

# Online Reputation Management for Businesses

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*How the Web Can Ruin Your Business' Image, and What You Can Do About It*

A free report compiled by *The Search Engine Guys, LLC*

## Introduction: What is Online Reputation Management?

As more and more consumers turn to the internet as a primary source of information and research, businesses are presented with both magnificent opportunity and serious risk.

On one hand, businesses are now able to reach out to consumers through new, targeted online channels. Search engine optimization, pay-per-click (PPC) marketing, and social media marketing are just a few of the new techniques businesses can use to connect with (and market to) potential clients and customers.

On the other hand, the internet is a far more open medium than either television or radio. Virtually any person or organization can, with minimal effort and cost, make their voice or opinion heard. **There are no barriers to entry and few defenses against those who would use the medium to attack rivals, sabotage competitors, or flaunt grudges.**

In many instances, these angry customers, bitter rivals, or disgruntled former employees succeed in gaining as much or more visibility (and thus, authority) online than the people or companies they seek to disparage.

Imagine the effect on your business' reputation (and revenue) if, for example:

- Every potential client who searched for your business' name was greeted by a competitor's paid advertisement.
- A dissatisfied customer left dozens of negative reviews on respected websites, accusing your business of being a scam.
- An angry former employee launched a website smearing your company, then succeeded in getting the attention of both search engines and major online media.

What would your current clients think? How would these attacks affect your ability to gain new clients?

Worse, if you're not actively monitoring mentions of your business online, how long would it take you to notice what was going on?

Even if you notice the problem, how much money, time, and stress would it cost you to rectify the situation?

*This is where **Online Reputation Management**, or ORM, comes in.*

Online reputation management is a set of strategies and tactics designed to monitor and protect your online image and visibility.

The best implementation strategy of ORM is to *proactively* defend against threats to your business' image online. This may be accomplished by preemptively purchasing domain names, creating a prominent online/social media presence, engaging in brand-centric search engine optimization and pay-per-click advertising, and monitoring brand mentions online, among other techniques.

**On the internet, it is difficult, if not impossible, to actually remove or take down negative buzz once it begins to spread and gain visibility.**

Instead, ORM campaigns focus on reducing the visibility of this negative buzz - by supplanting negative search results with positive ones, for example. This process is slow and uncertain under the best circumstances. For this reason, ORM campaigns are best launched preemptively, establishing a wide and powerful network of positive branding and thus making it less likely (though by no means impossible) for negative buzz to gain attention in the first place.

Nevertheless, all ORM campaigns must overcome several significant challenges:

- The growing visibility, ubiquity, and search engine relevance of **user-generated content** in the form of personal blogs, customer review sites, consumer advocacy sites, video sharing sites, discussion forums, social networking (and broadcasting) hubs, etc.
- The **viral tendencies** of negative online "buzz," coupled with the inability to actually remove, take down, or directly attack the offending content, thus necessitating proactive, rather than reactive (and indirect), ORM strategies.
- The **fragmentation of information** online, making it difficult (if not impossible) to track all mentions and discussion of a particular brand across all channels - and, as a corollary, the power of information aggregators and portals, such as search engines, news aggregators, networking sites, etc.
- The relatively small amount of time and resources needed to manufacture an online reputation crisis, compared to the **far larger amount of time and resources** needed to effectively untangle such a crisis.
- The complex, shadowy, and ever-changing nature of **search engine ranking and advertising algorithms**, which introduce uncertainty and delay to even the best visibility/ORM campaigns.

## I. User-Generated Content (UGC)

One of the most significant developments of the so-called Web 2.0 revolution is the rise to dominance of **User-Generated Content**, or UGC.

In contrast with Web 1.0 framework, which emphasized the broadcasting power of a few major players (news media, search engines, tech-savvy businesses), the Web 2.0 ecosystem emphasizes the role of innumerable small players - often individual users - who are able to disseminate opinion, distribute content, share media, and create and mobilize audiences, often without significant financial resources.

**For businesses, this means that each individual customer or client can be either a brand evangelist or the creator of a public relations nightmare.**

User-generated content can be loosely divided into two categories: self-hosted content and third-party-hosted content.

### Self-Hosted Content

**Self-hosted content** is content for which a user provides or purchases web hosting services. The user is thus able to retain *sole control* over his or her content.

Self-hosted content generally takes the form of **personal websites and/or blogs**, which make up a large portion of the internet. According to popular blog-tracking site Technorati, over 175,000 new blogs are created every day, publishing nearly 20 posts per second.

Certain websites, such as Blogger.com, Wordpress.com, and Tumblr.com, blur the line between self-hosted and third-party-hosted content, providing free (or cheap) web hosting services to users, while often allowing users to blog or publish content under a **dedicated domain name** (e.g., <http://www.myblogaddress.com>). Users may also opt to publish content on a **subdomain** of these services (e.g., <http://myblog.wordpress.com>).

The reach and influence of blogs should not be underestimated. Though many blogs are maintained by individuals or small teams, they can attract dedicated audiences of anywhere from a hundred to **several hundred thousand daily readers**. Some of the most influential sites on the internet, including Mashable, TechCrunch, and The Huffington Post, are blogs. Powerful blogs are often considered to be the new wave of journalism and information dissemination.

Even a "small" blogger's opinion of your firm can spread like wildfire through the blogging community - especially if that opinion is funny, provocative, or shockingly offensive.

Virtually anyone can start, maintain, and promote a blog - which means virtually anyone can command the attention of an audience. An angry client, former employee, or competitor with an axe to grind is no longer limited to complaining to his family and friends; he can now instantly share his opinion with thousands of people - including your current and potential clients.

### Third-Party Hosted Content

Many of the web's most popular sites and most popular companies thrive on helping individual users connect with potentially massive audiences for little or no cost.

By posting their opinions on these third-party sites, disgruntled users can take advantage of these sites' **search engine dominance and massive, established audiences**. Damaging content published this way can spread quickly and be difficult or impossible to push into obscurity.

Consider a few examples:

- **YouTube:** Launched in 2005, this popular video-sharing site is one of the most heavily trafficked on the web, serving up hundreds of millions of videos daily. Popular videos posted to YouTube can receive millions of views and are often picked up and reposted on dozens of other video-sharing sites, such as Vimeo, Dailymotion, Truveo, Break.com, as well as countless blogs.
- **Yelp:** Visited by over 25 million people every month, this local business review site is one of the most powerful on the internet. Though customer reviews can be helpful, there is little to prevent disgruntled clients from posting (and thus publicizing) angry rants about you and your firm. To make matters worse, review sites are generally held in high esteem by readers/users; people tend to take negative reviews very seriously.
- **Facebook:** As possibly the most visited site on the internet, Facebook is a perfect place for content of all kinds to spread. Individual Facebook users may have networks of dozens to hundreds of "friends," who in turn may have dozens or hundreds of their own connections.
- **Twitter:** This microblogging service, though relatively young, is one of the most important players in the social web. Users are able to post short messages (140 characters or less) to audiences of "followers." Popular Twitter users may have anywhere from tens of thousands to several million followers. It's no surprise that information spreads quickly on Twitter; in fact, Twitter users are often some of the first to report breaking news, even before established mass media.
- **Ripoff Report:** This powerful site allows ordinary consumers to submit complaints about scams, fraud, and shoddy businesses. Not only are complaints made public to search

engines and countless individual consumers, but also to the traditional media. Although businesses targeted on Ripoff Report may have the opportunity to file a rebuttal, the mere mention of Ripoff Report is enough to discourage many potential clients.

## II. Viral Content and the Distribution of Information

Online content is said to “**go viral**” when large numbers of individual users share that content with their network of friends, followers, and connections; these friends, followers, and connections then share it with their networks, and so on, disseminating the content at an exponential rate.

Viral content is often described as having a life of its own. Since it is spread not by one user but by an ever-expanding network made of hundreds, thousands, or millions of users, **viral content is powerful, self-perpetuating, and often unpredictable.**

Furthermore, as viral content spreads, it becomes **independent of its original seed** - the news item, blog post, tweet, video, etc. from which the story originated. The content becomes distributed over hundreds of sites, hosts, portals, and search engines; removing or taking down the original seed content would have little or no effect on the content's spread.

For a business, the viral spread of negative buzz is quite possibly a worst case scenario. Like mass media, viral content can reach a massive audience rapidly; unlike traditional news outlets, however, because viral content is decentralized, it cannot be retracted in the same way that a newspaper might offer a correction of a factual error.

Several major sites and services exist which are typically key players in publicizing and sparking viral content:

- **Twitter/Facebook:** as mentioned in the previous section on User-Generated Content, Twitter and Facebook are two of the largest social networking hubs - perfect channels through which viral content and opinion can spread. Twitter even has a built-in "retweet" function that allows users to quickly share popular tweeted content with their followings, and a “trending topics” feature which showcases the most popular topics on Twitter at any given time.
- **Delicious:** a social bookmarking service that allows users to save interesting content and share their collections with their networks and the general public. Content that receives a large number of bookmarks may also be featured prominently on the site's homepage, driving thousands of visitors to that page.

- **Digg:** The king of all social bookmarking sites. Users may submit content to Digg, which is then voted on by other Digg users. The more votes a particular piece of content receives, the more prominently it is displayed on Digg's homepage. A story that makes it onto the Digg homepage can easily drive hundreds of thousands of visitors to a piece of online content within hours or days. Digg users tend to favor content that is funny, extreme, or even offensive - content that "bashes" or insults a business, for example, fits the bill perfectly.

In addition to these powerhouse sites, other services such as Mixx, Reddit, and Yahoo! Buzz also help users share and popularize content.

Another key trait of viral content is **persistence**. A story on the evening news may be forgotten in a few weeks, but viral content lingers. The collective sharing power of thousands of users, added to the collective linking power of thousands of websites means that once online content goes viral, it never really goes away. People will continue to find, see, and potentially pass on this content for long periods of time.

If a negative story about your firm gathers enough attention online, it may secure a prominent spot in search engine results for your brand or firm name for months or years, ready to greet each potential client who looks you up online.

As mentioned earlier, information online is **fragmented and distributed across the "cloud."** Not only does this mean that it is virtually impossible to completely remove information once it has made it online, but also that information can be accessed through many different channels. A Google search and a Bing search may yield drastically different results. Add in search phrase variants, and the possibilities are endless. Just because negative press is not easily accessed through this portal doesn't mean it is hidden in that one.

One of the roles of Online Reputation Management is finding ways to **monitor** these myriad channels of information access and **preemptively saturate** each of them with positive or neutral brand mentions, thus deterring the initial spread of negative mentions.

Should negative content begin to gain publicity, however, an ORM campaign must have ways to track, identify, and target specific outbreaks of this undesirable information.

### III. Online Advertising, Pay-Per-Click, and Search Engine Algorithms

**Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising** is an effective way to gain prominent search engine placement for a website without the long, slow work of organic search engine optimization (SEO).

Essentially, PPC advertising allows businesses to purchase visibility from search engines; the more competition for a given set of search terms, the more expensive that visibility is.

PPC advertising may also be a vehicle for jealous competitors to "**piggyback**" off your success. A rival firm may, for example, purchase sponsored placement for search phrases containing your firm's name. When potential clients are driven to search for your firm through your television, print, and other advertisements, they will encounter prominent ads for your competitors.

The primary danger of Pay-Per-Click piggybacking is **how quickly it can gain placement**. Because there is usually a low level of competition for branded searches, and because a competitor can simply pay for placement instead of "earning" it through search engine optimization, competing PPC ads can "pop up" overnight.

On the other hand, PPC ads are one of the few ORM challenges that can be directly attacked. Most major search engines do allow businesses to buy advertising on their competitors' brand names; however, a business may not use a competitor's brand name in the actual copy of their ad. If a competitor violates this rule, you may be able to contact the search provider and have the offending ad taken down.

**Search engine optimization (SEO)** refers to the strategy and best practices used to help a given website gain prominence in search engine results pages (SERPs) for both targeted key terms and their variants, often referred to as "long-tail" searches. Ranking well in major search engines for the right industry or branded search phrases can drive hundreds or thousands of daily visitors to a given site for as long as the site retains its placement. If that site or search result is one that attacks, criticizes, or mocks your company, it may even draw potential traffic away from your "legitimate" site(s).

As any good search engine optimization firm knows, SEO is not an exact science, and in fact depends largely on indirect methods of deducing or reverse-engineering the complex and proprietary ranking algorithms used by major search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and Bing. As such, SEO is often conducted on a "best guess" basis, as SEO consultants and firms apply what information they have gleaned from past experience, trial and error, split testing, search patent analysis, etc.

For this reason, while capturing natural SEO rankings is a crucial part of any online reputation management campaign, whether proactively established or launched in response to an existing crisis, it is also highly unpredictable. SEO strategies that have proven effective in the past may not hold true as search engines continually refine their ranking algorithms. The best online reputation management and search engine optimization firms, therefore, are those that constantly adapt to the changing search landscape and are wise enough not to make unrealistic promises of success.

## IV. Devoting Resources to Online Reputation Management

It is far easier to trigger an online reputation crisis than it is to repair one.

A gripe site targeting your firm need capture only one spot on the first page of brand search results to scare away potential customers and attract the attention of online and offline media.

To push that same site into obscurity, however, you may need to capture all 10 slots on the first page (not counting PPC results) with positive or neutral content, whether that content belongs to you or a to a third party.

There is a large discrepancy between the time and resources needed to spread negative content and the time and resources needed to combat it. As we mentioned before, information online tends to spread, accelerate, and persist; it is difficult to contain or suppress.

For this reason, Online Reputation Management campaigns are most effective when launched preemptively. If your firm is able to set up monitoring systems to track brand mentions and buzz across multiple channels, pre-saturate those channels with powerful positive or neutral content, and maintain a strong presence in the major online social networks, it is more likely that you will be able to identify and mitigate the effects of potentially damaging content before it can gain traction.

**Setting Up Monitoring Systems:** By using services such as Google Alerts, actively tracking branded search results, and monitoring RSS feeds from relevant channels, an ORM campaign increases its ability to catch negative content in its infancy, before it has a chance to go viral. Catching this content early allows targeted action against a few offending sites or pages, instead of late, frantic, ineffectual flailing against a network of thousands.

**Pre-saturating Content Channels:** If your firm holds only the top spot on major search engines for branded searches, for example, it is very easy for a competitor or angry client to capture one of the other nine spots and gain visibility for his or her vitriol. By pre-emptively filling top search slots with content you control, in the best case scenario you may be able to stop negative content from being found at all.

It must be said, however, that pre-saturation is not a guarantee of success. Should negative content attract the attention of search engines, whether through other channels (Digg, for example) or coverage on a powerful site (such as a highly trafficked blog), even large amounts of pre-saturated content may not be enough to stop the negative content from gaining visibility. It should also be noted that there are thousands of potential content channels, from

blog posts to gripe sites to videos to PPC ads, that must be pre-saturated: hardly a small undertaking.

**Maintaining Presence:** Can be as simple as creating basic profiles on major online social networks and as complex as integrating network-building into your existing marketing campaigns. Maintaining a strong presence on these networks helps you watch for and respond to negative content.

Note that seeking to take down negative content through legal channels, while tempting, may backfire. In 2009, Horizon Realty sued a former tenant for \$50,000 over a tweet in which the tenant alleged the presence of mold in her apartment. The tweet itself went largely unnoticed – but Horizon Realty’s legal overreaction did not.

The story was quickly picked up on Twitter itself and by numerous powerful social media and technology blogs. Thousands of people read or heard the story and sympathized with the tenant, whom they saw as the victim of an insensitive, backwards corporation. What Horizon Realty failed to realize is that the very act of using outside channels to deal with online content is considered provocative by many users. In attempting to deal with an ORM problem through legal channels, Horizon Realty blew the situation out of proportion, rallied thousands of users to the tenant's cause, and created a huge image problem for itself.

## V. Conclusion – Takeaways and How You Can Approach ORM

Online reputation and image is an important challenge facing any and all businesses – especially those that rely on their online presence to attract clients and customers. The most successful ORM campaigns share several characteristics:

- They are launched proactively – that is, before a crisis actually presents itself.
- They are broad in scope, targeting numerous search engines, social media hubs, review sites, etc.
- They are continuous in both their content saturation and brand monitoring activities.

Effective online reputation management is neither a magic bullet nor a cheap, one-size-fits-all solution. Even with the best execution, ORM tactics can be undermined by a sufficiently powerful piece of negative or undesirable content. However, by identifying and addressing ORM issues early, you can reduce the possibility that a minor problem grows into an out-of-control online reputation disaster.