DIGITAL STRATEGY AND TACTICS
FOR BRAND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Do you know what your customers are saying about your brand in the online world? How about your competitors? What about your ex-employees? The Internet and many Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, video sharing and online customer reviews, have provided just about everyone with the ability to create content and have it immediately available to whoever is interested.

For businesses, it is vitally important to listen to what is being said, promote a positive image wherever possible and address any negative sentiment before it starts to affect brand perception, sales and the bottom line. People rely heavily on reputation before they venture into relationships, purchases and investments. Ensuring that the content available on the web accurately and positively reflects the value of your brand is the goal of reputation management in the digital space.

WHAT IS BRAND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Reputation management is about taking an active role in the perception of your brand. It should be noted that you cannot control everything being said about your brand online, but by actively listening, participating in conversations with both fans and detractors, and promoting and distributing positively charged content you can better manage your brand's reputation online.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

People are increasingly using blogs, video, podcasts, images and customer reviews to gather information about your brand. This information may guide the decisions they make about the interactions they have with your brand.

IMPACT ON BRAND PERCEPTION

Perception is reality. If someone does a search for your brand in Google, what will they see? Hopefully, there will be a link to your website, but what if there is a link to a site that talks about a bad experience someone had, or worse yet, what if there was a video that showed how your brand caused harm to someone? Perception of the brand at that moment is probably pretty poor.

IMPACT ON SALES

Would you buy something from a company where 5 out of 6 customer ratings blasted the company for poor customer service, lousy quality or late delivery? Probably not. You might search a little longer for a company that didn't have such bad customer reviews. And, you might even be willing to pay a bit more if you knew the company had a solid reputation. This negative feedback can directly impact sales.

IMPACT ON RECRUITMENT

Today's job candidate will typically research a company online before they submit their resume. Candidates will want to understand whether the company they are about to work for treats their employees well, if there is high turnover and what the current employees think of the working conditions. Sites such as Vault (www.vault.com) have given employees a voice. Search has allowed this voice to be heard. A company's ability to recruit for key positions can be negatively impacted by the information posted on these sites.

IMPACT ON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

A substantial amount of time and cost go into securing the necessary rights to a company's trademarks, copyrights and other intellectual property. Unscrupulous businesses can leverage your brand's equity to redirect unsuspecting customers to their business. This infringement can cause confusion amongst your customers, damage brand perception and impact revenue.

IMPACT ON INVESTOR RELATIONS

Like prospective job-seekers, investors look to blogs and other sources of unbiased financial data to make decisions on whether to buy, hold or sell a position in a company. Since blogs and other sources of user-generated media allow for frank discussions, investors can gain additional perspective on the health of a company.

IMPACT ON FINANCIALS

When Starbucks announced the closure of certain stores throughout the United States in July 2008, activity in the blogosphere spiked. This spike in activity corresponded with a dip in the company's stock price below $14 a share – the lowest point it reached for the entire month of July. The perception that Starbucks was in trouble spread quickly online and thus negatively impacted the company's stock price.

One company estimated they were losing **$2.5 million** in sales annually brought about by reputation attacks on consumer generated
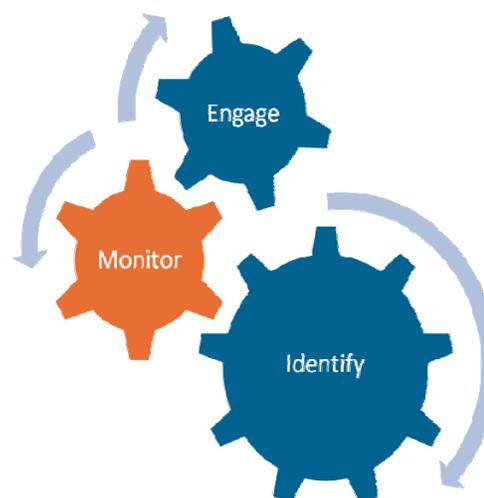
The volume of consumer generated media is enormous and growing each day. It can seem daunting to even consider the time and effort needed to protect one's brand in this environment. The good news is - it can be done. On the pages that follow, you will see what is needed to plan and implement an effective brand reputation management program.
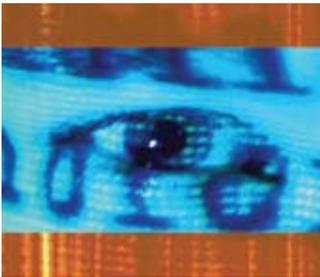
ESTABLISH A PLAN

Managing a brand's reputation online requires proper planning. Jumping in without a plan may cause more problems in the long run and negatively impact brand perception. A well-planned brand reputation management program requires the identification of communities that have the largest and most vocal membership, ongoing monitoring, and active participation in these communities in order to promote a positive brand image and suppress negative sentiment. The following questions should be addressed during the planning session:

> **What is the purpose of the program?** Are you looking to gather feedback? Promote a new service? Educate customers about a product's functionality? Address customer questions and concerns?

> **Where are we going to focus our efforts?** You need to identify the blogs, forums, newsgroups and websites that are most relevant to the brand, have the largest and most engaged audience and are seen as "authorities" by the search engines.

> **How often will we be monitoring?** Depending on the purpose of the program, the amount of time spent monitoring, posting comments, creating content, answering questions and linking could require multiple resources.

> **Who is going to manage the program?** Brand reputation management is not something to be assigned to the "intern that knows how to Google." Depending on the objective of the program (i.e. feedback solicitation, customer service, awareness) the intensity of the effort will vary and require resources that are qualified to respond in an appropriate manner.

IDENTIFY

A new blog is created every six seconds. Many of those will not amass a large enough audience to worry about. But there will be a number of blogs and forums where there is a good sized audience, which is particularly "engaged". Some ways to measure engagement include the number of pages viewed in a session or the amount of time the average visitor spends on the site. The more pages viewed and/or time spent on site, the more "engaged" that audience. The social media space is made up of a lot of moving parts and can be daunting to try and control. Your efforts should be focused on those blogs, forums and sites that have the largest, most vocal audiences as these will be the places where conversations about your brand are most visible.

MONITOR

There are a number of tools available online that will provide you the ability to monitor your brand. Most of these tools scan the major search engines, blogs, forums and other social media outlets to record any mention of the terms or phrases you specify, such as the name of your company, product, service or key corporate executive. One example of a free, automated brand monitoring tool is Google Alerts. Google allows you to specify the terms you are interested in monitoring and it will send you an email each time it encounters this term with a link to the site where it was encountered.

Most of the data that is provided by these brand monitoring tools requires a human to analyze the results. The technology behind these tools is getting more intelligent and some even offer "tonal analysis", which is the ability to determine whether a particular mention is positive, negative or neutral. However, it is always recommended that a human analyze the data to determine the tone and intention of blog post or web site.

Based on the analysis of the data and the sites, blogs and forums that have been flagged as most important, you should categorize each mention of your brand according to the threat that it presents. High risk threats might be those that require legal intervention such as sending a "cease and desist" letter, whereas low-risk threats might not require immediate attention.

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.*

ENGAGE – PROMOTE A POSITIVE BRAND IMAGE

A positive brand image online requires the creation, optimization and dissemination of content. This content can take many forms from articles to press releases to video. The point is – the more relevant and engaging content you can generate and distribute that puts your brand in a positive light – the easier it will be to control the visibility of your brand and deal with negative sentiment if it pops up.

In addition to creating, optimizing and distributing content make sure your website is optimized to allow the search engines to find the content within your site. This allows for the content to be indexed and displayed when people search for your brand or company's offerings. Besides being accessible, the content on your site should also be enabled to allow for your visitors to bookmark, email and submit your content to sites like Digg and De.Licio.us. These sites allow people to "vote" for content they feel is important and worthy of others attention.

Enabling your site content with this functionality is as simple as adding a few lines of code to your website. There are companies such as Addthis (www.addthis.com) that provide this code for free. The more you empower your visitors to consume your site's content in the way they want, the more options you have to expand the reach of that content beyond the borders of your website. Below are some additional ideas to promote a positive brand image.

> **Articles and White Papers**–The purpose of the article or white paper should be to entertain or educate the reader. The content can and should reference your brand, where applicable, but the primary focus should be on creating content that is relevant and engaging. Make sure to place this content on your website and allow your visitors to share it with their friends and colleagues, comment on it and add it to their bookmarks.

> **Press Releases** – For each newsworthy event a press release should be created. Writing and submitting a press release to sites such as PRWeb or PRNewswire allow for positive information about your brand to be distributed to a multitude of sites quickly. The search engines tend to pick these releases up and incorporate them into their search results, which further bolsters your visibility.

> **Video/Podcasts**– Content sharing sites like YouTube and Podcast Alley have large audiences that spend a long time online looking for and watching/listening to topics that interest them. You can get very creative with these channels and produce content that has the possibility of being sent virally to friends and family, thus expanding the reach and popularity of your brand.

> **Photos and Graphics** – Take the images you have rights to from your offline advertising and marketing collateral and upload these assets to sites like Flickr and Photobucket. For each image you are able to create a unique title and description that can incorporate your brand name. This will give you added exposure on these sites and allow you to leverage their popularity to increase visibility for your brand.

> **Social Network Profiles** – A cost effective and relatively easy way to build your brand awareness using highly popular and visible websites is to create a profile or group on sites like Facebook, MySpace, Linked In and Namyz.

A well-known law firm 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 in paid advertising.

ENGAGE – SUPPRESS NEGATIVE SETIMENT

By promoting a positive image using some of the ideas described above, you can create a solid foundation to work from if negative sentiment begins to appear. There are some additional steps that can be taken in order to push down websites and blogs that have some "not so nice things" to say about your brand.

> **Paid search for quick visibility** – if you find yourself in a situation where something negative has hit the blogosphere about your brand, the fastest way to get your side of the story out there is to implement a paid search campaign that targets the keywords that are associated with the negative publicity. By doing this you retain some control over the message and show your customers that you are aware of the concern and are proactively addressing the matter. Sometimes just by simply acknowledging a problem you can avert any further problems.

> **Court the influencers** – It is always good to know who is considered an influencer in your industry and do your best to get to know them. By courting these individuals and acknowledging their sphere of influence you can create alliances that may help you address negative attacks against your brand. Even in peace times, these influencers can be instrumental in promoting your brand to their audience or providing a positive review of a new product or service. Having influential friends can go a long way in keeping negativity at bay.

> **Address negative reviews** – if someone is unhappy with their experience with your brand and took the time to write about it on their blog you should address this head on. Leave a comment and at a minimum acknowledge that you have read their post. If your company is aware of a problem and is doing something about it make sure to mention that. Again, by simply acknowledging the person's concern or issue you may be able to turn a critic into a fan.

> **Link to positive content** – Linking is one of the most important search marketing tactics you can implement to improve the visibility of your brand. This takes a tremendous amount of time and resources, but the benefit far outweighs the cost. Obtaining and optimizing links from relevant and authoritative sites can improve the visibility of your brand within the search engines, which is one of the first places people go when looking for more information about who you are and what you do.

> **Purchase domain name variations** – Purchasing a domain name can be done for as little as $10 and takes less than 5 minutes to do. Unfortunately, there are a number of well respected brands out there that were either unable to or did not have the foresight to purchase variations of their domain name. Domains such as "brandXYZsucks.com" are purchased by people who are passionately displeased with the experiences they have with this particular brand. By owning this domain they are able to leverage the power of the brand to post negative content and have the domain appear highly within the search engines. Purchasing brand name misspellings, including the word "sucks", "blows", "stinks", as well as all available top-level domains (ex .org, .biz, .net, .mobi, .tv, etc) may cost a few hundred dollars, but the savings in terms of reducing negative brand association could be many times more. Once you own these domains you may want to consider redirecting visitors to the customer service section of your website or placing a form for people to fill out that asks why they are unhappy with your brand.

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

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The key to successful reputation management is persistence and a dogged determination to maintaining positive brand perception in the online space. By identifying the social media outlets that are most active, monitoring the conversations that exist around your brand and proactively engaging both fans and critics in open and honest dialogue, you can effectively manage your brand's online reputation.

The implications of failing to acknowledge the influence online communities can have on your business can be disastrous. Brand perception, sales, recruitment, intellectual property, investor relations and the company's financial health can all be negatively impacted by your action or inaction.

Look at the social Web as an opportunity to not only generate awareness and sales, but as a channel to become closer with your customers and establish a reputation that is built on trust and understanding.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like to receive more information about online brand reputation management, please contact:

info@elixirinteractive.com
602.494.6326