Online Reputation Management

Steps Towards Managing Your Online Reputation

- Discussion of Online Reputation Management
- Step-by-step Process for Developing ORM Processes
- Tools for Listening, Engaging, Measuring and Improving Online Reputation
Overview

It is very possible the year 2009 will be recalled as the turning point for an exchange in power of influence in the world, from organizations to individuals. Frequent situations developed that year when customers went very public (via the internet) with complaints about the poor service they received at the hands of large companies. The Web and related social technologies have enabled this shift, empowering consumers with the capability to publically announce their discontent with employers, vendors, service providers, and retailers. There's a wide range of public forums, including rating sites, discussion groups, e-communities, Twitter, Facebook, or review sites such as www.pissedconsumer.com. People are getting more sophisticated with using the internet to research business contacts, organizations, and service provider credentials.

The impact of these new dynamics will be much more extensive than most realize. It is no longer an option for individuals or organizations to ignore what is being said about them online. Successful professionals and organizations are aware of the importance of their reputation whether online or in person. This is because a positive reputation brings trust, confidence, and sales - all things which are ultimately reflected in profitability. A bad reputation can lead to a decrease in consumer confidence, and, in turn, a reduction in revenue and profits. In this day and age, erroneous rumors, malicious gossip, unfair opinions, and other bad news spread fast! The internet has compounded the acceleration and geographic distribution of this information. By the time negative news goes public, it is often too late to remedy and the damage is irrevocable.

*Important Note: The steps in this process should be viewed as the minimum effort needed to effectively monitor and improve online reputation.*
Goals

1. **Gain control over constituent impressions of you or your organization** – As internet access and social channel usage increases, online reputation will have a profound influence on your success or failure. No longer can constituent impressions be left to chance. You must institute a consistent strategic process and develop the supporting skills necessary to make improvements wherever possible.

2. **Maintain 100% awareness of any online mention that could be pivotal** – Because the internet is searchable and your content footprint can remain accessible, it is important to mitigate surprise in learning of a post or mention before it is too late. Be it positive or negative, you should always know about a posting before someone else tells you about it.

3. **Establish a measurement system that provides a clear, goal-driven analysis of the status concerning your online reputation** – In order to have an accurate idea of what your online reputation is doing for/against you, or to gauge real-time progress, you need a thorough measurement system in place. What gets measured gets done, so the added benefit of a solid ability to measure your online reputation will provide focus to those responsible for upholding it.

4. **Develop an ability to use Online Reputation Management (ORM) as a customer service and product/service development tool** – One of the benefits of an ORM process is the new ability to gain broad scope insight of what your constituents think of you, your products, or your services. In many cases, the comments and opinions you will find will be unfiltered and unguarded, something that can be a blessing in better understanding true perceptions and directly improving performance.
5. **Gain an ability to monitor your competitors** – The same tools you use to monitor your ORM operation can be used to monitor your competitors. For the same reasons you should want to know what consumers are saying about you and your products, knowing what the same groups are saying about your competition can be very useful in learning strengths and weaknesses to replicate or avoid.

**Process**

You should think about Online Reputation Management on four levels: listening, engaging, measuring, and improving. Each of these is important because they cover a different aspect of the reputation management process. For example, listening doesn't do you much good if you aren't engaging when you need to, or, say you're listening and engaging but you aren't improving; if pieces are left out then you will see some of the same problems cropping up again and again. We've formulated seven steps that can help you with your Online Reputation Management, but before you get to the listening, engaging, measuring, and improving, you need to organize a team that will handle your ORM.

**Step One – Identify and organize team members that should be involved in the ORM process** This process impacts a number of different areas in an organization, because it is not a sound plan to elect one person as the ORM guru. Not only would you be in danger of losing all institutional knowledge when they left, but you would also find that the fundamental lessons gleaned from the ORM process would not always filter to the right successors.

Likely candidates for the ORM implementation team could include representatives from the IT, marketing, sales, advertising, legal, HR, corporate communications, and product management departments.
departments. Additional thoughts to consider when putting this team together:

➢ Holding monthly meetings for the first six-month period helps maintain focus and the shared responsibility of bringing positive results to the table.
➢ Consider assembling a diversified team with a variety of viewpoints and opinions so you benefit from a good mix of skeptics, fans, and non-bias.
➢ The more members on the team, the faster the concept will spread across the organization.
➢ Each team member should be responsible for his or her own unique aspect of ORM. For example, HR could be granted jurisdiction over comments made on the web by current and former employees. The legal department could oversee monitoring of libelous comments. Marketing should own the evaluation of impact from comments on the first two pages of critical search terms. The list goes on…
➢ Consider giving every member of the team a specific task to accomplish so each of them must report on how they used the concept in their area.

Listening

**Step Two – Develop a listening process** – The foundation of an ORM process is the implementation of a very robust listening system that captures every keyword mention you are interested in. This listening process must find anything you want to monitor on blogs, discussion groups, Twitter, Facebook, etc. This can be accomplished using free or fee-based Web services built for this specific purpose. The assembly of this process then is merely selecting the tools that will best do the job within your budget. Additional thoughts to consider:

➢ The choice of software tools is critical in that weak listening tools will only find a
small percentage of mentions online and may defeat your purpose. There are also enterprise class tools that have monthly fees with free tools and add-ons. Make sure you choose wisely. *Note: We maintain a list of suggested tools and can supply upon request*

➢ When you apply these tools, be sure you are listening for the right things. It is important to at least monitor the names of your executives, organization references, products, and competitors. The keywords you are tracking must be given thought so you are seeing what your customers/clients/partners are seeing as well.

➢ Depending on which tools you select, there will be varying degrees of shared team listening. We never suggest using only one listener without a back up because when the that one is not available, you will be in the dark. This needs to be a consistently shared process.

➢ If the search terms you want to listen for are common names (e.g. Smith, or company name Apple) we suggest you use a fee-based system with tools built specifically to help you listen for common terms. These systems use advanced rules to weed out unnecessary information.

➢ Whoever is tasked with listening must have a clear understanding on what to do with the mentions they find online. This leads us to step three.

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**Engaging**

**Step Three – Document an engagement policy** – Once you have a flow of online mentions being identified, you must design a policy and process for how to compile this information. This is a critical step because the information found must be focused and evaluated. If the harvested information does not get to the right people, or if there is no action taken to
remediate comments, then you have wasted the time and energy invested in listening. It is also important to create a policy that dictates who is allowed to respond to online comments and what appropriate, acceptable responses might be. This engagement policy must be written and shared with all team members so everyone is clear on how your reputation will be managed. Additional ideas include:

➢ As much as possible, embed your engagement policy into existing organization governance. Do not create a unique position for fielding online reputation responses. If you have a customer service team, simply route negative comments to them. It is not wise to create a separate team to engage because they will come into conflict with those doing similar work in other areas.

➢ Involve your HR department if possible so they can help with the engagement rules and document the dos and don'ts in existing employee documents or social tech policies.

➢ It is wise to give serious thought to an emergency plan if something highly negative is found online, becomes well transmitted, and/or is high ranking in your search queues. The better a response plan is enacted in advance, the faster you can take action in this type of situation.

- An engagement plan is especially important for large organizations, franchisors, retailers, and businesses with geographically dispersed offices. This is a safeguard for remote office personnel who may otherwise take it upon themselves to respond to online comments in ways that are out of sync with regulation. If your organization falls into this category, consider creating separate engagement policy documents for each office, franchisee, or partner.

It is highly recommended that you document a classification method to list and describe what people should do with both positive and negative posts. You can either create a graphical tree
of decisions and responses for handling various situations, or you can create a text-based explanation. To do this, you must list all possible examples of positive and negative posts that can be leveled and classified at your organization. For example, you would want to list posts and related categories such as applicable to current employees, past employees, disgruntled customers, disgruntled investors, etc. Then answer the following items as applicable (positive or negative):

Negative comments:
1. Who should be made aware of this type of post?
2. What is the proper channel for responding (email, post back, phone call, in person meeting)?
3. How should you respond?
4. Who is authorized to respond?

Positive Comments:
1. What should you respond to?
2. What is the response (thank you, may we have permission to reprint?, etc.)?
3. Who is authorized to respond?

Measuring

Step Four – Create a measurement system – One of the most ignored dangers to today’s organizations is online reputation ignorance. What you do not know can hurt you – badly. A measurement system to safeguard against this provides two clear advantages. One advantage to adequate measurement is comprehensive knowledge current metrics related to elements such as share of voice, or how many people are talking about you, and your
sentiment ratio, or how positive or negative their comments are. The second advantage is the relative progress from improving your online presence and circumventing foreseeable pitfalls. Measuring helps us set goals and better analyze our progress toward reaching them. Key items that need to be measured are how many mentions per month, the sentiment ratio of positives to negatives, the sources of mentions, and your ability to influence negative comments. These are just a few basic measurements that work for everyone. Depending on your organization type and the specific projects you are testing, there may be many customized measurements. Consider the following when putting together your measurement system:

➢ Many measurements can be automated by using the right web tools. In many cases, the applications that help you listen will also help you measure. Try to do as little by hand as possible.

➢ Form a plan to distribute the measurements in dashboards at the end of each month, and give some thought to all who might be interested in the statistics. Sending out regular ORM dashboard updates keeps this subject top of mind with recipients.

➢ Use your measurements to support goals already in place to drive the organization forward with ORM. Once you measure something, you now have the ability to target a desired state. Do not allow these measurements to become raw data that goes unused.

➢ Once again, it is not a good idea to task only one person with measurement responsibilities. The more people sharing the responsibility to measure various areas, the more efficiently work gets done and the more mindshare is spread amongst the team.
Improving

Step Five – Provide training on ORM tools for appropriate team members – Because this is a new field, it is naive to assume team members will assimilate the knowledge without help. Training can be provided on how to use the Web-based tools that support this process, the proper methods of engagement, and on how to use the information gained. Do not make the mistake of purchasing a great tool then having only one or two people that know how to use it. This will limit its usage and put the company at risk should these employees be lost. Make the training mandatory for any job position that is highly impacted by online correspondence. Consider which new employee positions should get this training when on-boarded. Also, be prepared to do training more than once. This is a growing field and as new concepts and tools emerge, there will be additional value in training over time.

Step Six – Create a competitive analysis plan – As mentioned, the same tools that allow you to monitor what is being said about you will provide a wealth of insight into what is also being said about your competition. In some cases, this information is valuable as intelligence, and in other cases it can be acted on to convert unhappy customers over to your business. Understanding what your competitors’ customers view to be strong and weak product points can be invaluable. Gaining insight into employee changes or new product offerings can quickly provide valuable intelligence to gain a better foothold on the market. Consider the following ideas:

> Set up a routing process for delivering competitive information to the sales force and product and marketing teams. These are staff members that can use it on a daily basis. It costs you nothing more to share listening tool results with three people or a thousand.
➢ Add elements of competitive analysis to your engagement policy. For example, how will you react when you see that a competitor’s customer is upset? How will you capitalize on this? Also, who should receive and process information about major product announcements or executive changes? Ultimately once you have captured this competitive intelligence data, be sure to get it to the people that can most benefit from it.

➢ Be sure to run alerts on your competitors’ executive names so you are aware anytime these people change strategies, or they are quoted.

**Step Seven (Optional) – Reputation Remediation** – This may not apply to your organization, but this step is about intervention to lower the profile of bad online mentions. There are a number of steps that can be taken to improve a situation where negative comments have surfaced in critical places.

The first thing to do is to take a clear inventory of how glaring the problem is. This must be done by reviewing your online presence in the same ways a constituent might look at you. For example, you should do a Google search for all of the keywords someone might use, and chart out where the negative “landmines” are. You must audit who made the negative comments to determine whether the problem is widespread or limited to one or two disgruntled people.

Once you have identified the source, cause, and scale of the negative comments, you can choose a strategy for remediation. There are a number of vendors that specialize in this. If you have no time, or prior skill training to carry out work, it might make sense to hire this type of professional and turn them loose. If you prefer to try remediation in-house, however, consider the following ideas:

➢ Flooding bad news off of the top search pages is a common technique. It requires
you to do search engine optimization on new pages with positive information so that they jump ahead of the bad mentions and flood them off the top search pages. This takes some concentrated effort and a little time investment to accomplish.

➢ In some cases, simply adding lots of good news to specific keyword search pages will balance out the bad news.

➢ Directly reaching out to the source of negativity can be helpful to stem the flow of recurring mentions. This is something that should be tried early in the effort. There is little to lose by engaging someone that is upset and at least trying to assuage them.

➢ If the person spreading negativity has a suspicious motive, then it is good to flood your keywords with information about why the person should not be trusted. This can offset negativity or set the record straight in some cases.

➢ If the negative mentions border on slander or libel, a cease-and-desist letter is always an option. The only danger is the risk of the letter being published, which could make things worse.

**Expected Outcomes**

The most important outcome of this process is never to be surprised by what correspondence transpires on the internet regarding comments about you or your organization. Another positive outcome will be the ability to use the information you glean from this process to improve your products and services. You will also be able to identify raving fans and serious critics like never before. Whatever the case, the Online Reputation Management process will provide a level of control over your social relevancy so you are not
victimized by negative comments or powerless to get a fair and accurate story across. The final desired outcome is that this process will be integrated in an inexpensive, efficient, and effective manner so it is of low drag and high reward to the organization.