It takes more than a Google name search to know your online brand

There are several reasons why a simple Google search for your name isn't quite enough to understand how your brand is positioned online. First, not all content about your brand is highly visible on Google, meaning you have to dig deeper than the first couple of pages of Google results to truly know how your brand is positioned online. Also, people may find information about you using a search term or phrase that doesn't include your name. And last (but not least), your brand (or name) may be entwined with someone else's name, or a news item, that may not be immediately apparent via a Google name search.

Finally, Google searches do not tell you how influential content is – meaning, if, when or how content has the potential to lead to an opinion and from there, to a belief; one must understand this concept to truly evaluate an online reputation and develop an appropriate program that protects, supports and/or improves it.

You online reputation defined – basics for the business executive in 2012

By Jay Byrne, president v-Fluence Interactive

Mark Twain's often quoted admonition that a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes is one way to describe the power the Internet and the delicate nature of online reputations. Indeed, when your personal reputation hits your online radar screen, you can bet, nine times out of 10, it won't be a positive opportunity, and the truth may never see the light of day.

Unfortunately, many senior executives and business owners who acknowledge the influence of the Internet for business needs discount the Web when it comes to their personal and professional reputations. Most Fortune 100 executives know about Facebook and Twitter, but surprisingly, few actively engage with these or other social media channels[1]. Step beyond those well branded spaces into the world of Xing, Foursquare or BlogSpot, and it becomes more unlikely to see interest, much less participation.

The challenge for executives: The idea of personal information, comings and goings, pictures and other typical social content, showing up in public spaces like social media is unappealing to most successful business people. With that, most executives lack the time to effectively maintain profiles and update content. They also lack the time to do more than a Google name search to learn about their online brands – and more is needed. *See sidebar.*

The risk: When bad, false or misleading news hits online, it's usually too late to begin the process of evaluating and building your online reputation; this, in turn, increases the time and costs to manage a now Internet-damaged reputation exponentially.

The solution: Create a sustainable program that influences audiences you care about effectively. This can only be achieved through an honest and reliable understanding of your current online brand, as well as how to generate influence online.

Easier said than done? To help, this article shows you how an effective strategy can be developed, and the strong rationale for the approach behind it. Based on research by renowned social scientists Daniel Yankelovich and Vincent Covello, centered around the idea that opinions lead to beliefs, which in turn, can lead to action, v-Fluence has developed a simplified four-step model for evaluating your online reputation and where and when to influence behavior.

Consider following this model as you build your online reputation program; each stage presents opportunities to help manage your reputation and just as critical, disrupt negative opinions and beliefs and/or support a positive action.

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[1] Next15 research published in June 2011 reveals only nine Fortune 100 CEO's have managed Facebook profiles, http://timdyson.wordpress.com/2011/06/06/how-many-fortune-100-ceos-use-facebook-or-twitter/.

1. People become aware of your brand via normal day-to-day dialogue and content consumption activities. If the information people discover online is sufficiently provocative, it may form an opinion; this opinion-formation stage needs to occur before a belief is formed – typically associated with an action.
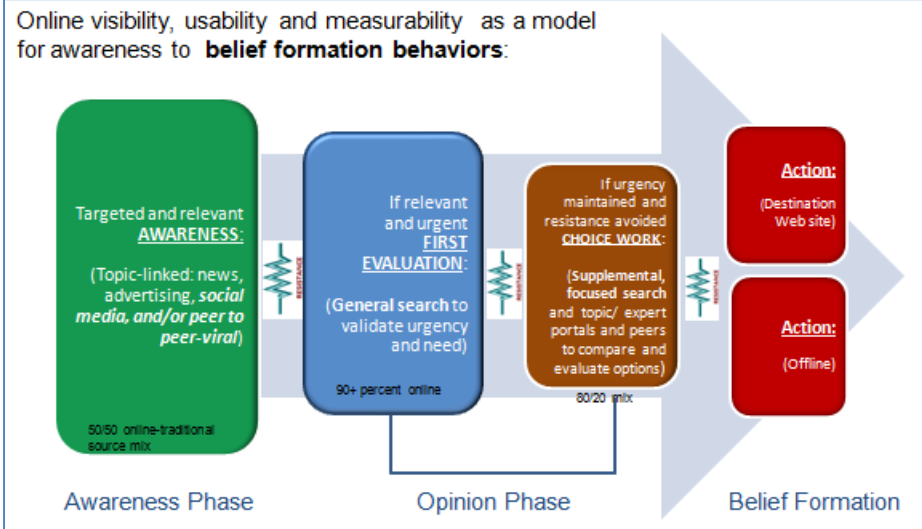
Why does this matter, and what can you do out it? These four elements (awareness, first inquiry, choice work and action) are the fundamental premises behind this philosophy, and show how your online efforts can make or break a brand reputation. The upshot: The timing and type of the content you deliver at each of these intersection points is critical to influence the online audience and their formed beliefs linked to actions associated with your reputation.

What to do - Awareness: Monitor social media and online news awareness channels for "hits" associated with your brand to identify opportunity and risk linked buzz. Establish profiles and content sharing accounts in relevant awareness channels to influence and intersect with influential awareness generating dialogue.

2. "First inquiry" – or the first evaluation of content linked to your brand – is your first chance to influence behavior. So how does one know where to place content to reach people, and what that content should be? The answer is relatively simple: Place content in places where people go online. Regardless of where awareness takes place, the most common space people go to find information online is search; this means that if you're able to show up where and when people search, you've got a shot at influencing people who've entered this "first inquiry" phase. And thankfully, this type of information – the terms people use in search and how often they use them – is available via various low-cost or free tools provided by search indexes Google and MSN/Bing, or other higher cost aggregator services that provide enhanced keyword intelligence. At v-Fluence, we use a combination of services to collect, evaluate and weigh search interest, which can be tracked month-to-month to determine the degree and evolution of interest in a brand or other related issues.

From this research – the language analysis – we can discern where we want to appear online (in which search engines and against which terms), and how. This influential language can be used to assess opportunities in social media spaces, as well.

Why this matters, and what you can do out it: If you can reach people during this phase of interest (i.e., "first inquiry"), you have a better shot at influencing behaviors, current and future ones, early on in this process that eventually leads to a belief and action. Tactically, you should ensure that the right types of content, yours' and others' that supports it, show up when people search using the language you know is relevant and used with measurable frequency.

What to do – First Inquiry: Identify and track search language for your brand, evaluate any "quality attributes[2]" linked to these queries and compare results with peers and competitors. Position (via creation and SEO) correspondingly relevant, owned and influenced content against these queries.

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[2] Quality attributes are those keyword terms people use linked to your brand that further define their interests.

3. After "initial inquiry" comes "opinion formation" (either negative or positive), then a phase of "choice work." If content engages a user, he/she will evaluate further via other types of searches and/or trusted sources (e.g., industry-specific websites, social media spaces where endorsement-like qualifications like friends, followers and likes provide credibility) for additional information; from here, they will make a choice – to form an opinion (i.e., move along our path), or not.

Why this matters, and what you can do out it: Engaging with targeted audiences, particularly when they are interested in your brand or related issue, in spaces where further information is sought should be considered another avenue for reputation building and/or protection. Tactically, consider placing content (via organic and/or paid methods) that positions your brand effectively in these more specific spaces online.

As part of this, it's important to understand that negative information is more influential than neutral or favorable content. People naturally seek out negatives to avoid risks, and it only takes a few credibly-perceived negatives, even when positive references exist, to lead to a negative brand opinion. Therefore, as part of this work, you must address negatives where and when they are found with direct, contextual and credible information.

What to do – Choice Work: Ensure you have appropriate brand information in topic-specific channels associated with your key audience areas of interest. Trade Journals, influential topic-specific bloggers and news sources are examples of such spaces. When negative quality attribute search exists (e.g., Hugh Grant scandal) address those negatives directly and via credible third parties with appropriate content, optimized against specific negative queries. Research suggests that Wikipedia, viewed as critical and independent, frequently plays an influential role in choice work evaluation of brands.

4. The final stage is the transition from opinion to belief. Beliefs are hard to change or alter, unlike opinions. And when a believe occurs, an action takes place, which could mean a decision to make a purchase, invest in your company and/or not do business with you – something difficult to measure.

To solidify a belief, you must find opportunities that exist where those who've undergone the first phases of this process – "first inquiry," "opinion formation" and "choice work" – are likely to be found. Your content, if appropriately and effectively placed (where and when is critical), can shift opinions to beliefs.

Why does this matter, and what you can do out it? If you do not reach people at this stage, people will seek out some other way to complete the process (e.g., make a purchase), or worse, they may form a negative opinion and become less open to any future engagement with your brand. Indeed, reaching people as they've formed an opinion in a way that resonates with them will result in a belief that supports your brand, which is our ultimate goal. For most executives, simply preventing negative beliefs from being formed that may impact their business opportunities versus securing a positive belief is an appropriate and achievable goal. For others, their business may rely upon building a favorable and well anchored personal brand that locks-in positive beliefs.

What to do – Belief Formation: Tactically, consider opportunities like social networking profiles for your personal brand that audiences can "follow" or "like;" this is a simple tactic that can prevent a negative belief from forming and lead to other opportunities for a favorable outcome. Other tactics include simply facilitating off-line interactions with your audiences via easy to use contact forms or public schedule/ event postings. Polls/surveys to rate content or performance or update subscriptions options can also help serve this purpose. Any form of committed action can help facilitate desired closure for your audiences who have engaged in this process. Research also shows that inability to complete will lead to a higher likelihood of a negative *opinion* formation. Further, this significantly reduces (by as much as 90 percent) the likelihood of future engagement in this process associated with your brand.

Best-practice considerations

Off-the-shelf and one-size-fits-all solutions rarely work to evaluate and address each of these four key stages of awareness online. Standard tactics and best practices should be applied across each stage of this reputation-defining process, but they need to be applied strategically and thoughtfully.

Consider the following steps:

1. **Evaluate your online environment** – assess how to people search, what channels and destinations are most likely to appear and who's seeking to influence your brand.

2. **Evaluate your existing resources** and their effectiveness. Compare your resources against best practices, as well as against resources owned by your peers, competitors and other influencing stakeholders, to identify opportunities for enhancing existing, new and owned (or other) content.

3. **Develop, optimize and maintain relevant owned and third-party content**. Creating an effective brand reputation online requires more than a website and generic social media profiles. Your content, and relevant content from others who validate your messages, are critical to helping people form a favorable opinion that leads to belief and therefore, action (i.e., your goals). This is particularly important when faced with negative information, regardless of its accuracy.

4. **When merited, appropriately address the credibility of critical information sources and stakeholders**. Brands that suffer from negative content or dialogue online should consider placing information that questions the credibility of the less-than-credible or untruthful sources of negative claims to prevent a negative belief from forming.

5. **Monitor the evolving environment and adjust your online efforts** based on the effectiveness of your investments and corresponding reactions from other influencers.

Next: Deconstructing online reputation services and their tactics – you get what you pay for so don't be surprised.

For more information, visit www.v-Fluence.com or contact us by phone (877) 835-8362 or email at info@v-Fluence.com.

Deconstructing online reputation services and tactics
By Jay Byrne, president v-Fluence Interactive

Nary day goes by without seeing an advertisement for online reputation-building or defending services from the likes of Reputation.com, Netmark.com or the dozens of other search engine optimization and reputation management services. For fees ranging from as little as a few hundred dollars to the tens of thousands of dollars, these services promise to remove negative content from the Web and replace it with content that makes you appear more favorable. Many of these services are akin to snake oil salesmen of yore, promising generic one-potion-cures-all for your personal ills of which they know little about.

For the standard small business, such as dentist office or local law firm, these services may be worth the typical $5,000 to $15,000 "reputation defense" package fee to help dilute critical comments from local social media postings; however, few senior executives or large organizations would likely see much return on investment for the off-the-shelf tactics employed in these programs, especially if a brand or person comes under attack. Simply put, you get what you pay for, and there are no quick fixes to a damaged online reputation.

Most of these services offer the following: An assessment, or audit, of your online reputation, followed by a relatively standardized program that entails content development and optimization. These firms typically also include a reporting system that shows you results over time and specific time periods ranging from three months to a year.

The problem: Truly thoughtful analysis, quality content development and appropriate placement of that content requires a customized strategy, linked to your specific goals and based on best practice tactics that can be sustained by you and your organization; the low-wage offshore Internet sweat shops used to deploy the services offered for $5,000-$15,000 per year to manage online reputations are simply incapable of providing such a thing. In addition, the Web is strewn with remnants of one-time investments in one-size fits all services. Left unmaintained, generic profiles and content positioned for visibility against your brand search can become outdated, corrupted or even hijacked by critics or competitors.

Here is a sampling of what you can expect from these services:

Content Development – biography-based materials and client-provided resumes, sometimes with short, medium and long versions crafted for different uses online.

Web Resource Development and Optimization – recommended coding, content and keyword usage in owned and other content online.

Content Placement – the placement of bio-based materials to various third-party directory services like Ziggs or BusinessCard2.com. Often for additional fees, other client-developed content, such as favorable news articles, images and videos, may be added to the mix.

Some services offer "premium" placements on high visibility sites, but in reality, these are typically free profiles available to any user on media sites like FastCompany.com or Huffington Post. Regardless of the site, these profiles require ongoing monitoring, management and updates to be effective, lest your online reputation become a graveyard of outdated profiles.

Indeed, a poorly-developed, managed and placed profile will serve little purpose (see below). In this case, a "professionally"-developed biography mirrored among dozens of other sites was haphazardly placed on FastCompany.com with a mishmash of links to other profiles and illegible biographical data, all of which was obscured by advertising.

Branded Profile Development – bio-based materials are often further leveraged via profiles via LinkedIn and Facebook and supplemented by other, less well-known platforms, such as PeoplePond and BigSight. Many of these profile and content sharing platforms can be cross-linked and allow for content sharing across your distinct branded pages.

Branded Destinations – the development of branded "micro-sites," which include websites, blogs and micro-blogs via services like Tumblr, Wordpress, Twitter and Blogger. The creation of these accounts includes portions of your biographical profile but rarely the cost of ongoing management, content updates or the social contact development required to make them useful and effective.

This WordPress blog (image on right) developed for a top executive at a leading online reputation management company contains no content other than a brief one-line biographical summary. These one-off, unmanaged destinations will have little to no influence online.
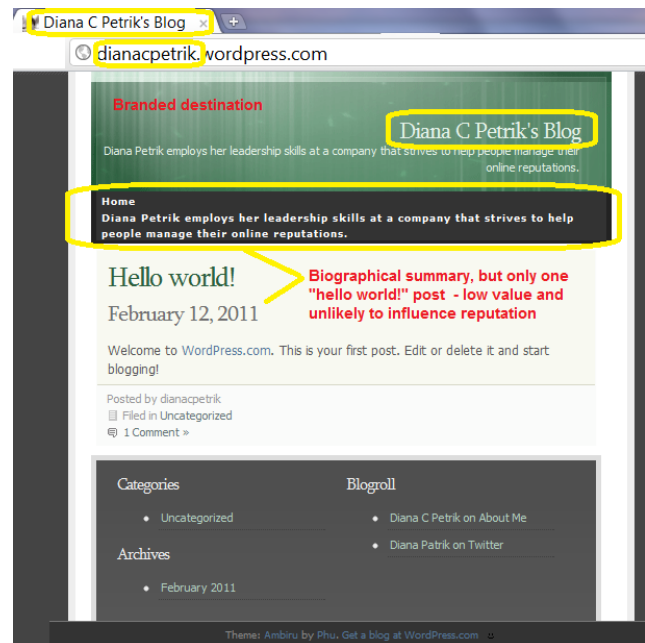
Linking support – Search engine algorithms give weight to the number of websites that link to your content to determine how highly it will appear in search results. Many firms use tactics like social bookmarking, cross linking among various channels (noted above), search engine and directory site submissions and Web wire releases to create these back links. Quality links require time and investment, however. Even worse, some reputation and SEO service use link farms to create back links, which in some cases, place links to your profiles alongside less attractive content (links farms are notorious pornography optimization tools); these tactics may also be viewed as a "black hat."

Clearly, you get what you pay for with most online reputation management services. If your personal reputation merits quality analysis by competent senior counselors, it will likely cost more than a few hundred dollars; don't be fooled by sales pitches claiming otherwise.

And if you want to combine that quality analysis with quality content creation, Web resource development and appropriate placement and optimization of content, the range of fees, often a one-time cost of $7,500 - $15,000, simply won't work. Add in ongoing maintenance, updates and strategic monitoring, all with an eye toward influencing search results in a meaningful and lasting manner, these costs sound almost absurd. One should expect to pay three to four times that amount for quality service and results. For many, that's a cost that needs to be thoughtfully evaluated against the value of a favorable, goal-supporting reputation online – and what the alternative could mean to your bottom line.

Next: How some top executives successfully use and leverage social media to enhance their online reputations.

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