Online by Andy Beal, Judy Strauss

<http://books.google.com/books?id=wWSkRkqje-cC>

The Reputation Vortex: Online Reputation Management by Terry Walsh, Ed Goldswain, Edward Goldswain

<http://books.google.com/books?id=1h0PAAAACAAJ>

Posts

A Makeover for Your Google Results by Julia Angwin

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123379331364449967.html>

4 Steps to Managing Your SMB's Online Reputation by Lisa Barone

<http://smallbiztrends.com/2009/05/managing-your-online-reputation.html>

How Companies Should Respond to Negative Reviews by Lisa Barone

<http://outspokenmedia.com/reputation-management/respond-negative-reviews/>

Using Directories for Search Engine Reputation Management by Michael Gray

<http://www.marketingpilgrim.com/2009/02/using-directories-for-search-engine-reputation-management.html>

34 Online Reputation Monitoring Tools by John Jantsch

<http://www.ducttapemarketing.com/blog/2008/03/03/34-online-reputation-management-tools/>

10 Ways to "Own Yourself Online" by Todd Malicoat

<http://www.stuntdubl.com/2007/07/11/reputation-management/>

Basics of Online Reputation Management by Lee Odden

<http://www.toprankblog.com/2007/03/basics-of-online-reputation-management/>

How to Build Your Own ORM Dashboard by Marty Weintraub

<http://www.aimclearblog.com/2009/03/16/how-to-build-a-reputation-monitoring-dashboard/>