Managing Your Internet Reputation

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"Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."— Abraham Lincoln

Local Government professional executive managers, like their private industry counterparts have highly visible public profiles that often leave them open to criticism and attacks from many avenues including disgruntled employees and dissatisfied unions. However, unlike a private enterprise manager, the very nature of local government management with its regulatory function and its public persona opens the local government professional up to other forms of criticism and attack which can stem from the political nature of policy formulation, conflicting opinions and associated emotional reactions. These attacks, as in private industry, can lead to newspaper articles with quotes and statements that reflect negatively on the manager's professional reputation.

Were it just the local hometown printed newspaper that used to be consigned to the basement archives, you might be able to survive the attacks after the issue dies down. However, digital journalism may remain visible on the web forever and is difficult to remove, even legally. Negative search results may not only be permanent, but due to the way certain software works, the negatives may multiply over time.

The popular concept "to Google someone" makes digital information readily available to anyone with access to a computer and the will to search. To compound this problem, people often tend to believe search results reflect the truth.

Factors Affecting Internet Reputation

The permanency of digital journalism and its ability to impact your reputation negatively is exacerbated by several factors.

1. Newspapers report facts as documented by statements or quotes from people. These statements do not connote truth, but simply put, are the opinions of an individual from their own perspective with their own agendas. As William Faulkner so infamously *stated, Facts and truth really don't have much to do with each other.*

   For example, you are a manager in a community with seriously declining revenues that has provided very rich employee benefits over the years. You recommend reduction in employees' benefits, outsourcing certain services and reducing the number of employees to maximize use of revenues. Employees and unions, wishing to maintain the status quo, actively and successfully campaign to elect a new governing majority composed primarily of former employees, some who were terminated for cause by the City! How do you think the quotes-'statements of fact' from these newly elected officials might be driven by their own political agenda more than conveying reality?

2. The mass marketing technique used by newspapers of "bad news sells" often results in highly defamatory, negative headlines. How many times have you seen a headline that purports certain facts, only to read the article and find a different set of facts? The problem is the headline becomes the catchphrase for the 'permanent' digital document! Headlines that are driven by 'statements of fact' or even name-calling in public meetings which have nothing to do with you as a professional become the headline and become associated with you as a professional.
3. Newspapers with blogging sites as well as local community blogging sites have further corrupted the reporting of facts by allowing comments online that are best defined as internet slander-basically untruths, mistruths, incorrect, and misleading negative comments, which detract from the totality of what, might otherwise have been reasonably factual reporting. As a result, a person's online reputation can become unfairly tarnished.

   As managers we have to make hard and unpopular decisions. Comments from those impacted by these decisions can be acrimonious and vengeful. Whether it is terminated employees, regulated businesses, or 'over-taxed' citizens, expressing their angst or venting their anger online anonymously often .results in permanent slanderous 'blog' comments negatively affecting the manager's reputation.
4. Since 2009, Google and other search engines have concentrated on ensuring that the latest information, 'fresh content', shows up on the first page of search engines. Therefore, who you truly are as a professional, years of successful accomplishments can be destroyed overnight by current or 'fresh' negative internet slander or articles.

Proactive – Positive Approach to Internet Reputation Management

As local government professionals operating in this new age of instant information and permanent visibility, we have a responsibility to understand the power of the web and to maximize its usage to promote a positive self-image, but we are also constrained by the very public nature of our position which leaves us open to unfair attacks and criticism. As a result we must stay alert to our web image, monitoring even during the good times and ensuring that we immediately and consistently address the negatives.

The most important thing to remember is THINK POSITIVELY AND ACT POSITIVELY. DO NOT confront blogs and other sites by responding and engaging in repartee! In other words, do not distinguish an insult with an intelligent response. Repartee generates fresh content which will keep the negative data current and fresh for the web search engines.

In the day of the printed press, Mark Twain's proverb said it all "Never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel" In the digital age it is better said, "Never pick a fight with a blogger, his ink is free"... and it may stain you forever!

So, if you cannot attack it and it is almost impossible to remove it, what can you do?

There are a growing number of Online Reputation Management (ORM) firms who provide services primarily focused on monitoring a person's online image and using many of the accepted techniques for Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to enhance the person's online image. Tracking efforts are instituted to learn what is said about the person on the internet

and then techniques are used to promote positive or neutral content, generate new content and move the ranking of that content to the first one to three pages of a search engine (Google, Yahoo etc.) while moving the negative content to the "back" pages. Studies show that the vast majority of persons only search the first page of search results. Using a content development strategy backed by aggressive search engine optimization can move negatives to page two and beyond. This method effectively removes negatives from view, and has the added benefit of moving true, positive search results to the first page of search results where most people will see them.

Not everyone needs to or can afford to hire a firm to help them, there are steps that you can personally take to change or improve your reputation.

Your goal is to market who you are as a professional and 'overwhelm' the negative information on the web in your name with positive information. Remember, you are responding to the technique of "googling someone", which is producing negative information about you on search engine results. So, use your name or if you have a common name, something catchy that will consistently point back to you for search engine results. The idea is to sell yourself or 'brand' and market yourself, your accomplishments and your skills and abilities. Because of my unique name, Oel Wingo, branding my name was relatively easy. The reverse was also true in that negatives also showed up quickly under my name.

BRANDING YOURSELF:

1. Develop Websites with your Name in the URL:

A domain name with your name in it is called an 'exact match URL'. This type of domain is almost guaranteed to rise in search results, especially if it contains the coveted .com or .net

Utilizing Google tools, I developed my first website https://sites.google.com/site/oelwingo50. This process helped me to learn how pages were created and generated. As this whole process was all new to me, I hired a company called Internet Reputation Management (www.internetreputationmanagement.com)to assist me with my online reputation management.

IRM contracted with GoDaddy.com, on my behalf to purchase domain names with my personal brand and host the websites. My five domains are www.oelwingo.com, www.oelwingo.net, www.oelwingo.org, www.oelwingo.biz, www.oelwingo.info were created using off the shelf content management systems. The material and design on each site should be unique and not mirror the other sites to maximize the proliferation of content for your brand name.

The most important point is to get the site live, later you can adjust the designs to your liking. Even a simple site with your name in the URL will rise quickly in search results. Don't get bogged down in design minutia at first.

Another good reason to buy domains with your name in them now-Detractors cannot.

If you choose to manage the purchase, registration, development and hosting of your own websites, choose your web hosting service with caution. Key factors for consideration in choosing a web host are

- Reputation of the provider,
- Cost and payment plans,
- Number of websites the provider can host,
- Technical support depending on your individual needs and understanding of working with websites,
- Management tools, how easy is it to manage your space and
- Uptime guarantee- If the hosting service does not have the ability to keep your site up at least 95% of the time, you are wasting all of your website development efforts.

After the preliminaries are complete, you should make every effort to maintain and update the sites on a regular basis to keep the content fresh for search engine purposes.

2. Generate Social Profiles in your name and join Social Networking Websites:

There are numerous platforms that can be used to build social/personal or professional profiles as well as social networking sites to build your presence on the web.

It is important to keep these sites positive and updated regularly. You should consider keeping personal and professional profiles separate, including pictures that you share on each site. How many of us want a prospective employer to see pictures of our children and grandchildren. But, don't ignore the personal profiles. Personal profiles can also add to the proliferation of positive information about you on the web. Control your sites and the content by controlling who you 'friend' and who you allow to comment on your profile sites.

My social/personal and professional profiles are posted on the big three, Linked-In, Face Book and Twitter for networking and linking purposes. These sights have some of the highest rankings with Search Engine Sites and are a must to expand your presence and market yourself positively on the web. In addition, I continue to research the highest ranked social profile sites and post new profiles to increase my presence on the web including BigSight.org, Biznik.com, ProfessionalOnTheWeb.com, CVShare.net, AboutMe.Com, Multiply, Ziggs.com, Google+, Yahoo, Jigsaw, Orkut, and MySpace. Use well-known sites because they are considered 'stronger' by search engines and therefore have a better chance of rising in search results.

2. Utilize Publishing Platforms:

Blogs: Write and post articles and blog about yourself and your subject area expertise on a regular basis.

Blogging tools such as Blogger and Wordpress allow you to create your own Blog sites utilizing your personal brand (your name), i.e. http://oelwingo.blogspot.com , http://oelwingo.wordpress.com, thus adding these sites with your content to the search engine results.

Negative articles and blogs affected your professional reputation negatively; therefore, generating and controlling your own positive articles and blogs will affect your professional reputation positively. Publishing requires effort and time as you

want to ensure that what you are publishing meets accepted professional standards and does not detract from your intent of promoting your image positively. Publish about yourself and on topics about which you are knowledgeable or passionate. Use your full name in all that you write so the search engine results lead back once again to your name-personal brand, reflecting the fresh associated positive data you are generating. Hire a firm or do it yourself, but get started!

Additionally, find the top ranked blog sites and comment or post on topics of interest to you. Stay positive. Do not respond to negatives. Stay active and visible. Occasionally, blog posts such as this will rise in prominence in the search results for highly visible and active blogs.

Articles and Press Releases: Become a recognized authority and publish articles in your areas of expertise. The first place to publish is your own website or blog. Then consider re-publishing on sites such as local government or public administration authority sites that accept submissions from guest writers, online reference sites such as Wikipedia, and article submission sites or directories which will allow reprints such as EzineArticles, ArticlesBase, GoArticles, ArticleBiz and Squidoo.

Article directories allow users to submit articles to the site directory which are then categorized by content. Utilize article directories that have high page rankings and maintain credibility with the search engine sites. Because these directories are considered authority sites, they are constantly crawled by search engines in search of current material. Utilizing your name as well as embedding backlinks to your website creates linkages which increase page ranking and visibility for your profile sites.

Additionally, if you are knowledgeable or an expert in a certain area, submit to Online reference sites such as Wikipedia, Yahoo! Answers, About, Answer, eHow, Reference, Hubpages, Squidoo, Googlebooks, wikia, and wikihow. But remember, anything you write in a Wiki such as Wikipedia.com, it can be changed by anyone else in the world.

Finally, do not hesitate to publish your own press releases touting your expertise and professional accomplishments with your personal brand. Some of the free sites include Free-Press-Release.com, NewswireToday.com, PR.com, ad PRLog.org.

MARKETING YOURSELF:

Generating positive content alone is ineffectual unless coupled with promotion and internet marketing tools which maximize the visibility of your positive content with the search engines. Promoting and maintaining your new positive image can be accomplished either via an ongoing contract with an internet reputation management firm or you can begin to take control yourself. Whether you go with a firm or do it yourself will ultimately depend upon time and financial resources and your understanding of the ORM processes.

1) Search Engine Optimization Techniques and Terminology: Your goal is to 'own' the first page of search engine results whether it is Google, Yahoo or Bing, the top three ranked search engines. A study from the Georgia Institute of Technology indicates that 75% of users do not search past page one. The majority of those will click on one of the top three items on the first page.

The practice of boosting specific search results is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Search engines are ever-changing but can be prompted to change search results in your favor using SEO techniques.

The most important techniques to remember are:

1. Unique and Relevant Content: The content must be real, be different (not copied) and utilize your name (the key phrase) in the headline and a few times in the body of the copy itself. Search engines reward relevance, so write content that people will actually want to read and will find helpful.

2. PageRank: Google uses the concept of PageRank to determine the importance of a site on the web. The higher the ranking of a page, the higher the page will show up on search engine results. In other words, the more likely it is to end up in search results on the first page.

3. Linking: Page ranking is determined by the number of linkages or connections to a page. Simply put, the more inbound links to a page the higher the page is ranked. While the number of linkages is important, Google also looks at the quality and types of linkages, so it is important to link with sites that have high page ranks.

Creating Linkages

1. When generating content such as articles, press releases, article-biographies, blogs etc., embed links pointing back to your personalized webpages. Do not duplicate content (writing and images for example) in different places. Unique, fresh content is the key.

2. Develop reciprocal links or one way links with colleagues or related sites – one-way links from their site to yours are best, education and government sites, Chamber of Commerce Sites and radio station, television, magazine, or newspaper sites.

3. Link your social profiles to your websites or blogs. Google Profiles, Facebook and LinkedIn are good choices.

4. Use website directories such as Web Directories, News Article Directories and Social Bookmarking sites to create linkages. If you know people that own or control websites, talk to them.

Online and offline, Reputation Management is not only about adhering to the highest professional ethics and continuous learning and self-improvement, it is also about marketing yourself as a competent and accomplished professional. A successful online self-marketing program will enhance your professional efforts not only as you manage your communities during the good times but will provide a solid foundation to enable you and your professional reputation to weather the bad times.

If you would like additional information or assistance with your online reputation management, contact Dr. Wingo at owingo50@gmail.com or visit her website at http://www.oelwingo.org.