

# VIRTUAL REALITIES



## 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 in the form of Twitter, Facebook, discussion forums and blogs 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 astonishing 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

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do not have until Monday to respond to it, you have two hours." But it also gives people who manage corporate reputation the opportunity to be able to do what they always did well on a larger scale.

So just how should an organisation deal with negative comments online? Sandman points out that a lot of aspects of crisis management stay the same, upset people want their concerns addressed not ignored. "They are more interested in how they are communicated with than they are in the actual solution. That is in all but the most dire of threats you care about your life being saved more than being talked to nicely!"

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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 always 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

the organisation and the offended person. Sandman says even if the person's anger is not justified and at, the very least excessive, the organisation has to be seen to be responsive. Even if the person shouts back that it is not good enough, it has to do this. "Then we all start rolling our eyes. If you roll your eyes at crazy people then they look to the rest of the world like whistleblowers... You have to be the last one to think this person is a jerk."

Lamont agrees saying that the idiot with a grievance is usually a voice in the wilderness. By taking them on you risk turning them into a *cause célèbre*. But, he says, it is easy for him to say, he is not the senior manager whom the idiot hates. Some sort of subjectivity always creeps in to these situations.

### Online tools

There are many sophisticated tools to track a brand's reputation online like Brandwatch and Radian6. At the very least, Mayfield says, you should have a Google alert against your company name and personal name, with miss-spellings and any other variations. He encourages research into what a company's "online world" looks like, mapping out where the important conversations are, where the important influencers are located. He continues that Google throws up results whether positive or negative about you, but you have to be able to understand the context in order to make a decision about what to do. Mayfield says that to ensure your company is at the top of a search result list, you should have a presence wherever a client or customer might look for you, this might be in LinkedIn or Google. Research indicates that 80% to 90% of HR departments use Google and LinkedIn to check out potential candidates. What Google engineers are looking for are "signals of quality", anything that gives the search engine a clue that this is the better website on the subject, says Mayfield. They like websites with fresh, recently updated websites and other websites in your industry linking to you, though this usefulness has to be earned it should not simply be a "game of links".

### Web 3.0

A company that has spent much time pouring over the inner workings of Google algorithms is reputation.com, a US-based firm established by Harvard law school graduate Michael Fertik.

The company aims to enhance the reputation and privacy of individuals and organisations online. To do this, Fertik has a

team of mathematicians and IT experts who scrutinise millions of data points determining why certain content is preferred and shows up ahead of others in search results. "On the internet, what people find first defines the reputation of a business", he says. So his team essentially buries the more negative, out-of-date information about a person or company,

### 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.

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ensuring that the first entries are the things the company is most proud of. It's a basis for a business that many see a lot of growth in; it recently received a headline-grabbing sum of \$15 million in venture capital.

"The traditional means of protecting your reputation just doesn't cut the mustard anymore, says Fertik. He continues, "The companies that are still in web 1.0 or 2.0 are trying to manage reputation saying that the CEO should tweet, the CEO should blog, this is a very old point of view, it is already out of date."

He adds, "Everything affects your reputation: an employee, a customer, one trademark. It is increasingly viewed as important and also increasingly viewed as something that is no longer within the

control of the business because the internet has democratised access to information and publication of information."

He balks at the mention of manipulating Google, pointing out that manipulation implies that Google is sacrosanct, "Google is not God, it's not the first amendment, it's not the truth, it's just a machine."

He thinks traditional legal methods like take down requests are a "neanderthal solution to a space age problem, it's totally backwards, even in the UK which has very protective libel laws, the Google search results are not affected."

He continues, "The Streisand effect [where an attempt to hide or remove a piece of information online has the opposite effect and actually draws attention to it] is how lawyers make everything worse on the internet, lawyers exacerbate the problem with their solutions, they don't make them better."

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) had its own problems recently with a lookalike website the World Intellectual Property Database (WIPD). Despite several entreaties from WIPO, the WIPD remains online. The WIPD has now changed its logo so is hopefully less likely to confuse unsuspecting patent applicants; WIPO has also issued warnings about the website. But it was an embarrassing incident for the organisation and highlighted the difficulty in removing websites. Fertik suggests that what might work best in this situation is not to aim to take it down, but move the copycat website down the Google search result list, so no one ever finds it.

Managing reputations online is a part of daily life and what it reveals is really what is happening in the offline world anyway; it should ultimately be seen as something not out of a company's control but, with the right attitude and tools, something that can be harnessed for the company's benefit.

### Author



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