



## Managing Your Online Reputation: Best Practices for Mid-sized Companies



A report prepared by  
Corporate Payment Solutions

*Managing Your Online Reputation: Best Practices for Mid-sized Companies*  
is published by American Express Company.

Please direct inquiries to (877) 297-3555. Additional information can be found at:  
<http://corp.americanexpress.com/gcs/payments/>

This report was prepared by Federated Media in collaboration with American Express.  
The report was written by Karen Bannan and edited by Michelle Rafter.

Copyright ©2011 American Express. All rights reserved. No part of this report may  
be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means,  
without written permission.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Fig. 1, Corporate Boards' Risk Management Concerns</i>	4
The Definition of Online Reputation	5
How to Manage Your Online Presence	6
Where Social Media Fits In	7
<i>Fig. 2, Social Media Loyalty</i>	7
How to Protect Your Reputation Online	9
Conclusion	10
Case Study: PrimeGenesis Takes "Authentic" Approach to Grooming an Online Reputation	11
<i>A Stamford, Connecticut, executive onboarding firm uses a variety of tools to promote itself on social networks.</i>	
Case Study: Clements Worldwide Takes Soft-Sell Approach	12
<i>A Washington D.C. insurance company manages its online reputation by focusing on customer service.</i>	

## ■ Introduction

In the Internet age, bad news travels fast. Companies need to manage their online reputations to avoid disasters that can scare off current and prospective customers.

Online reputation management is important for protecting a company's brand, preventing sales erosion and recruiting talent, according to Chris Rosica, author of *The Authentic Brand: How Today's Top Entrepreneurs Connect with Customers*.

It's also something executives and corporate boards are studying closely. Sixty-nine percent of 142 board mem-

bers in a May 2011 study<sup>1</sup> from accounting and consulting firm EisnerAmper LLP expressed concern about risks to their companies' reputations (see Fig. 1).

In this report, you'll learn:

- The definition of online reputation
- How to manage your online presence
- Where social media fits in
- How to protect your reputation online

### Fig. 1 – Corporate Boards' Risk Management Concerns

Aside from financial risk, corporate boards say risk to a company's reputation is their greatest concern, according to EisnerAmper's 2011 director survey.



Source: Concerns About Risks Confronting Boards, EisnerAmper LLP

<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/nppyWN>

## ■ The Definition of Online Reputation

An online reputation is based on the results people find when they search for a company's name or products online and the perceptions those results create. The searches can involve many sources, including these:

- Reviews of products and services
- Social networks like Facebook and Twitter
- News articles
- Advertising
- Customer complaint sites

Taken together, these elements form the impressions that prospective customers use to make purchase decisions.

*“We see \$100 million companies spending millions on advertising, yet they don't know how to do anything about the three or four scathing reviews that pop up when someone searches for them.”*

Joe Beccalori, co-founder and chief operating officer  
Interact Marketing

Most companies are unaware of the impact their online reputation has on their businesses, says Joe Beccalori, co-founder and chief operating officer of Interact Marketing<sup>2</sup>, a New York online reputation and search-marketing firm. “We see many \$100 million companies

spending millions on television and print advertising, yet they don't know how to do anything about the three or four scathing reviews that pop up when someone searches for them,” Beccalori says.

That disconnect is becoming more significant as a company's online reputation starts having a bigger impact on its off-line image. “The first thing people do when considering purchasing a new product or service is search for its brand name and look at what's on that page,” says Don Sorensen, president of Big Blue Robot<sup>3</sup>, an Orem, Utah, online reputation management firm. “What's being said about the company? Does it look like people think the products are good? How green is the company? Are there any negative reviews? All those things can harm your brand.”

They don't have to. Most reputation problems, whether online or offline, shouldn't be a surprise. They're usually issues companies already know about and can fix with a little work. Even in the case of negative reviews, a company should be familiar with a product's strengths and limitations and how it compares with competitors, says Steve Rubel, executive vice president at public relations giant Edelman Worldwide<sup>4</sup>. The key to avoiding potential problems is anticipating where they'll come from.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.interactmarketing.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bigbluerobot.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.edelman.com/>

## ■ How to Manage Your Online Presence

Mid-sized companies must take a multi-pronged approach to managing online reputation, with in-house marketing teams working with outside contractors that provide search engine optimization, marketing and public relations.

To get started, take the following steps:

**Assess brands.** To get ahead of potential reputation problems, evaluate the online face of everything related to your business, including brand names, product names, executives, other public-facing employees, consultants and personalities associated with the business. When you find vulnerabilities, you can plan ahead and counteract them.

**Consider everything that could impact your online reputation as a single unit. Everyone connected to those activities should work together in an “authentic” way.**

**Integrate activities.** Consider everything that could impact your online reputation as a single unit. Everyone connected to those activities should work together in what Rosica calls an “authentic” way. “Authenticity produces connectivity with highly satisfied customers,” he says, “through touching people at an emotional level driven by unparalleled quality, commitment to customer service, concern for the community, charitable involvement and remarkable business cultures.” (See *Case Study: PrimeGenesis Takes “Authentic” Approach to Grooming an Online Reputation*, on pg. 11.)

**Create relevant content.** Regularly produce online content that’s relevant to your brands. Content could include blog posts, white papers, videos, podcasts, press

releases and transcripts of speeches by executives or employees. Share links to posts on your social networks and industry forums. Ask partners and industry websites to highlight the material on their own blogs to gain links from those sites back to yours, which can help lift your site’s rankings in search engine results. Share company news through PRNewswire or other press release services.

**Make posts matter.** How you post information on your website is as important as what you post. Add content on a regular, scheduled basis. Tag content with relevant keywords, including any that are already driving traffic to your site. The operator of your website can often provide data on what keywords are being used to find your site.

**Move beyond the obvious.** Instead of running a single website, create microsites devoted to specific products. Sites that use your company’s name or product names in the URL (the Web address) can bolster reach and search rankings.

Companies that use these strategies have a better chance of dominating the first page of results on Google and other search engines. “If you only have one site, you might get only three or four listings in the rankings,” Rosica says. “I’ve seen companies build sites dedicated to charitable works, blogs for their executives, specific product sites. All of these build relationships and (give) customers a better idea of who the company and its employees are.”

## ■ Where Social Media Fits In

Social media describes any online forum that allows a community of readers or visitors to interact, which makes it easy to understand why a company’s online reputation and sales can be shaped by what people say about it.

Research bears this out. A June 2011 report<sup>5</sup> by Lancaster, Pennsylvania-based consumer insights firm ROI Research found that 60 percent of U.S. social network users are at least “somewhat likely” to buy or recommend a product when someone they know posts something about a company or brand. That compares with 18 percent who were “not at all” likely to take action, according to the report.

Social media’s influence continues to grow as new channels pop up. Established outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and blogs have been joined by newer offerings such as Google+ and Tumblr.

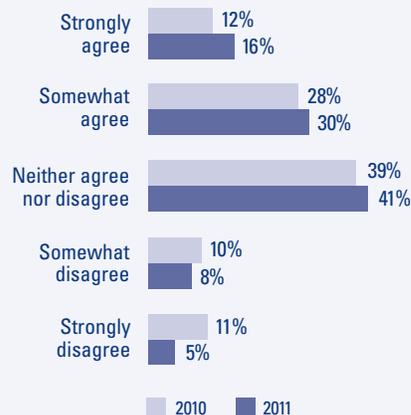
Social media has become a big part of consumers’ decision-making and buying process. In a separate June 2011 report<sup>6</sup> from ROI Research, 46 percent of social media users said they were “somewhat” or “strongly” more loyal to brands they followed on Twitter and 34 percent to brands they liked on Facebook (see Fig. 2).

*Continued on next page*

### Fig. 2 – Social Media Loyalty

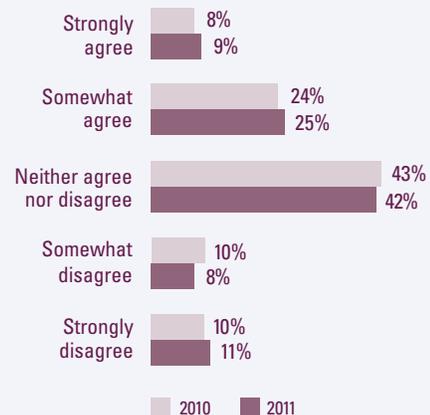
U.S. consumers are becoming more loyal to companies or products they follow on Twitter or Facebook, according to a June 2011 ROI Research survey.

U.S. social networks users who say they're more loyal to companies they follow on Twitter



Source: ROI Research, eMarketer

U.S. social networks users who say they're more loyal to companies they follow on Facebook



Source: ROI Research, eMarketer

<sup>5</sup> <http://bit.ly/pOjZbT>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1008447>

## ■ Where Social Media Fits In *(cont.)*

Integration Technologies Inc.,<sup>7</sup> a New York City technologies provider, has monitored social networks for more than three years. CEO Bruce Magown makes it a point to respond to all questions and comments, often within minutes. In the tech world, customers use the web to ask for help or follow up or research an issue more often than they pick up a phone, Magown says. For that reason, the private company, which sells smart integration solutions for customer resource management (CRM), finance and e-commerce, monitors major software review sites, including sites in multiple languages. It also runs a customer service forum named

Companies can also raise their search rankings and visibility by writing guest posts on partner or industry blogs, appearing in webcasts or virtual events or hosting Twitter chats and other social media events.

Some companies buy links, blog posts or tweets to gain online exposure, but experts don't advise it because it can backfire. In one recent example, a popular mid-sized toy manufacturer offered parenting bloggers free toys to review or give away for every 200 new Facebook Likes they drove to the company's Facebook page. But because the promotion favored bloggers

**Companies can also raise their search rankings and visibility by writing guest posts on partner or industry blogs, appearing in webcasts or virtual events or hosting Twitter chats and other social media events.**

after InterWeave Smart Solutions, one of its most popular products, to encourage customers to come to them with suggestions, ideas, issues or problems. Once they're documented, resources can be assigned to assess and follow up quickly, Magown says.

In addition to running online forums, Big Blue Robot's Sorensen suggests companies maintain a presence on all the major social networks and put an employee in charge of monitoring and posting comments there and dealing with problems as quickly as possible. That employee needs to know how to respond intelligently and honestly to negative posts to avoid tit-for-tat discussions that can escalate to unpleasant conversations. "Respond once, ask to take the discussion to a more one-on-one forum and be clear you are not going to keep responding to negative rebuttals," Sorensen says.

who could drive more traffic to the company's site, it created a firestorm of criticism on the very blogs the company was hoping to win over. Although the company backpedaled and apologized<sup>8</sup>, some bloggers vowed not to review or promote the company's products again.

Companies are better off creating genuine relationships with bloggers and social media experts influential on Facebook and Twitter. "Don't bribe or entice," Rosica says. He also recommends courting traditional media and influential online news and commentary sites such as TechCrunch, Mashable, and Politico whose posts are regularly shared and retweeted. *(See Case Study: Clements Worldwide Takes Soft-Sell Approach, on pg.12.)*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.interweave.biz/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://bit.ly/q6mvOc>

## ■ How to Protect Your Reputation Online

Once a company has established its online reputation, it's up to everyone in the business to maintain it, especially marketing and PR employees. Companies must be diligent about taking action against copyright infringement and libel. Breaches usually can be uncovered by Google Alerts and regular searches on sites such as YouTube and Facebook.

Even something as simple as a website with a similar address can hurt a company's online reputation. One of Beccalori's clients recently discovered seven unauthorized Facebook fan pages for its products. The pages could have been set up by a fan or affiliate trying to gain traffic. In other instances, "It could be someone putting up a parody, and it could be a competitor trying to

**Share buttons.** Include social sharing buttons on every page of your website to make it easy for anyone to share your content. Sharing also creates links back to your site, which can raise your overall search ranking.

**Logos.** Make content and company logos available for partners and affiliates to use on their own sites. "Put a section on your site with source code so people can use it on their websites," Beccalori says. "This creates another backlink. It's a simple [search engine optimization] tip, but it helps with reputation."

**Paid search.** When problems occur, use "paid search" to move your message ahead of organic search results by paying the search engines to display your link first when

### When it comes to protecting online reputation, companies must be vigilant or they'll lose customers, sales and market share.

smear your name," he says. "We've seen people take a company's commercial and overdub the audio."

To fight unofficial websites, Facebook fan pages or YouTube channels, create and maintain official accounts on the networks and include registered trademark information. To date, there's been little legal precedent covering social media, but the threat of legal action is often enough to get fraudulent pages or videos taken down.

Other mechanisms to protect online reputation include:

**Social bookmarking sites.** Use sites such as Digg, StumbleUpon and Delicious to share posts or other information to help boost online visibility and search-engine ranking, which can push negative or outside links down or completely off the first page of results.

certain keywords are typed in. "It puts your voice front and center when you buy that first spot and drive people to an information page," Rosica says.

Toyota Motor Corp.<sup>9</sup> used paid search to combat a monumental challenge to its reputation. Typically praised for its quality and customer service, Toyota came under fire in 2010 after recalling more than 10 million vehicles for unintended acceleration and other problems.

The recalls were covered in the mainstream press but went viral after bloggers and social-media pundits wrote that Toyota didn't disclose the problems soon enough. Blog posts with negative and sometimes erroneous information made their way onto the first pages of search engine results.

*Continued on next page*

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.toyota.com/>

## ■ How to Protect Your Reputation Online *(cont.)*

The situation could have been disastrous, but swift moves by Toyota marketers helped rescue its online reputation. The company's PR department created a microsite to dispel misinformation and bought search terms such as "Toyota recall" and "Toyota brakes," to dominate Google search results for those phrases. The company also made executives available for interviews, including a high profile appearance on the *Today* show.

The crisis plan worked. While Toyota may have made mistakes early on, negative perception of the company's brands doesn't appear to have had a lasting impact. In

2011, five Toyota models took top places in J.D. Power & Associates' Vehicle Dependability study<sup>10</sup>. The company's Lexus line garnered first place in J.D. Power's 2011 Initial Quality Study, a widely viewed barometer of automotive reputation, up from fourth last year.

The lesson: When it comes to protecting online reputation, companies must be vigilant or they'll lose customers, sales and market share, Rosica says. "Most companies don't realize the impact that reputation issues pose."

## ■ Conclusion

A positive online reputation can help companies build sales and create loyal customers. By disseminating content, promoting themselves with backlinks and monitoring social networks, blogs and other websites for mentions, companies can boost positive search engine listings and their overall reputations.

By failing to monitor and foster a positive online reputation, companies can lose customers and sales. Considering that managing an online reputation doesn't require a lot of money or additional staff, it should become a core responsibility of every business' marketing department.

<sup>10</sup> <http://bloom.bg/qG4UqT>



## Case Study: PrimeGenesis Takes “Authentic” Approach to Grooming an Online Reputation

PrimeGenesis<sup>11</sup>, a Stamford, Connecticut, executive onboarding firm, takes the authentic approach to managing its online reputation that’s advocated by social media experts.

“If we think about our clients as people we need to contribute to, our efforts will help our overall reputation,” says George Bradt, managing director of the \$2 million company, which helps executives quickly get up to speed in new positions.

“Even doing these simple things can mean the world of difference for a company’s image.”

Chris Rosica, author  
*The Authentic Brand: How Today’s Top  
Entrepreneurs Connect with Customers*

Bradt uses the following to create and monitor the company’s online reputation:

**Website.** PrimeGenesis’ website features a blog, videos, downloads of e-book summaries and an ongoing feed of recruiting industry news.

**Ancillary materials.** Bradt has published three books about succeeding in a new executive position and offers downloadable onboarding tools.

**Community action.** Bradt encourages employees to volunteer for the Red Cross and blogs about it.

**Social media monitoring.** Bradt starts work early—at 5:30 a.m.—to answer questions or comments from his website and monitors Twitter and LinkedIn for mentions of the business. He also manages a LinkedIn group he started about onboarding.

**Google Alerts.** Bradt uses Google Alerts, which sends him an email notice anytime his or his company’s name is mentioned online. Social media expert Chris Rosica suggests setting up Google Alerts for a company’s brands, product names, model numbers and executives. He also recommends creating alerts for business partners and suppliers, since both can be tied to a company’s reputation.

**Expert commentary.** PrimeGenesis’ website gets a huge traffic boost from a weekly column Bradt writes for Forbes.com called *The New Leader’s Playbook*, which relates positive examples of strong leaders and links back to the company’s site. “We used to get 400 visits per month,” he says. “Yesterday when my column went up, we got 657 visitors in one day.” The extra traffic translates into trust and reputation as far as the search engines are concerned, say experts.

All told, Bradt spends about two hours a day managing the company’s reputation. It’s time well spent, according to Rosica. The simple, inexpensive social media and monitoring tools that PrimeGenesis uses should be on every company’s to-do list, he says. “Even doing these simple things can mean the world of difference for a company’s image.”

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.primegenesis.com/blog/>



## Case Study: Clements Worldwide Takes Soft-Sell Approach

Clements Worldwide<sup>12</sup>, a Washington, D.C., insurance company, sells to expats and organizations around the world. It's not uncommon for its customers in the military, Peace Corps or overseas government offices to be stationed in places where the usual means of communication don't work. As a result, the company goes to great lengths to stay in contact with current and prospective clients—and uses social media to do it.

Customer service must be “perfect,” says Sergio Sanchez, the company's marketing director, and social media help the company fulfill that mandate.

Here's how Clements Worldwide uses social media to manage its online reputation by providing the best possible customer service:

“When people see that we've heard their problem and fixed it for them, it bolsters our online reputation.”

Sergio Sanchez, marketing director  
Clements Worldwide

**Expatriation information.** The company provides information helpful to expats in an email newsletter and contributes articles to Expatwomen.com, Expatfinder.com and similar sites.

**Social networks.** Employees staff two Facebook pages, two Twitter accounts and the company's LinkedIn presence, posting and tweeting stories and other information that customers might find interesting. Most of what they share isn't specifically related to its products, according to a Clements Worldwide spokesperson.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.clements.com/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://hootsuite.com/>

“Customers do not want to hear about our brand all day long. They do not want to feel like we are selling to them,” the spokesperson says.

The company uses Twitter and Facebook to interact directly with customers. Employees aren't allowed to delete or sidestep negative comments. “When people see that we've heard their problem and fixed it for them, it bolsters our online reputation,” Sanchez says.

Social media experts endorse that level of attention. When people feel taken care of and know they have access to a monitored customer service platform, they're less likely to post negative comments on other social media channels.

Even so, Clements Worldwide is proactive about its reputation. The marketing department subscribes to a news monitoring service and uses Google Alerts and HootSuite<sup>13</sup>, a social media tool, to monitor mentions of the company and its executives. “We search for terms like ‘expat’ and ‘insurance,’ and then repost items we think are of interest,” the Clements spokesperson says.

**Frequent website activity.** The company updates its website regularly with press releases and product information and makes sure it's set up to be easily indexed by search engines. It also offers content to partner and sponsor sites to increase the number of links back to its own site.

Because Clements Worldwide is so aggressive, negative comments about the business rarely show up in search results and have little effect when they do, Sanchez says. “Those one-offs are part of doing business,” he says. “As long as we're transparent and show empathy for our customers, we're going to be okay.”



A report prepared by  
Corporate Payment Solutions

Learn how American Express Corporate Payment Solutions streamline processes, increase visibility, leverage data and generate savings for your company. Call (877) 297-3555 to explore a new program or to convert an existing program. Additional information can be found at: <http://corp.americanexpress.com/gcs/payments/>