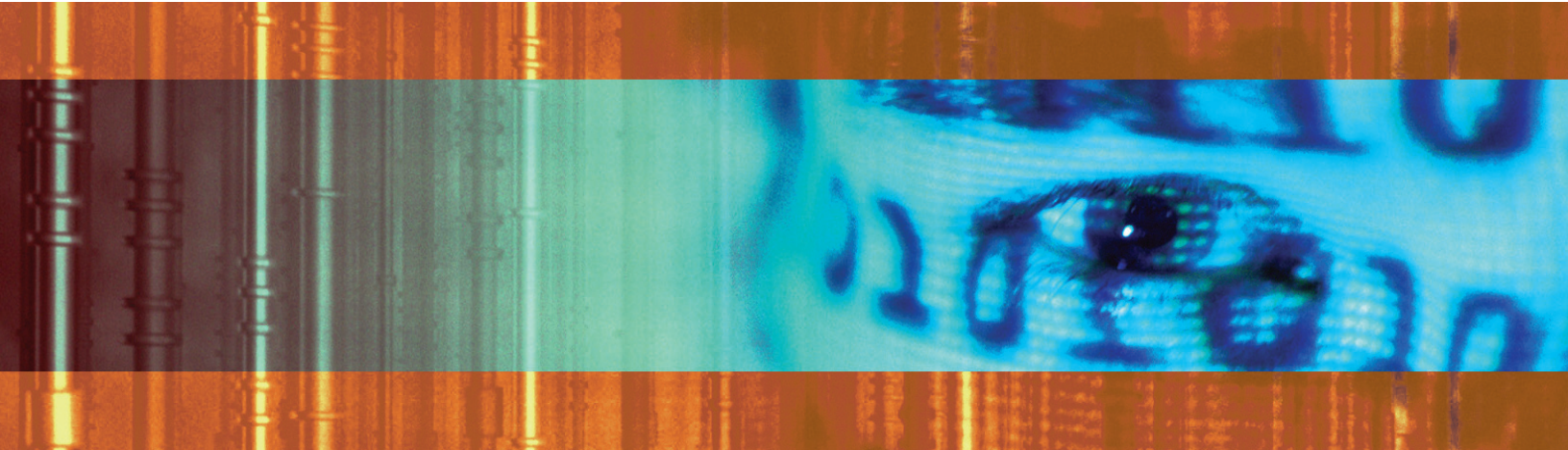


Online Reputation Management



Protect Your Brand
Influence Consumer Perception



elixirsystems

Are you aware of what your customers are saying about you? What about your ex-employees? What about your competitors? Information travels quickly across the internet. Are you listening to the online conversations about your brand? How are these conversations affecting how people view your organization?

Consumers use the web to make buying decisions. A vast majority buys offline, but goes online to research, read reviews and get opinions from other consumers.

With the growth of consumer-generated media (CGM) such as blogs, forums, and message boards, information can be quickly generated and indexed by search engines. For business leaders, it is vitally important to actively listen to what is being said online, even if messages are negative. Listening creates the opportunity to take action and resolve internal problems or deal with malicious information, both of which can negatively influence your brand image and your corporate reputation.

ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION OVERVIEW

Successful organizations are aware of the importance of reputation. A positive reputation brings trust, confidence, and sales, which are ultimately reflected in revenue growth and profitability. A bad reputation can lead to a decrease in consumer confidence, and, in turn, a reduction in revenue and profits.

In this day and age, erroneous rumors, malicious gossip, unfair opinions and other bad news spread fast! The internet has compounded the speed and the geographic distribution of this information. By the time negative news gets out it is often too late and the damage irrevocable.

Online Reputation

Before the development of the web, news was slow moving and organizations could take their time to develop structured responses to problems. Currently, rapid developments in consumer generated media sites mean that the general public can quickly air their views. These views can make or break a brand. Consumers trust these published opinions and base their buying decisions on them. For example, eBay's success has been based on their system of feedback ratings, which provides consumer opinions of sellers. Any information available to your potential clients affects your reputation and their buying decisions.

Similarly, ex-employees, and brand activists can easily get their personal viewpoints out there. Competitors who can also spread malicious rumors and lies about your company and brand in the hopes of stealing your market share.

These types of unsubstantiated reporting can affect your corporate image. Sites containing these kinds of information are being indexed by search engines and appearing in search results for your brand names. The information can spread to the traditional media, compounding the damage.

Online Reputation is Important

Consumers use search engines to gather information. When they undertake a search for your company name or brand, your hope is that your own website is high up on the search results list.

Undertake a search on your favorite search engine for your company name and look at the results. Hopefully, your company web site is at the top of the list. But what about the other results in the top 10? What do they say about your brand?

People searching for your company name will often look at all of these results – not just those pointing to your homepage. When their eyes skim down the list, what stands out about your company? Is it all good, relevant, up-to-date information? Are there any negative listings saying bad things about your brand or your company? Are there sites with outdated information about your brand in the list? What are people saying about you on industry forums and blogs? People looking for your company in the search engine results will scan all this information.

A client estimated they were losing \$2.5 million in sales annually brought about by reputation attacks on CGM sites and the wrongful use of their trademark in paid advertising.

People from all walks of life use search engines to research, and gather information so that they can make informative decisions. If the information they come across during a search relating to your brand is adverse, it can affect the decisions they make. Negative information can ultimately lead to problems in many areas including sales, investor relations, recruitment, financials, image, and reputation. In other words - damage to your brand.



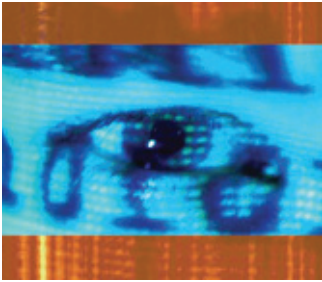
ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Online Reputation Management combines marketing and public relations with search engine marketing. Visibility and high rankings for good publicity are the ultimate goals, which will in turn push bad publicity down the search engine listings and out of public view. Statistics show that the general public rarely views more than two pages of search engine results for any search.

The goals of Online Reputation Management are high rankings and indexing in the search engines for all positive associated web sites and corporate communications. The result is an increase in your overall positive web presence, which will help you own the top spots of the search engine rankings for your brand. Online Reputation Management enables you to protect and manage your reputation by becoming actively involved in the outcome of search engine results through a three-step process.

The three steps involved in Online Reputation Management are:





1. MONITOR

Monitor And Track What Is Being Said Online

You want to know what is being said about your brand. You should be aware that ordinary people influence how the general public views your brand. It is very easy for anyone to publish information on CGM sites such as blogs, podcasts, and opinion forums. You must monitor these online conversations. However, the size and complexity of the internet, coupled with the speed at which news travels, means that it is difficult to continuously monitor all that is being said.

To address this problem, you need an early warning system to alert you of all news relating to your brand, so you may remedy when needed. There are internet monitoring services available that do the work for you. Such monitoring systems not only inform you of news and information relating to your brand, but will also help you to gather market intelligence and assess developing trends.

To monitor manually for your brand:

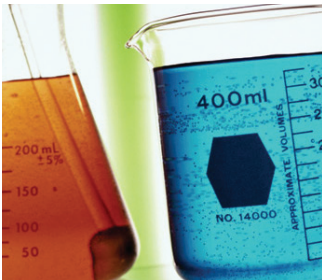
- Set up Google and Yahoo Alerts to catch the use of your brands in the news.
- Use sites such as Feedster and Technorati to watch your brand in blogs.
- Customize RSS readers for brand tracking.
- Track for all names including brand names, company names, product names, and key employee names.
- Monitor industry-related sites.

Once a monitoring system is in place for your brand you should also track other information such as competing brands and organizations, industry terms, as well as general industry news.

Monitoring gives you immediate heads-up if adverse information is appearing. Monitoring is an essential and useful tactic for controlling adverse information within your search engine space. Unfortunately, monitoring by itself is not enough. By this stage, it is usually too late and damage has been done. The best outcomes occur if you pro-actively control your space and what people read about your brand. It is important to analyze your current space in order to take action to control it.



TIP: Clients come to us after they find negative information about their brand in search engine results. At this stage, a major campaign is needed to clean up the results. By monitoring on a daily basis, this type of campaign can be prevented. Monitoring is a cost-effective strategy.



2. ANALYZE

Analyze How The Visible Information Affects Your Brand, Your Reputation

Your search engine space is dynamic and constantly changing as new sites are added to the mix and as search engines alter their algorithms. You need to develop an understanding of your search engine environment and of your competition.

First of all, undertake an analysis of your search engine space. Look at the sites listed in search results for your brand. List the sites that offer positive information and those that are negative. Determine what types of sites they are - blog, forum, consumer review, etc. Assign a value to their quality – Page Rank, number of links, influence, etc. Determine which results you may want to move up or down the list. This will help you understand the scale of the work involved.

Analyze Your Online Assets:

Your online assets are the sites that you have control over and that you can use to dominate the search engine rankings. These include:

- Corporate Sites
- Sister Sites and Micro-Sites (other sites from your organization)
- Product Sites
- Corporate Blogs
- Employee Blogs
- Partner Sites (supplier sites, recruitment sites)
- Corporate Communications (press releases, articles)

At this stage of the analysis, document the present position of each of your sites, including screen-shots of the various search engines results, so you can monitor future movement and activity. Further developing these assets will be discussed below.



TIP: Many organizations are unaware of the large number of sites that they have direct influence over. They often think only in terms of their corporate site. Explore all opportunities.



3. INFLUENCE

Influence the Results by Participating in the Conversation and Eliminating Negative Sites

Influence online conversations by being actively involved in them. Your participation will give you the opportunity to improve the perception of your brand. Take an active part in your industry conversation by becoming a regular contributor to blogs and forums within your industry. Lead the conversation about your brand.

Sources of Potential Reputation Problems, Sources of Opportunity

- Blogs, Forums, and Consumer Opinion Sites
- Consumer Complaint Sites
- Social Network Sites
- Competitor Attacks
- Trademark Infringement
- Counterfeit Products
- Counter-intelligence
- Crisis Management Developments

A client in the education field came to us after a negative listing for their brand became visible. With our insight they made a determined effort to be involved in industry dialogue. This positive dialogue now appears in the top ten listings for the brand across the search engines.

Blogs, Forums, and Consumer Opinion Sites

Blogs are important and consumers use blogs to gather information. Blogs can quickly develop a following and influence reader's views. Blogs also make reputation management challenging because of the speed at which information gets exchanged.

The millions of blogs in existence today have made the *blogosphere* the world's largest and most influential form of interactive media. Small, unknown blogs can link or syndicate to larger, more influential blogs, which in turn can supply story leads to traditional media. Those stories, once legitimized by the mainstream press, are then spun back out into the blogosphere. The blogosphere dramatically expands the reach of your audience, which means the potential for more supporters, as well as more detractors.

Industry forums exist to exchange information within an industry. Forums are often organized by categories. Participants can post industry related news, developments, and issues, thereby encouraging discussion. Forums are used for information sharing, education, and idea development.

Consumer opinion sites are platforms built to solicit feedback from consumers about products so that others can make informed buying decisions. These sites provide valuable information for buyers, but should be closely monitored in order to gain insight into customer's views and concerns.

Interacting with Blogs and Forums

Engage with contributors to blogs and forums and attempt to build a relationship with them. Make these two-way conversations and use the comments sections to get your viewpoint across.

One major principle of reputation management is that if you attempt to hide the truth it will come back to haunt you. Therefore, be honest in your online conversations. Respond directly to critics. The end result is that speaking the truth builds trust in your audience — even if the truth is negative.

If a blog or forum does include inaccuracies about your brand you should send them clarifying evidence and ask them to remove the error. Again, this is part of building a relationship. If you are truthful with authors and offer to continue the dialogue in the future, possibly by sending them your latest news, a successful

resolution can be achieved. If not, you may want to add a comment with your own perspective on the situation. If the negative information is true, you may want to post an honest public comment that will encourage a continuation of the dialogue.

If there is a negative posting in a forum, try to contact the source directly in order to resolve the issue. This personal offline contact will give you the opportunity to create a potential evangelist for your brand.

Identify the most influential sites for your industry and participate in them. You may want to empower a member of your organization to participate in these industry blogs and forums. Along with participation, you may want to consider sponsorship opportunities. This will help to build relationships and alliances with these outlets.



TIP: With regards to industry conversation – become a leader and influence the conversation.

Consumer Complaint Sites

Consumer complaint sites (also called ‘attack’ ‘boycott’ or ‘flame’ sites) are devoted to attacking individual organizations or brands. These sites are often well-organized attacks and should be handled carefully. If there is a whole website devoted to attacking your brand what should you do? Consider the following questions:

Are the complaints valid?

- If so, Can you integrate organizational changes to eliminate the complaints?

Are competitors involved?

- Copyright infringement may be an issue.

What is the best way to counteract the attack?

- A counter-attack site
- A Pay-per-Click campaign
- Participation
- Litigation

Generally speaking, litigation against consumer complaint sites is not the answer as it can increase the amount of adverse publicity against your site. Direct communication is an option, but bear in mind that anyone who goes to the trouble of building a website dedicated to the destruction of your brand may not give you the time of day. However, listening to their point of view is essential and a well-formed response should be produced. A counter-attack site giving your point of view is a possible platform for your response. This can be given immediate placement in search engine results if a paid advertising campaign is activated.

Negative Search Term Domains

Research negative term domain name availability (e.g. yourbrandsucks.com). You should consider purchasing these domains to avoid someone else buying them and redirecting them to your corporate site.

Social Network Sites

Social networks include participation driven sites such as My Space and Wikipedia. They have enormous amounts of traffic. Participants share common interests and information. As a result, brand endorsements are visible and shared amongst members. Chains of endorsements evolve from this sharing, making social networking incredibly powerful and influential upon the corporate brand. Social network sites should be monitored for your brand.

Competitor Attacks

Your competitors are desperate to take business away from you. They may go as far as participating in undercover smear campaigns against your brand. This can take the form of negative CGM conversations that may directly infringe upon your trademark.

Ruthless competitors posing as customers on so-called consumer watchdog sites such as scam.com or ripoffreport.com can and often do post any form of libelous content with impunity. In this situation, swift legal action may be necessary to limit damage.

Another technique used by unscrupulous competitors is known as 'Google Bombing' or 'Link Smearing'. This involves the use of software to add hundreds of links per instant to link farm sites and directories where offensive information can be instantaneously linked to your website.

A client in the legal field had a reputation issue with negative postings written by a competitor. The development and distribution of positive corporate communications displaced these postings from the search engine results.

A Google AdWords client was in a circumstance where their competitors were bidding on their trademarked search terms. The cost to secure top positions for their ads skyrocketed from an initial \$2.00 per click to \$15.00 per click. Monthly expenditures increased from \$1,200 to nearly \$30,000. The estimated budget increased to \$500,000 for the year to control the space for their branded trademarked term.

Trademark Infringement

Trademark infringement issues are of great concern to Pay-per-Click (PPC) advertisers. Twenty percent (20%) of all searches online are trademark searches. Businesses around the world are losing millions of dollars because of trademark infringements. It also drives the price of PPC ads upwards.

Companies often bid on the brand names of their competitors. This means that when a searcher types in your brand name the ads for your competitors appear. They click on your competitor's site thinking it is related to your site. This is basically a form of bait and switch fraud, which offers your customers an alternative brand to your product.



TIP: Stop all advertisers from bidding on the terms within Yahoo and MSN. At this time, Google is the only one of the top three search engines that still maintains a strong stance in allowing advertisers to bid on trademarked search terms -as long as the trademarked term is not used within the advertiser's ad-copy.

Defending Your Brand Against Trademark Violations

Conduct search audits at least once every month.

- Organic Search Results
- Paid Search Results
- PPC Contextual Ads

Look at both the questionable result and the site displayed in the result. When looking over the possible violator's site, don't just look over the visible content on the site; look over the code as well to uncover hidden text, image alt tags, and keyword meta tags that may include your trademarked names.

There is also the possibility that they may be using a cloaked page, which includes your trademark. To check this out, you will need to view the search engine's cached page on file.

Document all of your findings by dating the violation as well as the site owner's complete contact information. Obtain Whois information for the site. Once you have all of this documented, you will need to send your findings to the appropriate search engine. For both organic and paid results, use a "screen capture" of the page displaying the mark infringement. For mark infringements that are visible on a website, save the entire page's code as an .htm file.



TIP: You can obtain Whois information at www.dnsstuff.com.

You also have the option to take legal action in which case you should present your records to your legal counsel. You may want to gather evidence by hiring a third party to collect evidence against the infringer of your trademark or copyrighted material.

Counter-Intelligence

Confidential corporate information can be exposed on the internet. Leaks may be the result of employee error or intentional and malicious. Monitoring for this type of leak is essential.

Counterfeit Products

Counterfeit products that masquerading as your brand can cause serious damage to your business. Not only do you lose revenue from lost sales; you also lose control of quality and safety. This can result in severe reputation damage. The US Department of Commerce estimates that counterfeit products account for the loss of \$200 billion per year for US businesses.

Crisis Management

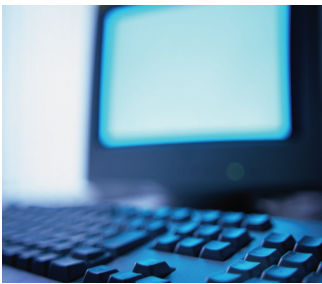
A crisis management plan is essential in order to react quickly and communicate effectively when a corporate crisis occurs. It is possible to handle these types of situations well, by communicating effectively, and to actually come out ahead. However, in the majority of incidences this is not the end result and reputations are tarnished because trust in your brand has been violated.

A manufacturer of designer leather goods identified negative information on CGM sites. After investigation we found that the postings related to quality issues with counterfeit products. Litigation was recommended.

Crisis can come in many different forms ranging from product recalls and lawsuits to natural disasters. Relatively few organizations have a specific crisis management strategy in place. Those that do, such as airlines, tend to be in industries in which disasters are an unfortunate but unavoidable occurrence.

The speed at which news travels and the development of real-time technologies requires that every organization should have a crisis management plan in place.

INFLUENCE RESULTS BY DEVELOPING YOUR ONLINE ASSETS



Corporate Site

You must make sure that your corporate site is fully search engine optimized and appears at the top of results lists for your name and your brand. If your organization has more than one brand site, the same attention should be given to all of your sites.

Sister Sites and Micro Sites

If there are other sites within your organization, such as micro sites and individual product sites, they should include an optimized page about the corporate site.

Corporate Blogs

Consider the benefits of developing corporate blogs if you do not already have them. Blogs can be aimed at supporting specific business functions such as marketing or customer service. Being a forward thinker within your industry will help your reputation to grow.

Employee Blogs

Encourage employee blogging. These blogs can be search engine optimized for your brand.

Partner Sites

Look for 3rd party opportunities to include information about your company. These could include the websites of your product retailers, parts suppliers, distributors, etc. Develop relationships with the various types of partner organizations and set a goal of getting information about your business on their site.

Communicate with your business partners and ask them to optimize a page about your brand. Make sure that all content relating to your company on other highly ranked sites is accurate and current. Communicate with these partners regularly and provide them with site updates.

Corporate Communications

Publish all your corporate communications on your website including press releases, articles, testimonials, case studies, white papers, etc., and be sure these pages are optimized. If this information is not published or optimized in a search friendly way—it is not indexed or listed by the search engines. Release regular newswire releases and submit them to online wire services. Optimize these press releases for your name or brand. Submit articles about your business to online industry publications. Optimize these articles for your name or brand.

Paid Advertising

Consider a paid search engine listing for your company name or brand. Although this does not affect the 'natural' listings, it contributes to add to the total domination of your search engine space. Dominating your space in this manner also counters the efforts of competitors who divert traffic by using your trademark.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Manage the Search Engine Results

The above ideas are all directed at dealing with potential problems and getting as many listings as possible related to your company or brand at the top of the search engine results pages. This is, of course, not an overnight task, but should rather be viewed as a sustained campaign. However, once you begin to see results, you are effectively managing your search engine space. This gives you the control over how people perceive your company or brand. From a public relations viewpoint, this helps develop favorable publicity for your company. From a business viewpoint, it helps give consumers confidence in your company and brand. The end result is an increase in the overall web presence for your company and its products and services.

Maintaining and Monitoring Results

Once you have put your Online Reputation Management plan into operation you need to maintain your work and continue to monitor results.

Areas that should be monitored include:

- Organic positions
- Pay-Per-Click tracking on your branded terms
- Snapshots of the top 10 search engine results
- News about your brand
- News about your competitor's brands
- Consumer generated media

Take Action Immediately On New Results

Your overall online reputation management strategy also requires regular review. What are you doing to maintain or improve results on a monthly basis?

Persistence

The key to successful Online Reputation Management is – if at first you do not succeed try, try, and try again! Reputation management is not only about monitoring – it's about taking action. Action is not always easy. It requires persistence and a dogged determination to succeed.

Online Reputation Management is rapidly becoming an important strategy for organizations. The American Marketing Association states that in 2006 companies will attach more importance to online sources of news, increasingly monitor these sources, and then take action on the findings.

Online Reputation Management is critical for organizations as they observe the fiscal implications. A bad reputation can cost an organization millions of dollars in lost sales each year. Pro-active communication is the key to maintaining and improving reputations. Currently, many reputations are being damaged by the wrong response or by no response at all. Do not allow your organization to be part of this trend.

Online Reputation Management through monitoring, analyzing and influencing online communications, can help prevent the loss of business and ensure the ongoing success of your organization.

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About Elixir Systems

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Elixir Systems is a full service, professional search engine marketing agency that specializes in strategies built around search engine optimization, paid search marketing and online reputation management to help clients develop online business opportunities. Elixir Systems has offices in Scottsdale, Arizona.

