

# Online Reputation Management: Where the Web Meets the Road

Terry Boothman

Originally published in the Rochester Business Journal, 2009

*“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” -- Mark Twain.*

What might Twain have said if he knew that one day that lie could navigate the world in less time than it took to light his cigar?

Twenty of its employees become disgruntled over Acme Company's refusal to grant them performance bonuses. They bash their employer in a series of anonymous blogs and, to twist the knife even further, set up a dedicated website, [www.acme-is-cheap.com](http://www.acme-is-cheap.com). They are vocal and creative enough that the imbroglio is picked up by the news forums and a few social media sites. Then it gets worse: the search engines pick up the posts. Acme is pained to learn that a Google search on their corporate name brings up not only [www.acme-is-cheap.com](http://www.acme-is-cheap.com) but also nine other listings linked to the offensive pages. The negative listings come up over their own corporate messages. Suddenly, it seems as though the bad news is everywhere—and, in a real way, *it is*.

While the names in this scenario were changed, the case is real, drawn from one of our accounts. In fact, the actual problem was much worse. Businesses are rapidly discovering that the *viral* in “viral marketing” can be applied with a vengeance in reputation trashing. It has been observed that, if your business has a high enough profile, someone is talking about you at almost any time. A single web posting works its way into those pesky search engines at light speed, and anyone, anywhere, can find it. Enter “Bill Gates reputation” in Google, and the top listing includes, “. . . Gates' reputation was further sullied by a series of major antitrust actions brought both by the U.S. . . .” Not that Gates is worried, but imagine the search was on *your* name.

A reputation can be assailed for any of number of reasons: a former partner is unhappy about a deal gone bad, an terminated employee bears a grudge, a business wants to deflate its competition's standings, a consumer is unhappy about a purchase, a patient wants to publicize a gripe against a doctor, a political activist wants to bring down the opposing party's nominee. The list of real examples is lengthy, and there are as many motives as there are means. Those “means” include not only blog postings, but also actions as cynical as false reviews of a company's products or a malicious gossip campaign.

Both the upside and downside of the Web is that everyone has equal access. That's good news for the average user, but when someone acts anonymously to vent anger or frustration, or out of a selfish commercial motive, the damage is hard to contain. An offending Web post may be false, but businesses can't devote the time or money to argue their case. Defense of a claim can merely inflame the issue. Most businesses simply want the problem to go away as quickly as possible.

In an effort to curtail the damage, the first recourse is the corporate lawyer. Your counsel or a good cyberlaw firm can issue cease and desist orders, or, if there's a real legal issue like trademark violation or libel, pursue litigation. But legal remedies may not apply to cases where the law is fuzzy or the issue is not really a legal one. (Is it illegal to use your competitor's name in a string of invisible HTML code?) And, all too often, you simply can't identify the source of the offensive postings. The Internet, for better or worse, does preserve anonymity.

## **We've Got a Problem. What Can We Do?**

In addition to legal avenues, there's still a course of action:

- Do the research. Start with web searches using any and all “keywords” (search phrases) that apply to you, your employees, your offerings, and so on. What comes up? Find out as much as you can about who, what, when, and from where. Does this information trigger any immediate counter-action? For instance, if there’s simply a false statement about you, can you demand a correction? Of course, it’s seldom that easy.

- What is the extent of the damage? Some blogs or forums purge their content on a periodic basis, but most archive their content—often with no termination date. You may be able to “counter post” or request an apology if the offensive post is clearly incorrect and you can contact the Webmaster. But, most likely, this will not be effective and the damage is already done.

-Set up continuous monitoring. There are a variety of dedicated sites and online tools that you can use. *Moreover.com* manages news feeds that let you track recent happenings in major industries. *Monitor This*, <http://alp-uckan.net/free/monitorthis/>, lets you subscribe to 22 different search engine feeds simultaneously. *Website Watcher*, <http://www.aignes.com/> is one of several sites that let you monitor changes on given target pages (such as your competitors’). *Google Alerts* will feed you updates on given results for Google searches. There are too many to list here, but you can find them with a little dedicated surfing.

- Consider any reasonable path of action. This will include, but not be limited to creating your own positive information campaign where *you* are doing the blogging, setting up positive message sites, distributing press releases, or even posting YouTube videos with spin about your products or services. A YouTube search on “iPhone” brings up over 79,000 videos. See if you can find some that were sent up by Apple’s marketing team.

- Document your successes; refine and recycle. This is going to take time and more than a bit of gathered expertise, but it will most likely be worth the effort.

## The Professionals

Another way to handle a serious problem is to hire a reputation management firm. These services have emerged in the past few years to meet a growing need. They’ve gained enough credibility to garner stories in major business journals (do a search in the Washington Post), and offer a concept that commands a page in Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online\\_reputation\\_management](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_reputation_management).

A reputation management company follows the path noted above: analysis, intervention, monitoring, and recycling—but systematically, and using tested methods of posting content quickly. The best firms use a variety of tactics including:

- Legal analysis. Are there actual laws being broken, or are legal remedies the best early intervention? The firm may have its own dedicated counsel.

- Brand and identity management: saturating blogs, forums, journals, or news feeds with positive content set to reverse any current (or future) damage.

- Search Engine Optimization: posting new content on your website and boosting it in the engines. The objective is to replace offensive listings with positive ones.

- Social Media Optimization: if it makes sense, leveraging such online magnets as MySpace, YouTube, or even eBay pages.

- Buying and building new domains offering positive content about your business.

Any given company will offer its own formula, but the outcome, in time, should be that the bad news becomes scarce and your brand message prevails.

## Is It Worth Fighting?

It all depends on the company, the circumstances, the stakes. But consider that “reputation” is becoming something of a commodity. Enterprises such as eBay, Amazon, and Shopping.com rely heavily on “CGM,” consumer generated media, those little reviews that appear below the product listings. Political and editorial blogs are commanding respect, and in order to stay current, the search engines have become sensitive to news outlets. In the online world, we rely on each other, and, like it or not, we tend to trust the last thing we read.

As has been said about the Net, unbridled access to information comes with a cost: the decline of critical thinking. Adept online players will have to assess the risk of leaving things to chance versus the cost of a calculated approach. For those who take it seriously, reputation management may become a standard part of the business plan. To quote Warren Buffet, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently.”

Terry Boothman is *Director of Online Brand and Reputation Management* at [www.onlinereputationmanager.com](http://www.onlinereputationmanager.com)

Comments to [terry@onlinereputationmanager.com](mailto:terry@onlinereputationmanager.com)