10 Ways to Preserve Your Online Reputation

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I don't give a damn about my reputation. You're living in the past and it's a new generation.
We’ve all done it.

You type your name into the search engine and hit enter, awaiting the results of just how “famous” you really are. You might think it’s vain, but Googling yourself has actually become a near-necessity in today’s working world. The complexity of the internet and easy-to-use social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have made our lives public; there’s no denying it. And now more than ever, employers are judging your online personality before they meet the real you. Sound scary? It doesn’t have to be. Here are ten ways to keep your online reputation in check.
Social media is constantly changing. This means sites like Facebook and Twitter are adjusting user privacy all the time. However, these two websites are very different—Twitter contains snippets of information limited to 140 characters, while Facebook can quite possibly represent every aspect of your life. Kim Caponi, associate director of ISU Liberal Arts and Sciences Career Services, says, “I’d lock Facebook down pretty tightly. I’m amazed at how open [students’] information is—their walls are open for anybody to see. It can be embarrassing.” Caponi suggests either keeping your wall and photos private or being very cautious about the nature of content you provide.

That said, many personal branding professionals suggest the exact opposite for Twitter. Because you are only allowed to post a limited amount of information, it should be easier to filter. And since it’s becoming more of a trend for potential employers to check out your Twitter, if you’re posting professional content, it’s probably to your advantage to make one available. It will show you have a true interest in your area of expertise.

**NIX THE QUESTIONABLE FACEBOOK PHOTOS**

So you won the kegstand/flippy cup/pong triathlon last weekend. That’s great, but was it really necessary to tag yourself in 17 pictures retelling the evening’s hazy events? Go ahead. Take photos. Revel in your glorious victory—but keep it offline. Your next boss shouldn’t be the one who sees you downsing a FourLoko in a minute flat.

“There are numerous ways negative content can hurt an individual,” says Josh Ingalls, Campus Relations Manager for the Principal Financial Group in Des Moines. “It is rather easy to keep this type of information off the web—simply don’t put it there.”

**USE YOUR REAL NAME**

Online aficionados often argue on this one. Some say you should go by an alias online by using your middle name instead of your last name on Facebook, or by making up a nickname on Twitter and other social media sites. This way, when potential employers and other professionals go to look you up online, they find nothing, and you’re in the clear, right? Not anymore. That may have worked five years ago, but nowadays it can be a red flag. In a day and age when even your grandma has Facebook, people are going to be suspicious if you, a young professional, don’t. If you complete the steps above, using your full name shouldn’t be a problem because you won’t have anything to hide.

If you’ve already established a Twitter or blog under a less-than-impressive label, it may be best to start from scratch with your actual name.

Why? If you use your real name, your Google results will start to fill with professional tweets and blog posts, pushing negative and irrelevant content further down the list. Just remember the point of this step is to be professional—keep the one-night stand stories for Friday nights with the guys.

**BRAND YOURSELF**

The Internet has created endless opportunities to promote yourself to a large audience for little or no cost. Creating this online identity—also called “personal branding”—doesn’t have to be difficult. In fact, Schawbel’s most recent book, “Me 2.0,” gives four steps to doing just that.

“The first step is to discover yourself,” Schawbel advises. “You find out who you are, and start building your plan. Then you’ve got to create a personal branding tool kit—a blog, a website, business cards and a portfolio CD.” Once you have these, Schawbel says, you can communicate with prospective employees and other professionals by networking on and offline, writing and interviewing, and getting press. The last step is to maintain your reputation.

“You want to keep an eye on how people perceive you,” Schawbel says. “Then, if need be, you can do something to change it.” Ingalls agrees personal branding can make or break your ability to outshine competition in the job market. “As a recruiter at Principal,” he says, “I only see a few résumés that have a link to a personal website. It is a great opportunity for students who wish to take advantage of it.”

Ingalls suggest investing in a self-titled website domain name. “If possible, purchase www.yourname.com,” Ingalls advises. “It’s usually pretty cheap, and one of the surest ways to bring your online identity together.”

Ingalls suggests using your website as not only a portfolio and résumé hub, but also a place to provide updates and link to relevant sites and businesses you’ve worked for. “The key with a personal website is to make it a one-stop shop,” Ingalls says. “You want [visitors] to feel like they found everything they need to know about you.”
YOU NEED TO BE LINKEDIN

Haven’t heard of LinkedIn? In short, it’s the professional version of Facebook, listing job history, interests and recommendations from colleagues. Don’t let the professionalism scare you just because you’re young or in college. LinkedIn is for everyone, and it’s quickly becoming a very popular form of professional communication and representation. “Most of the colleges at Iowa State have groups on LinkedIn,” Caponi says. “There are also alumni groups. These are good places to get connected with people from your major as well as alumni that already work in your desired field.” Caponi suggests students contact these alumni to do informational interviewing or use them as mentors. But before you decide to commit to the LinkedIn universe, make sure you’ve got the time to do it right. “The big problem with LinkedIn is that most people don’t fill out their full profile,” says Schawbel. “It actually makes them look bad. Don’t start networking unless everything is complete.”

“Build a complete profile and start connecting to people you already know,” Ingalls adds. “After you’ve built some connections, go search for a company and you’ll be surprised at how many people you’re connected to at the second or third level. This is an easy system for getting an introduction to a company you’re interested in.”

CONTRIBUTE TO OTHER SITES

So now you’ve got a Facebook page, a Twitter, a LinkedIn profile and your own blog. If you’ve used your name to set these up, they will likely come up towards the top of your Google results. So what are the rest of the results made up of? All the other stuff search engines can dig up on you. This is why contributing to websites other than your own can be very beneficial. By posting regularly on professional forums, commenting on industry blogs, and writing content for online publications, you’re pushing positive content to the top of search results and increasing your chances of being noticed by the nearly 80 percent of employers that look to the internet for possible employees.

GET CONNECTED

Now that you’re a pro at creating an online identity, it’s time to organize your information. Caponi says one of the easiest ways to do this is to link your websites to each other. “I blog and I have a Twitter,” Caponi says. “I link the school’s Facebook to the Twitter, which feeds into the blog and LinkedIn. A lot of students can take advantage of that. It saves a lot of time.”

By connecting your websites, you’re not only saving time, but you’re encouraging traffic between different aspects of your online personality. This linking makes it easier for viewers to get a better idea of who you really are and what you’re interested in. For instructions on how to link your social media and save time on all your social media sites, visit communicatevalue.com/articles or consider using widgets on your website.
BE A REAL PERSON, TOO

Before there was Internet, there was (gasp!) face-to-face conversation. Don’t get so caught up in your online reputation that you forget how to act professional in real life. And make sure you’re honest with yourself and your audience. If you can’t do long division instantaneously in your head, don’t list that as a quality online. If you’re shyer than Kristen Stewart in a porno, don’t say you’re a people person. No employer wants to hire someone who’s an online superstar but has the social and intellectual qualities of a brick wall in real life. Your online profiles may be the reason you scored an interview, but if you act completely different in person, it’s going to be obvious you fudged your way through it — and someone else is going to secure your dream job. You can talk the talk online, but make sure you walk the walk in real life.

Overwhelmed? Don’t be. You don’t have to complete all of these steps simultaneously, and you can still party-hop your way through Campustown this weekend. Someday, though, the inevitable will happen: you’ll have to find a job. But, if you follow the steps above and don’t live the public life of Spencer Pratt, you’ll score a “real” job (and hopefully a girl who’s more “real” than Heidi) in no time.

KEEP TABS ON WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT YOU

You’ve put a lot of hard work into maintaining your reputation. Now it’s time to monitor it. No, you don’t have to Google yourself every day. Instead, visit www.google.com/alerts and fill out a quick form. Google Alerts will send you an email as frequently as you like telling you what kind of results will come up in a search. Caponi, who signed up for alerts on her name, says it’s a convenient way to keep tabs on your reputation. “If my name is in the newspaper, if I’ve interviewed somewhere and it gets posted, if my name shows up online anywhere—I’m going to see that. It’s nice to know you’re being informed on what’s going on out there.”

Thinking about un-friending Facebook? Check out some cool alternatives at ethosmagazine.org.