Reputation 3.0

Managing your reputation online can seem a daunting task, but if done properly it can enhance your rapport with clients and customers, benefiting your business. **Maura O’Malley** reports

Just a few short years ago, monitoring an organisation’s reputation mainly involved scrutinising press coverage in newspapers, pumping out press releases on quarterly results and cases won; single individuals with a grievance could be shrugged off and ignored. To really wreak havoc people had to devote their lives to the cause through slowly putting activists groups together, writing endless letters to regulators, indulging in painstaking and exhausting lobbying. The explosion of online social media has changed all that. Blogs can be written and picked up by news hungry websites within hours, eager to feed the growing dependency on 24-hour news, video rants can go viral and be viewed by a magnitude of millions at astonish speed.

Crisis management expert Peter Sandman says that online media has made it much easier for an outlier, an individual with an axe to grind or a genuine problem to garner attention. But he thinks it’s mostly a good effect. “It’s not just good for society, but it is also good for big organisations. It’s teaching them something they should have known without social media, which is that individual unhappy customers or unhappy stakeholders are important.”

He adds that companies are slowly learning to be more responsive earlier. “I know everyone experiences this as a reputational threat, but it really is a reputational benefit. Because you are getting much earlier warnings of the reputational threat and can address it more productively.”

At its basic level, old style reputation is the same as online reputation, it is what you do and what you say, says Antony Mayfield social media consultant and author of the book *Me and My Web Shadow*, and that is as true offline as online. It’s always been about social networks, it’s just that now these social networks are powered by technology. What is slightly different online is that things can happen faster and that there are more opportunities to enhance and damage reputation. “If a crisis blows up on Friday you will be on it.” They pretend it doesn’t exist while taking it very seriously which is “really stupid”.

He believes that all organisations should try to look as responsive as they can to criticism. What that means is to be willing to comment on your critics’ blogs and websites, be willing to tweet back if they tweet about you.

Mayfield points out corporations need a thicker skin, “Not everything that is said about you impacts negatively on you. It’s who is saying it, where it’s being said, how far it spreads.” For instance, if you hear something on a small blog or forum and they write something negative or inaccurate about you, it might not be appropriate to respond. “In doing something you would give them the oxygen of publicity which is what they are after a lot of the time.” If someone says something factually inaccurate it might be time to contact the moderator of the article and tell them there is something potentially libellous online.

The level of vitriol expressed on the internet can be shocking. Mayfield notes that when you address people directly they usually back off – quickly. But sometimes people can be motivated differently and that is exactly what they want, they want to elicit a reaction. A partner at the law firm Charles Russell, Duncan Lamont, says that people think they are anonymous online, but of course they are not. On football club forums, “Obviously one encourages fans to let off steam and talk about the management and so on, but of course there is a point beyond which people shouldn’t go, where people are making serious allegations. The courts do give powers that you can track down people’s computers and bring your claim against them.”
There are moderators on websites like the Daily Mail and the BBC and they will not put up the really offensive material, says Lamont. So you can rant almost safe in the knowledge that there will be no come back because it will never be published. However, the majority of sites are not moderated or any editing is done post publication. He thinks that people who use these technologies need to be educated about what they can and cannot do. Bloggers have a wide latitude of freedom of expression, but they are not anonymous.

He says that there is nothing that focuses the mind more of a regular Twitter user than receiving a letter delivered to his or her personal address about their online comments. Not necessarily serving legal proceedings, but a letter from a lawyer saying “we see there is a problem, we suggest you take advice, let’s talk about it” and the potentially defamatory information needs to be removed and, from experience, it usually is.

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Cause célèbre
Lamont has been involved in a number of cases involving a corporation and a substantial charity, in which something potentially defamatory was said on Twitter about them, but was it really worth pursuing? You do not want to make something an issue; you never want to be the next online campaign, he warns.

He refers to the science writer Simon Singh who was sued for defamation by the British Chiropractic Association following criticisms he made about the complementary medicine in British newspapers. After a campaign buoyed up by Facebook group support, bloggers and online forums, the organisation withdrew the case last year.

The voice of the lone, disgruntled individual reverberates throughout cyberspace and people need to be mindful that third parties will watch intently the dialogue between
A cautionary tale

Two unhappy clients of a construction business used Google AdWords to gain retribution for unsatisfactory work after more orthodox attempts at restitution failed. The clients bought the business’s name as a keyword on Google AdWords and requested that traffic be redirected to a website called Dodgybuilders.com. The company was brought to the brink of receivership following the incident.

“Google is not God, it’s not the first amendment, it’s not the truth, it’s just a machine.”

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