

Saving Our Students From Themselves: An Introduction to Web Presence Management

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Abstract

Social networking screen names, email addresses, and URLs are commodities. Where businesses and celebrities are able to secure protection through trademark law, the common user has been left to fight for his/her name. An early adopter for a common name, such as John Smith, can capture the notoriety of being the John Smith, from whom everyone thereafter must distinguish himself. Large companies can legally affect the purchase of certain screennames or URLs that correctly identify a product or company. For the average user or professional, a corporation's vast resources are unavailable. On the other hand, a single user has the ability to, and not necessarily maliciously, command an audience with the proper choice of a combination of online tools. Because of the principle that screennames and URLs are determined on a first-come-first-served basis, naming rights have become a commodity, which is important for a strong online presence. A professional online identity can be as important as your tangible real world network. By controlling one's online presence, one can avoid cases of mistaken identity and further command their professional reputation online. Securing an online presence through social media products can safeguard and bolster business opportunities for professionals, especially during a time of economic crisis and massive unemployment. Without utilizing social media's limitless potential, professionals risk losing a dedicated 24-hour publicist, resume broadcaster, and personal SEO. This paper seeks to explain nuances in mainstream social media products,

which facilitate better professional relationships by keeping one's online reputation and digital professional identity secure.

Key words: SEO; Internet; Social media; Web presence

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INTRODUCTION

"And again, the Internet is not something that you just dump something on. It's not a big truck. It's a series of tubes..." (Curtis, 2006)

Arguments for critical media literacy regarding film, radio, music, news, and magazines, etc. in the classroom are abundant. Despite the level of education, scholars echo that students need higher order thinking skills regarding the world around them without addressing digital media and technology. Modern computing and access to digital tools have moved the student well beyond the role of passive watcher or reader, into the role of creator, interactor, or remixer. This demands the use of critical social media literacy that does not often find its way into the curriculum. While a degree hangs well on one's office wall, one's digital web presence can portray a different, potentially damaging story, or one that bolsters the skills a résumé can only list. Because of differing experiences, recent Hispanic and Latino graduates may be unaware, or are often overwhelmed, with their lifetime's worth of digital content (blog posts, forum comments, public profiles, videos, photos, etc.) in the way of their future careers. This article argues the need for social media literacy within the curriculum, particularly within business curriculums, to foster, not only business professionals,

but digital professionals. This article further provides the foundation through which students can create or rebuild for themselves an online digital presence to help bolster their job search and professional future.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY

Researchers have described the relationship between college students' use and need for social media like that of drug addiction; abstaining from use results in frantic craving, anxiety, and misery, which are symptoms similar to that of withdrawal from alcohol or drugs. Furthermore, college students are not just unwilling to part with their social media tools and networks. They are functionally unable to be without them (Nauert, 2010). Although a bold portrayal, the authors do not argue to legitimize social media literacy due to student obsession. Despite the level of student use, there appears to be a self-regulating distinction between how students identify themselves and their digital identities.

For students, their digital identity is different than their real identities. Most will self-edit their social media network and share specifically chosen information "it's me, but minus the things I don't like about me" (Thomas, 2007). This inherent distinction of self provides an opportunity for educators to help craft this second digital identity while fostering within a student personal and professional responsibility over that digital identity.

2. YOU ARE WHAT YOU SHARE

Despite being an existential question, most would find it quite difficult to quickly answer "Who are you?" but for Google it is surprisingly easy to answer. Less than a decade ago, one's reputation would have little to do with their 'tweets,' 'check-ins,' or 'likes.' But in a world where 552 million daily users log on to Facebook in the United States, and 40% of all social media users say they interact more over social media than face-to-face, we have a catalog of interactions available to determine reputation. Aside from gaining a reputation, online social interactions are available for many to view. Today's college graduates start careers struggling to adapt to a professional environment filled with different networking and social media rules from their previous nonprofessional lives (Miller, 2013).

Within keystrokes the Internet can reveal your most prominent facts, leaving aside, and untold, the breadth of accomplishment of most of our lives. While we have little control of publicly available information (perhaps a felony) or what others might have to say, most of what is available is of our own doing. Of the United States general population, researchers found an overall willingness to share personal information online as follows:

77%: Brands I like

78%: Race/Ethnicity

87%: Name

67%: Education

62%: Occupation

74%: Relationship Status

50%: Birthdate

56%: Personal Photos

54%: Political Affiliation (Isozio, 2012).

Notwithstanding any privacy concerns for the general public, the above figures display an awfully shallow view of the average person. Of course, this does not account for blog posts, forum comments, public conversations, and profiles, all of which could portray someone in a poor light. Where employers regularly peruse social media for information regarding job candidates, negative interactions, or damaging comments could be considered a liability.

Professionals who do not understand the concept that their online perception is as important as their real-world perception may eventually become victims of technological pitfalls and self-inflicted character attacks. For instance, in May 2011, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall tweeted about the death of Osama bin Laden (Huffington Post, 2011, July 3). Mendenhall's tweet, which could be deleted but not undone, said, "It's amazing how people can hate a man they have never even heard speak. We've only heard one side" (Huffington Post, 2011, July 3). Those few lines of online text resulted in thousands of retweets, which tripled his exposure in a matter of hours. As a result of the tweet, the Pittsburgh Steelers coaching staff called a press conference to initiate damage control with the media (Huffington Post, 2011, September 18). Further, Champion Sports released Mendenhall from his endorsement contracts with the company, which ultimately caused a series of legal ramifications for the football player (Huffington Post, 2011, September 18). Even though this event occurred almost two years ago, any recent Google search of Mendenhall's name will continue to show sports news reports of the offensive tweet and subsequent court case.

3. HOW ABOUT ABSTINANCE?

While many professionals maintain successful businesses without a web presence, the lack of a web presence may be a red flag for potential customers. For job candidates, a web presence may be crucial. According to Forbes magazine, some employers have seen the lack of a Facebook account for job candidates as problematic (Hill, 2012, Aug. 6). Curtis Midkiff, of the Society for Human Resource Management, commented that "most human resource professionals see a person's lack of a Facebook or LinkedIn account not as a statement about one's character but about their level of seriousness about their job search" (Hill, 2012, Aug. 13). Therefore, if a job

candidate does not have their web presence maximized, then they are not serious about finding a job (Hill, 2012, Aug. 13).

Sometimes, it is too late to prevent dissemination of negative content. When this occurs, a user will need to focus on damage control to prevent the total destruction of a professional reputation. Take, for example, the confession and apology issued by Olympic Gold Medal Swimmer Michael Phelps in 2009 after a photo surfaced of him smoking an unconfirmed substance from a water pipe (ESPN, 2009). Although he was not banned from the Olympics nor criminally charged, his reputation suffered as a result of the photo. An endorsement contract with Kellogg's was not renewed; however, Phelps was able to retain the majority of his endorsement deals and both the public and sponsors appear to have accepted his apology (Macur, 2009).

4. CONCEPTUAL DESIGN

Given the string of issues that might arise from a student's digital content, the authors have begun implementing in undergraduate Business Communication and Professional Development courses assignments that entail market research and rebranding of individual students. What does the Internet tell us about this person? Who do they want to be? Further, a single user has the ability to, and not necessarily maliciously, command a digital audience through a strong, well crafted web presence. An early adopter for a common name, such as Juan Hernandez, can capture the notoriety of being *the* Juan Hernandez, from whom everyone thereafter must distinguish himself. A professional online identity can be as important as your tangible real world network. By controlling one's online presence, one can avoid cases of mistaken identity and further command their professional reputation online. Without utilizing social media's limitless potential, professionals risk losing a dedicated 24-hour publicist, résumé broadcaster, and personal Search Engine Optimizer (SEO).

Proactively analyzing and interacting with one's web presence can afford some students their first opportunity to becoming a business professional and dealing with the transition to the corporate world. Following is a framework, organized in four phases, that students are expected to follow to clean up any discrepancies with their online presence to command that presence and then use it to tell a story of a young professional with a great deal to offer.

4.1 Phase One: Search

According to Michael Fertik (Fertik, 2011), founder of Reputation.com, it is important to manage online screen names and URLs before a problem presents itself. Running an online search with one's name should show only desirable results. While an offhand remark made in

person is easily forgotten, a comment or a blog posting is essentially written in stone and may have a detrimental effect on one's reputation futuristically.

If a person wishes to create a positive online presence, the person must first conduct research to see what information about him or her already exists. A search of all the online search engines is the best place to start. Each search should be done using all possible variations of your name as well as any company names or professional affiliations with which you may be associated to ensure that all existing information is located. You should keep in mind that content exists in four basic forms: text, video, audio, and images. Therefore, this means that negative content can also exist in those four forms.

Unsavory blog posts, insulting comments, unprofessional videos, or revealing photos are all examples of negative content that could be found during the search phase. Once you are certain that all existing content has been located, it is time to move to Phase Two.

4.2 Phase Two: Destroy

Once a professional establishes a reputable web presence, it is important for them to maintain it. Clearly, positive information that was located during Phase One is not an issue; however, any negative content should be removed if possible. One option is to deactivate accounts. If you have an active MySpace, Friendster, or FourSquare account but have not logged into them for two years, it may be time to deactivate the account. Deactivating accounts will not only potentially remove any negative content located on that account, but it will also, in most cases, move other positive information up on search engine results. Personal data is also gathered, stored, and disseminated by several public record and social network aggregators such as Spokeo and Pipl (Spokeo, 2012). Often, negative content can be removed by corresponding with the organization where the negative content was located and asking them to remove it (Lim, 2010).

We recommend aggressively removing all unprofessional content and setting all profiles, such as Facebook and YouTube to private. Then, create a plan of what and where you will decide to interact with your primary digital audience. For most people, there is no real reason to allow public access to most social media. A LinkedIn account or public résumé may be the exception to this general rule. Unlike other social media that is geared toward socializing and/or dating, LinkedIn was developed as a professional network and its focus remains the same today.

4.3 Phase Three: Rebuild

Now that you have located and removed all negative content, it is time to rebuild a positive social media presence. Potential employers and investors will likely take into account a professional's reputation prior to hiring, endorsing, or investing in the individual. For this

reason, it is critical to rebuild a positive, professional, and well thought out digital presence. There are numerous ways to rebuild your online presence, including:

- Create a personal URL. A domain name brings instant credibility for businesses (GoDaddy, 2012).
- Purchase multiple domain names. This is essential if you own a business. By purchasing all domain names that sound similar to your actual domain, you can ensure that the company name is not tarnished when someone else purchases the domain. For example, if your company's website is located at www.buymyproduct.com, be sure to also purchase www.bymyproduct.org and www.bymyproduct.net so that you own all the "real estate" where potential customers might visit (Ostrow, 2009).
- Use your own name on accounts such as Twitter, Gmail, Yahoo, or Instagram to increase visibility (Cohen, 2011).
- Use screen names as a commodity. The more your name is used, the more exposure you will receive. Therefore, use your name in a professional and positive context as often as possible. This further differentiates you from others with the same name.
- Create a LinkedIn account if you do not already have one. Unlike other social media, LinkedIn is specifically geared toward professional information sharing. Many human resource departments are even allowing potential job candidates to include their LinkedIn profiles on job applications.
- Join philanthropic organizations that will include your name on their website.
- Write guest entries for reputable blogs.
- Include well thought out comments on reputable websites.
- Develop and write your own blog or create a web show.
- Buy ad space with your name on it.
- Author an E-book and give it away online.
- Use a service such as BrandYourself. BrandYourself is a do-it-yourself online service that helps you improve your own search results.
- Pay a professional online reputation management company. If the damage to your online reputation is severe or you need to see results fast, you may need to turn to a professional online reputation management company that will increase your positive digital presence quickly.

4.4 Phase Four: Nurturing

Rebuilding your online social media presence will only matter if you nurture what you built. Unless a user is searching for a specific company when searching online, they will typically only make it through the first page of search results, meaning that the content associated with your name that is located on the first page must be positive and productive. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a complicated methodology for manipulating search results; however, there are some basic concepts that anyone can understand and employ. Content that shows regular updating or new content tends to move up on search results. This means that if you create a blog, you should ensure that you post regularly. Web presence can

also grow organically from user searches and the search results users click on. The more often users visit your website, blog, or social media site, the higher it will climb in the search results. In addition, when third parties link to your content, it tells search engines that your content is worthy or engaging, which then pushes it up in the search engine results.

One of the best examples of successful rebuilding and nurturing is Michael Phelps. Despite the pervasive news coverage of the water pipe incident around the world, searching "Michael Phelps" on Google today will not return any water pipe or marijuana-related news stories on page one of the search results. On the other hand, the positive articles that show on page one may have been organically pushed to the first page. Online users who search for Phelps actually help to organically push the positive articles up simply by choosing to click on the positive articles instead of on the negative content. He did win several Olympic gold medals after his incident.

CONCLUSION

This article examined an introduction to the concept of web presence management including four main phases to successful web presence and reputation management on the world wide web. Ultimately, as a higher education faculty, we are to look after the best interests of our students and steer them away from potential damage that they may be creating for themselves, most of which may be unbeknownst to them. The framework incorporated several types of social media platforms and strategies for the sole purpose of explaining and describing the discourse. Evidently, a positive web presence is imperative for future business branding and rebranding. It is also worth mentioning that the framework presented is by no means absolute but has been revised to fit students and classrooms. Through this framework, however, we can clearly see that a positive web presence is critical to any successful organization and most importantly to individuals who want to maintain a positive online reputation.

There will be a ongoing massive transformation. People will be discovering that the Internet helps their career. One of my theses is that every individual is now a small business; how you manage your own personal career is the exact way you manage a small business. Your brand matters... Reid Hoffman, CEO LinkedIn (Colleen Debaise, 2009)

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