

PART 1

BUILD YOUR REPUTATION—OR YOUR BRAND—FOR FREE

Your character is what you really are while your reputation is merely what others think you are.

—John R. Wooden

I couldn't agree more with this quote from the late great coach Wooden. The reality on the Internet is that very few prospects will ever care to find out who you really are deep inside as an organization, business, or individual.

The busy, overwhelmed public will make snap decisions based on a quick glance at your online reputation.

Whether your online reputation or brand is accurate or not matters very little to the masses. Which is why you can't afford to ignore it by thinking that it's entirely based on your good character, or the handful of testimonials on your own website.

Monitoring and managing your online reputation has recently become just as vital as any other marketing you may be doing. It's time to play defense.

The term *reputation management* may be new to you, but it's a term that you must embrace because of the new rules of the Internet economy. Under the old rules if you upset a customer we were all told to expect that they would tell seven of their friends. The implied conclusion was that an

occasional upset customer was acceptable and expected, but certainly not potentially devastating.

Now things have changed. If someone has something bad to say about you, their comment could be posted semi-permanently on page one of Google for months or years. This seemingly insignificant act on the part of one customer could potentially impact you negatively in front of hundreds or even thousands of prospects. The fact is, people are increasingly using search engines to research the industries, people, or businesses they are considering doing business with and, like it or not, your business, name, or organization is on the list of those that *will* be impacted. And it gets worse before it gets better, because on Google bad news floats.

The stakes are high. All it takes is one angry customer, one disgruntled employee, or one bad business partner acting on your behalf and your reputation could take a semipermanent hit. Maybe it already has and you don't even know it.

TOUGH REALITY

A public that rarely takes time to investigate the background of the news reporters they listen to isn't likely to devote any time to researching the motives of the random strangers they encounter online who have something negative to say about you or your company. They'll just believe the negative and move on.

But there is good news. Take a deep breath.

You *can* proactively manage your online reputation whether you are a small local business or a big player with customers worldwide. You don't have to be perfect either—which is good news since none of us are.

In my online businesses I've sold services, products, and downloadable goods to well over 100,000 customers in the past few years with my name and business name proudly attached to every transaction. The price points have ranged from \$7 special reports to tens of thousands of dollars for multiyear coaching or consulting contracts. In other words, my own business has been a good testing ground for my theories of reputation management.

The big question: Is it possible to keep 100,000 people 100 percent happy on that many various transactions? The answer is no—that's impossible. No person or organization is perfect.

The realistic goal for your business should be to fix every problem fast, and allow no one to become so upset that they post glaringly negative things about you online. On the occasion where a situation gets away from you, you need to be prepared to combat the negative comment strategically. It is

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possible to manage your reputation through a large numbers of transactions and customers even if you have only a tiny staff like I do.

The other component of a good strategy involves intentionally flooding the Internet with the good news and testimonials about you and your company to help drown out the inevitable bad news. You'll need the help of loyal customers to do this part correctly (and of course 100 percent ethically).

So, how's my online reputation doing with the odds stacked against me?

One popular watchdog site that monitors those of us claiming to teach Internet business has over 40,000 voting members and ranks over 2,000 industry experts. At the time of this writing I'm thrilled to be consistently ranked in the top five most trusted and have spent a lot of time at number one. Also, the first several pages of Google and other major search engines are filled with positive comments and feedback about me, my websites, and my businesses. It's all because of what I'm about to show you in the next six chapters—my six rules for maintaining a good online reputation. I believe these rules will serve any business very well.

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CHAPTER 1

SUPERCHARGE YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION

If you read books the way I do, you may be starting out by jumping over the intro and other stuff by going right to Chapter 1. That's a *big* mistake. You really need to check out the Introduction in order to get what I'm saying.

Virtually every customer has a megaphone and an audience—give them a reason to say great things about you.

This era of instant online relationships and limitless information is the best time in the history of business to run an honest business that also wows your customers. Customers today have the ability to spread the word to unimaginable numbers of potential prospects if you'll just give them a good reason to. In my business I teach anyone who works for me the power of testimonials and feedback with this simple philosophy, "Any positive comment sent to us or posted online is worth \$1,000 in our pocket. No amount of marketing or advertising that you will ever do can compare to the viral power of your audience as they share their experiences and impressions of your business online."

The network of potential contacts that your customers are all a part of is unlike anything we've ever seen in business, and it's growing at an unimaginable pace. If Facebook were a country it would be the third largest country on earth, and it's still growing rapidly as I write this book. You simply must find creative ways to tap into the pool of prospects that are directly connected to your current customers.

Even if you don't have a website. . . .

It's no longer good enough just to be good at what you do. In order to supercharge your online reputation you must proactively encourage your customers to spread the word. You must lead and encourage them instead of waiting on good things to happen on their own. You need the help of your most loyal fans and customers in order to flood the web with good news that will counter and drown out the inevitable bad review that will eventually show up—if it hasn't already. While you can't put words in the mouths of your customers, you can give them every opportunity to say great things about you, and you can encourage them to do so.

Make it easy for your customers to leave feedback online both in front of their online network of friends and contacts, and on review sites. A few examples of this in action:

- Have an Internet-connected laptop or iPad on hand in your business lobby or waiting room and post a sign nearby that reads, "Free Internet access. All we ask in return is that you tell your friends about your experience with us today on Facebook, Twitter, or e-mail us your story at this e-mail address: MyStory@YourBusinessEmail.com."
- Post a sign in your business targeted at customers with smartphones, requesting that they leave a review or post a comment on your blog, website, a popular review site, Twitter, Facebook, and so on while they wait. This little prompt could start a viral wave of activity from just one customer participating.
- In every e-mail or correspondence you send your customers encourage them to send you stories of success or mention your services to their online network of friends. If you give instructions on exactly how to help you it will be very well received by your most loyal customers.
- Most cell phones now have built in powerful cameras, and as a result pictures have become nearly as easy to share as the spoken word. We all know that a good picture is better than a thousand words right? Encourage your customers to use their cell phones to take and send you pictures of their experiences with your business, employees, and products. Encourage them to post them online in their social networks and on review sites (be specific as to which sites).
- Hold contests that encourage your customers to create a simple YouTube.com video talking about you and your business. Reward the most creative entries with a prize. I did this activity with my mailing list of top customers about a year ago and created a great viral wave of new activity and publicity on YouTube.
- Create a high quality T-shirt or other branded items that reflect the marketing message of your business and give them away to top

customers and sell them to others, but take it a step further. Request that customers send you a picture and post a picture of themselves wearing or using the items somewhere online. These photos make for great eye-candy for any website as well if customers send you a copy! If your customers aren't local, use a service like Cafepress.com to manage the printing and shipment of your T-shirts.

CAUTION

Most of the legitimate feedback and review sites online now use IP tracking to help prevent abuse. This means they can tell if one computer is being used to pad the stats for or against a business. More tips and rules for staying legit are posted at the end of this chapter.

Once we've pulled in positive feedback or testimonials, we post them to our own website where the public can see them almost instantly. We also ask anyone who sends us a great testimonial to please jump on the appropriate feedback sites and leave their comments there. We make it easy for them by providing a link and instructions.

Feedback and reviews posted online from a third party that lacks an agenda will be trusted far more than if you post anything positive about yourself. Honest feedback and conversations left on neutral territory, such as a trusted review site, are worth their weight in gold for your business.

Alternately, it's just as easy to use the Internet to tell the world how rotten you are. Online, bad news floats. This means that if 1,000 people love you and one doesn't like you, the comment from the one angry guy will probably find its way to the top. It's not a kind truth, but it's a truth nonetheless. This truth will guide many of the other rules I show you in the five following sections.

You will have customers post bad things about you online eventually. You need to prepare for this reality. Nothing quenches the pain of a complaint posted online like a host of happy testimonials standing nearby overwhelming the lone complainer. These testimonials and happy stories won't come in on their own, though, and it takes time and great service to get them. You have to go after these stories and testimonials and encourage your customers to give you feedback. People are busy, but if you remind them they are glad to help you out (assuming they like you). As you collect stories of success and gratitude you can post these testimonials on your website,

blog, or other sites. You can also encourage your customers to post their comments themselves on popular review sites for your industry, and on their social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

A few things to keep in mind when gathering and encouraging testimonials:

- While you can ask for testimonials, don't give customers prizes for submitting them. They must be sincere or you'll risk damaging your credibility.
- Let customers know the specific review websites and services where you'd appreciate their feedback appearing. Register with all possible sites associated with your industry. Here's a partial list to get you started: Yelp.com, Google Places, Bing Local, CitySearch.com, Yahoo! Local, Local.com, MerchantCircle.com, and AngiesList.com.
- Adding testimonials to your own website is some of the best content you can possibly have. It's called *social proof* and it's far more powerful than anything you can ever say about yourself on your site.
- Be aware of FTC rules for posting testimonials. More info can be found at www.FTC.org (search for the most current documents on "Endorsements and Testimonials"). Always be cautious when making specific claims of results—those are murky waters with the FTC.
- Whenever possible post a picture, a name, and a city with any testimonials you put online or in your marketing materials. This increases the credibility factor significantly.
- Never give yourself reviews, let your customers do it.
- Don't encourage customers to submit reviews from a single permanently located computer sitting in your office because the IP address will be identical on all testimonials and this will raise red flags with most legitimate online review sites. Instead encourage the use of smartphones for in-house customer testimonial submissions. For example, a restaurant could post a sign where customers can see it that says: "If we didn't earn a 5-star review on Yelp.com today, please let us know how we can earn it before you leave. We rely heavily on your feedback and reviews."
- Use a service like freeconferencecall.com or any other similar service to capture testimonials. Whenever an excited customer contacts you with a great story to tell, request that they "hold that thought" and then give them your dial-in number for your conference call line. Record the call with the two of you talking, and then edit it to their liking if necessary. I provide more details in the chapter on teleseminars, but you can check out a great example of where I used this very idea myself

recently to capture a conversation I had with an excited student (end of Chapter 30). There are also services that will allow you to capture single dial-in customers and record their testimonial, but I prefer to interact so that it feels more like content.

- Watch for positive posts on your blog and get permission to post the comments in other places.
- Any positive e-mails you get can be used the same way.
- Twitter, Facebook, and any other social media site can be a source of new comments and stories that should be shared with larger audiences as a testimonial.
- Use Google Alerts as mentioned earlier in the book to keep an eye out for good news being shared about you and your business.

CREATIVE IDEA

Houlihan's restaurant offers (by invitation only) their best customers to join their "HQ" program at www.houlihans.com. Once inside, members get invitations to tastings and are encouraged to then report their feedback on review sites like Yelp.com or on their own Facebook.com pages.