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Leveraging Social Chatter: Online Brand Reputation Monitoring and Management

A Wakeup Call

WSI White Paper

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Introduction

Marketers could keep a positive spin on consumer and client perceptions when their brand visibility was managed through a combination of media advertising and news coverage. Only extreme, newsworthy activities got any other visibility beyond small numbers of people, and big brand companies had good crisis control departments geared to deal with the exceptions.

The introduction of social networking sites and consumer-generated content to the Web has dramatically altered that landscape. The means for customers, champions and critics to disseminate information about their experiences and opinions are now accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and a browser-enabled PC.

Despite this crucial trend, many businesses are still behind the curve. Some recent research¹ surveying 703 executives found that:

- Nearly 70% of executives regard their company's reputation as vulnerable, but they are universal in their belief that non-traditional outlets like blogs are the least important in building corporate reputation;
- Virtually all executives surveyed regard the Web as important in measuring corporate reputation, but almost none of them believe the Internet is crucial when making important business decisions;
- Despite previous surveys that indicate the reputation of the CEO is closely linked to the reputation of the company they work for, very few executives seem to believe that, and fewer than 40% have even Googled their own name;
- Most surveyed executives say they utilize the Web more for competitive intelligence than understanding their company's reputation positioning; and,
- Despite overwhelming shifts in consumer media behavior trends, global executives put much more stock in brand perceptions that appear in mainstream media channels than what's said about them in online communities.

The good news is that savvy companies who are open to communicate with their customers can leverage the online trends to generate new business and deepen existing relationships in ways that are more effective and less expensive than old fashioned mass broadcast or print media campaigns.

As Tara Hunt says in her book The Whuffie Factor², marketers need to "turn the megaphone around" and listen more and talk less.

Companies who shy away from the trend and are uncomfortable adjusting their relationships accordingly are in for rude awakenings. And this is true across the spectrum from very large to small, local businesses.

¹ Source: Weber Shadwick, Reputations Online <http://www.online-reputations.com/findings.html>

² The Whuffie Factor, Tara Hunt, 2009, Crown Business, New York

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But with a little executive attention, companies big and small can stay on the right side of the situation and get advantage – particularly if they do it before or better than their competitors.

The Perils of Inaction

Users put great trust in their social networks. One-half of respondents to a survey by Beresford Research³, said they considered information seen on their social networks when making a decision—and the proportion was higher among users ages 18 to 24, at 65%.

For those executives and business owners whose heads are not in the game, the risks are significant.

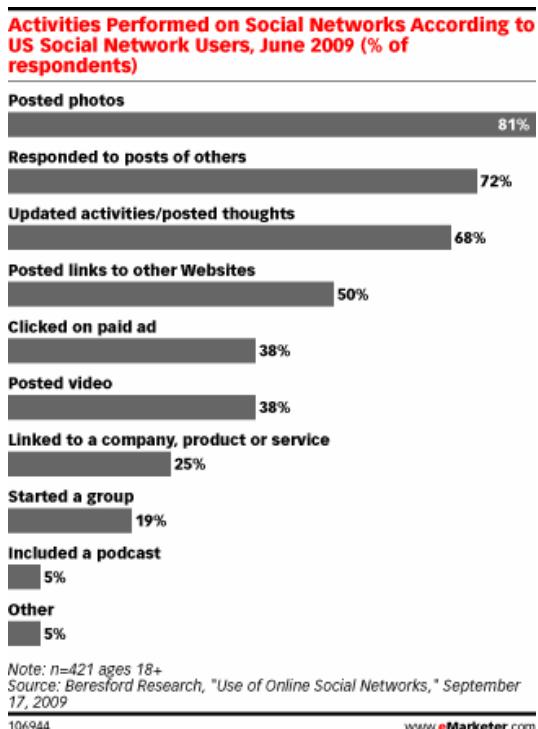
The venerable Pepsi brand took a serious hit this year when they created an iPhone app to promote their Amp energy drink product. The app provides tips for the product's target audience, young men to "score" with women.

The bad-taste item generated a fire-storm of activity on various social media sites with comments flying around the blog site Mashable.com and conversations on Twitter.

Pepsi withdrew the app and apologized to all who were offended, but the situation points out how vulnerable a brand can be.

In another recent example, two Domino's Pizza employees created what they thought was an amusing video of some "un-hygienic" activities back in the kitchen. They posted the video on YouTube and had nearly a million viewings before they knew what hit them.

They were able to get the video shut down for "copyright infringement" and officials of Domino's pursued both legal and online responses. They set up a Twitter account to field comments on the matter, and have since been morphing that traffic into their @dominos account where they are aggressively running contests and providing other information to undo the damage and rebuild their online reputation.



³ A full copy of the report is available at www.beresfordresearch.com

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There is a definite silver lining to this apparent cloud of consumers being able to readily broadcast their opinions online. CNNMoney.com posted an article⁴ about Jim Hobart, co-founder of an online retailer called AlpacaDirect.com.

Hobart found that even critical feedback can turn into increased sales when he decided to replace the hand-picked customer testimonials on his website with a service that allows consumers to publicly post ratings and comments. He received some 3-star (out of 5) ratings and unflattering comments, and yet he notes that sales increased 23% on items that had reviews. He was able to address concerns and respond to the reviews showing a credible concern for customer service and quality products.

What to Do

There are plenty of things you can do to get a handle on your brand's reputation and turn the phenomenon to your advantage.

Take an Attitude Check

The first step in the process is to update your mindset as a marketer and embrace the opportunities to make customers into marketers. This is not a trivial task, but is fundamental to capitalizing on the opportunities. If you fear what customers may say, and are not prepared to respond to the critical and embrace the opportunity, you may be in for a bumpy ride.

Most consumers and clients are realists. While everyone seeks and prefers the perfect product and service, we recognize that "things happen." When you genuinely care about those customers or clients, online dialogue can become your asset.

Research and Monitor

Listening to your audience, customers and potential customers is critical in this world of Social Chatter. The burning question for companies is: as an organization are you listening? If you have customers, most likely they're talking about you to their friends, colleagues, and to anyone else who will listen and is in their social sphere of influence.

Once you are ready to embrace the reality of public dialogue, it is time to find out what people may already be saying about you. There are many tools available to accomplish this, but unless you have a lot of time or are going to delegate this to someone who can concentrate on it, narrow your monitoring to a few key resources.

⁴ Even bad reviews boost sales, September 28, 2009,
http://money.cnn.com/2009/09/28/smallbusiness/retail_democracy.fsb/index.htm

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Some of the easiest tools for monitoring your brand online are the search engines you are already familiar with. [Google Alerts](#)⁵ or [Yahoo! Alerts](#)⁶ are free, can be set up in minutes and will send you a daily update via email letting you know of any materials they find using keywords related to your brand or other key issues.

Another tool at [HowSociable.com](#) provides a quick scan of 32 different online sites, rates your brand's visibility on each (by number of mentions) and links to those mentions so you can see the conversations and join or react where appropriate.

Create a Google Alert

Enter the topic you wish to monitor.

Search terms:

Type: Comprehensive

How often: once a day

Deliver to: glevine@wsiwebmark.com

Google will not sell or share your email address.

One of the most talked about Web phenomena in recent years is Twitter. While the very concept of a steady stream of small messages can intimidate busy business owners, it can be an invaluable source for finding out what people are saying about your brand, or your competitors.

Go to the advanced search panel at [Search.Twitter.com/Advanced](#) to see some powerful search options including not only the keywords, but also the geographical areas in which you are particularly interested. You can subscribe to your searches so future updates go to your RSS reader when someone is talking about you.

WE WILL ADD LOGOs of these apps, if you approve.

Here are some of the top tools for listening to and monitoring the online conversation about your brand:

Free Apps

1. Google Alerts

Google Alerts is the steady rock in the sometimes white-water world of monitoring. You can easily target keywords that are important to your brand and receive streaming or batched reports—choose your own adventure.

⁵ Google Alerts can be found at <http://www.google.com/alerts>

⁶ Yahoo! Alerts can be found at: <http://help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/alerts/>

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2. Technorati

Billing itself as "the leading blog search engine," Technorati has been helping bloggers and those with their fingers on the blog pulse stay informed for years. It's a simple, free tool available for you to measure what is being talked about in the blogosphere.

3. Lexicon

Are people talking about you on Facebook? If yes, then the Lexicon tool can help as it searches Facebook walls for keywords and provides a snapshot of the chatter volume around those terms.

4. Monitter

Everyone is talking about Twitter, but what are people talking about on Twitter? Beyond the integrated search of Twitter apps like Twhirl and TweetDeck, Monitter provides real-time monitoring of the Twittersphere.

5. Tweetburner

In the world of Twitter, URL shortening is the magic wand for effectively connecting with the public. Tweetburner also lets you track the clicks on those magically shortened links, giving you some hard numbers.

* * *

Listening, analyzing and responding is key to successfully solving the brand monitoring equation and one step you don't want to miss is how you use that information to interact with your audience.

Build up Your Online Brand Visibility

For many small and mid-sized businesses, you may find that you have very little online recognition so far. The time has come to promote your own brand by making your website visible and beginning to communicate regular updates through a blog mechanism.

At a minimum, the top result for a search for your brand name on major search engines should be your business website. If it isn't, you need to revisit your website to make sure that it was constructed in a search engine-friendly manner. Your brand name

The screenshot shows a Google search results page for the query "WSIWebMark". The first result is a link to the WSI Web Marketing website, which includes a brief description of their services and links to their corporate profile on LinkedIn and Twitter. The second result is a link to Gary Levine's LinkedIn profile. The third result is a link to JREGOnline Inc. (DBA WSIWebMark) on Yelp, showing a 5-star rating and customer reviews. The search bar at the top contains "WSIWebMark" and there are "Search" and "Advanced" buttons.

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should be prominently used in text on the Home and other “About” pages, and the HTML Title and Meta-Description tags.

Manage and protect that position as it may be vital to keep your content ranked above any other comments or news that may come out about your brand.

Make sure you have set up your business in the Google⁷ and Yahoo!⁸ local listing services. These profiles are increasingly visible in search results, especially for businesses that do local services and are searched with regional, city or other local qualifying terms.

If you don’t already have a blog, you really should consider creating one. “Blogs” (the term is a contraction of “Web Log”) is a mechanism made popular initially by individuals for their opinions and diaries. In the last few years, it has become a preferred method for communicating all types of business information to audiences who are interested in your field or products or services. This topic is covered in more depth in an excellent whitepaper within this series. [Click here](#) for the whitepaper *“Time is of the Essence: Gaining and Maintaining a Competitive Advantage with Social Media”* by Heather Anges-Lee, Social Media Strategist, WSI.

Another important way to build your brand visibility is by using the social media sites themselves. The full subject of social media has also been covered in more depth in another WSI whitepaper entitled *“Understanding the ‘Buzz’ Around Social Media: Finding the Right Social Media Mix”* by Baltej Gill, Social Media Strategist, WSI. Click here to download it:

<http://getwspowered.com/socialmedia>.

But at a minimum, if you are a professional services business, build a company page in LinkedIn. If your business is more consumer-oriented, a Facebook Fan Page can be a valuable way of bringing awareness to more people. The example shown here for a heating, plumbing and air conditioning company was built around a character they’ve used in local advertising and gives a literal “face” to their online presence.



If you’ve got commercials, presentations or other visual and audio materials, create a YouTube channel where you can post these materials. YouTube is now the second-most searched website after Google, surpassing Yahoo! in the number of searches per month. Your positive presence there can do a lot to improve your perceived reputation.

⁷ List your business on Google Local at <http://www.Google.com/LocalBusinessCenter>

⁸ List your business on Yahoo! Local at <http://www.local.yahoo.com>

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Engage

The most critical factor in this online brand management game is to engage in conversation. The simple fact is that marketing in the Internet world is not a one-way activity.

Some ways to engage with your markets and customers:

Make sure you post to your fan pages or company profiles from time to time. Make sure you, or someone you assign, responds to the conversations you are now monitoring.

Expand your blog by opening it up for comments. Invite people you know to read and link to it; monitor the comments and make sure you respond with thoughtful answers.

Consider engaging in active feedback with your market. As mentioned earlier, more and more consumers are looking for hard data from other buyers to determine the credibility and quality of goods and services they find online.

Add a 3rd party, online review capability on your website and solicit feedback from customers.

Review publishing site [Customer Lobby](#)⁹ has a service that provides a means to ratings and feedback and post it in a very credible way. They provide an enhanced service for under \$100/month that includes making 3 phone-based interviews to solicit in depth insights to your client's perceptions.



Conclusion

This is a lot for many business owners and executives to absorb. The important message is that consumers have unprecedented voice and visibility today, enabled by the Internet and social media sites. If you have not brought your company around to this reality, it is time to start.

We suggest you use the following checklist to get some traction and begin to protect your brand online:

⁹ Customer Lobby can be found at <http://www.CustomerLobby.com>

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| 1. Ask 5 customers what they would say about your business, products or services. Find out how you will respond if it isn't all positive. | <table border="1" data-bbox="804 312 1398 1072"><thead><tr><th>Comment</th><th>Response</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>1.</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>2.</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>3.</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>4.</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>5.</td><td></td></tr></tbody></table> | Comment | Response | 1. | | 2. | | 3. | | 4. | | 5. | |
|---|---|---------|----------|----|--|----|--|----|--|----|--|----|--|
| Comment | Response | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Make sure your company website comes up first when you search for it by name in Google. | What position did my site come up? If not, who do I talk to about getting that fixed? | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Set up a daily Google Alert for your company name, and some relevant industry terms. | Done: _____ (date) | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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4. Make a list of 10 things you repeatedly explain to customers; then assign them to someone to write each one into a blog post. Start your blog and start posting them!

Blog Titles:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

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| | |
|---|---|
| 5. Pick a social media site to get engaged in. Start a conversation by linking a status to your blog posts; tout your successes and ask friends to become fans. | <p>Facebook _____</p> <p>LinkedIn _____</p> <p>Twitter _____</p> <p>MySpace _____</p> <p>YouTube _____</p> <p>Other _____</p> |
| 6. Make sure you have a way for customers who have feedback on your products or services to get their input to you in a constructive way that you can monitor and respond to. | <p>Customer Survey Form _____</p> <p>Social Fan or Company Page _____</p> <p>Other _____</p> |

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About the Author



Gary Levine has been an Internet Consultant with WSI since January 2004, and he is currently on the Advisory Council, representing North East USA. He runs his WSI business from McLean, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C. and specializes in providing proven Internet marketing and social media consulting services to businesses of all sizes. If you have any questions, please email education@wsicorporate.com.