

SAFEGUARDING YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION

BY KATHERINE HEAVISIDE

YEARS OF WORKING TO BUILD RESPECT and loyalty in your marketplace can be lost in a blinding flash when your company, your products or your services are attacked online through newsletters, blogs or other websites. The Internet has become the Wild West of communications. While smaller companies can compete very effectively with larger competitors using the Internet, the online world can also be an undisciplined and even dangerous frontier when it comes to communicating information about your company. A lack of rules and regulations means competitors, ex-employees and disgruntled clients or customers can trash your company or products in what is called user-generated content — blogs, forums and message boards.

Is there a defense? Yes, but there is no magic pill here. The work involves TAR — track, analyze and react. Here are just a few of the ways to get started.

Track — Tracking is vital, particularly if you are facing a negative issue. The sooner you can respond to misinformation — preferably daily — the better your chances are of stopping it from spreading. You can do this for yourself by setting up

monitoring through Google.com/alerts and Yahoo.com/alerts for news items. You can also use Technorati.com or Feedster.com, which track weblogs for keywords and links and are an effective way to search for mentions of your company. In addition, Internet monitoring services such as fortuneinteractive.com or prnewswire.com will do the work for you.

Analyze — On a weekly, if not daily, basis, you should be doing a search for your own website. Your own website should be at the top of the list; then look at everything else that comes up on the same page. Be sure that up-to-date information is there — after all, potential clients and customers will likely be checking those items before they pick up the phone. If your brand is being attacked in a blog or anywhere else, read the profile of the author and try to determine their audience and whether they are thought of as credible.

React — There are ways to counter negative comments in a blog. First, if the information is not correct, send your supporting factual information and offer to keep the blogger up to date. If you cannot be successful by this route, it may be time to

consult a lawyer. If it is true, you should still tell your side of the story — along with how you are solving this problem — via an e-mail or through your own blog. In addition, a proactive crisis management plan should be implemented through traditional media. Engage in the discussion and be honest; nothing can make a situation worse than half-truths or evasion. Try to take the discussion offline by providing e-mail along with your comment to answer any questions. Although you don't have control over some of the negative postings, you can make the positive aspects of your company move up by aggressively promoting and releasing positive news on a regular basis. If unfairly attacked in a forum or a bulletin board, appeal to the forum administrator or moderator who has the ability to edit, delete or modify any thread on the forum.

Today, customers and clients consult the Web before making decisions, and reputations have never been as easily built or destroyed. Every business, small or large, is affected by how it manages its online reputation. Whether you do it yourself or hire an outside reputation management consultant, it's an investment that no company can afford to ignore. □

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