

How to tend image in age of online permanence

May 9 2013, by Claudia Buck

The embarrassing tweet. The drunken party photos. The DUI arrest. The messy divorce or business scandal. When it comes to the Internet, there are no secrets. If people are searching for you, what they find isn't necessarily what you want them to see.

"Google is increasingly becoming your first impression ... but it's getting increasingly harder to take control of that impression," said Patrick Ambron, co-founder of BrandYourself.com, part of the growing "online reputation management" industry.

Whether it's a new [college graduate](#) looking for a first job, a single jumping into the online dating world or a business owner stung by negative publicity, almost everyone has some online history they'd like to bury.

And that's the problem. On the Web, it's virtually impossible to erase anything entirely.

That has helped spur growth in the "reputation management" industry.

According to media consultant BIA/Kelsey, small- and medium-sized businesses spent about \$1.6 billion in 2012 managing their online reputations in various ways. That figure is expected to reach more than \$2.9 billion in 2017.

Companies like BrandYourself, ReputationChanger.com,

Reputation.com and others help individuals, companies, celebrities, even foreign governments, put their best foot forward online.

The key: Pushing the "good stuff" about you to the top of a [Google search](#), while suppressing the negative.

"Almost 94 percent of Google searches don't go beyond the first page. You can push things down to the third or fourth page ... that's the closest you can come to erasing things from the Internet," said Michael Zammuto, president of ReputationChanger.com, a Philadelphia-based firm whose clients include Hollywood celebrities, [Fortune 500 companies](#) and foreign governments.

"It can be very difficult to get things taken down. So instead, you have to focus on telling your story better."

Here's how:

-Populate yourself. It's like a positive PR campaign where you want to get yourself on as many online platforms and links as you can: A personal website, LinkedIn and other [social media](#) profiles, a YouTube video with your name in the headline. Post some articles, a lecture, a link to something about or by you in writing.

"The intent is to make those things in the eyes of the search engine more authoritative. Then Google will naturally rank those things higher," Zammuto said.

-Don't engage. For businesses, Zammuto said it's natural to want to wage war against negative posts, especially those on customer review sites like Yelp.com. Restaurants and service-oriented businesses are especially vulnerable to nasty comments by anonymous bloggers.

Hard as it sounds, ignore them, said Zammuto.

"Stop going on there and defending it. If you get into a debate with an anonymous person with a chip on their shoulder, it's not worth it. It will make (the debate) rank higher in searches for your company's name."

Yelp.com, which recently held a "town hall" meeting with small-business owners in Sacramento, Calif., says businesses can manage their online reputations by responding to customer reviews, both good and bad.

Take a deep breath and respond carefully to negative comments, but always thank those who post a complimentary review, said Morgan Remmers, Yelp's manager of local business outreach in San Francisco.

-Do it yourself. While reputation management firms may charge fees from a few thousand to a few million a year for high-level corporate and government accounts, there also are sites that cater to everyday people.

BrandYourself.com, started in New York by two young entrepreneurs in 2012, offers free and paid services.

It lets you create a free profile page, as well as submit up to three sources - say, your LinkedIn profile or a mention on your company's website. It reviews those, then gives tips to make them more appealing to Google search engines. For those wanting expanded help, it offers paid services for \$80 a year and up.

Reputation management firms see all types of clients.

BrandYourself, for instance, had a New York doctor who was continually losing business to a similarly named colleague who had less-than-favorable reviews on professional websites. Another client's 2002 wedding was prominently featured in a New York Times story. Now

divorced and embarking on a new career, she sought the company's help in submerging her wedding story, so it wasn't the first item popping up in a Google search of her name.

Youthful escapades also can be problematic. Zammuto said he's working with a mid-30s business owner who posed for Playgirl magazine in his 20s. Now married, the business owner sought help in getting his "reclining nude" photos to drop lower in Google searches. In another case, a young Drexel University business major was mortified by sexually explicit photos taken by a boyfriend that frequently showed up when she Googled her own name. She had dropped out of social media altogether.

Wrong approach, said Zammuto. In both cases, he advises getting lots of new content posted that include headshot photos - ideally in a business suit. Eventually, those professional images will help push the more salacious ones deeper into Google's recesses.

-Buy your name: Zammuto recommends going to domain sites, like GoDaddy.com, and buying your name.

"Buy your 'firstnamelastname.com,' as well as .net and .org," he said. "With each of those sites, put up different content. You're trying to take up slots on a Google search page."

For instance, he said, your .com site can discuss previous jobs and professional accomplishments. On .net, put up content about your academic history and extracurricular activities you're proud of. On .org, post your views on business or career-related topics.

In the case of the Drexel business major, "Who cares about a bachelor-degree student's views on (Bank of America) earnings? That's not the point," said Zammuto. "Google will care. What's important is that when

people search for her, that's what comes up."

-DIY tools: There are plenty of do-it-yourself tools for those who want to be sure their online reputation stays clean.

Scott Eggert, director of digital communications for Merlot Marketing in Sacramento, uses a number of tools, both personally and for his clients.

He recommends setting up three: Google Alerts, which sends an email anytime your name (or any selected search topic) appears online; Newsle.com, which sends email alerts when your name (or anyone else's you choose) is published in news articles or online blog posts; and Mention.net, which covers the "nooks and crannies," such as social media mentions. ("It's backup," said Eggert. "It catches stuff that Google Alerts might miss.")

Eggert, president of the Social Media Club Sacramento, which hosts workshops on how to use social media effectively, said setting up a free Google Alert (www.google.com/alerts) for your name is a good first step.

"Most people should do that, if they have any online exposure at all. You want to know if there's good buzz and if the opposite is true, too."

Another recommended site: Completed.com, which lets you create an online showcase of your accomplishments and professional successes.

Even the completely innocent can get tarnished online by sharing a name with someone notorious. That's what inspired the 25-year-old co-founders of Brand-Yourself. When Ambron's business partner, Pete Kistler, was still in college, he couldn't get an internship, a job interview or even a callback from employers, until he discovered that bad publicity about a local drug dealer with the same name was popping up first on

Google.

"Bad search results happen to good people," said Ambron. For anyone, the solution is to "bury all the unwanted things as deep in [Google](#) as you can."

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