

PluggedIn: Does Your Online Image Need a Makeover?

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There's hope for people with an unflattering photo, blog entry or video clip floating around on the Web. Not only can you take steps to clean up your online image, but several companies are willing to help you for up to \$10,000.

A character in Christopher Buckley's new novel "Boomsday" makes a fortune when he comes up with Spider Repellent - software that searches out and deletes anything bad that appears about you on the Web.

"It was so simple," he writes, "he wondered why no one had thought of it before."

Unfortunately, Spider Repellent only appears in a novel, meaning that a search for your name in Google or Yahoo can still bring up results you wish it wouldn't.

Nevertheless, there's hope for people with an unflattering photo, blog entry or video clip floating around on the Web. Not only can you take steps to clean up your online image, but several companies are willing to help you for up to \$10,000.

"People make decisions about one another based on what they find online - sometimes decisively - before they meet one another in real life. This goes to everything people find important -- it goes to career, romance, dignity, sense of self," said Michael Fertik, chief executive of Reputation Defender Inc. (reputationdefender.com)

"It is essential that you know what's out there online about you and you take charge of it as much as possible," he added. "Either yourself or with a service like mine."

Started last year, the company's basic product is MyReputation/MyChild. For about \$10 a month, it conducts an in-depth Web search and reports findings that could take a savvy Internet user 3 to 4 hours a month to uncover.

The client can then request the service try to remove or make less prominent anything unflattering at a cost of about \$30 per item. But Fertik said that does not always work.

"We don't try news articles or government records," said Fertik, a Harvard Law School graduate. "This is stuff that is everyday stuff - maybe legacy from your college years, or legacy from a discussion forum as a young working person."

For executives, hedge fund managers, or corporations with big budgets, the company offers a product, MyEdge, that starts at \$10,000 for even more complex Web identity makeovers.

Start a Blog, Launch a Web Site

You don't have to have deep pockets, however, to put your best foot forward on the Web.

If you don't like what you find about yourself on the Internet, one of the best remedies is to start a blog. It's a fairly simple process using Web sites like blogger.com, and will allow you to manage your online identity with entries and also influence what appears when you search your name.

Those with more technical know-how may want to create their own Web home-page, which can also show potential employers or dates how savvy you are on the Internet.

In case a home-page or blog is too daunting, Fred Stutzman and Terrell Russell, two PhD students at the University of North Carolina, have started a company named claimID that will consolidate and package search results for you.

"We haven't invented any technology," said Russell. "This stuff is already available. You can do this already if you care to read about it and learn and spend lots of hours."

He adds, "You can fix your own car if you want to, too."

ClaimID (claimid.com) began with a small circle of friends in January 2006 before opening up to the public six months later. The free site now has about 17,000 members.

Russell said they started the site - which essentially allows you to consolidate your online identity in one place - when they realized that as PhD candidates and teachers, their own students would be Googling them.

Naymz (naymz.com) is another company that creates personal pages and links, such as to MySpace, blogs, and online photo albums. Naymz then promotes these pages to the top of Web search results by buying advertising on key words on Google.

"Online identity is becoming more and more important," said co-founder Tom Drugan. "It should be top of mind, especially professionals, who really should keep an eye on what's being said out there about them."

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