

Your website doesn't matter –

Your Google results are your new corporate homepage!

A business owner with offices in Europe and North America goes to open a bank account at a London Bank. He wants to establish a small line of credit for a new office he's opening just as he has done in other locations. A few days later at the bank, he's told that there's a problem. It's not his credit. It's not any of the references. The manager "Googled" the company name and didn't like what he saw. Sounds crazy? But this actually happened to a client of ours. The client's negative Google results prevented him from doing business. A few blog posts mentioning a proposed lawsuit that never even made it to court were responsible.

Reputation Management Then and Now

There was once a time when a company's reputation consisted of what Dun and Bradstreet had to say about them or what *The Wall Street Journal* printed. PR firms and crisis management consultants played a critical role in shaping their clients' reputations. They worked with their clients to position the company with the media and control the message.

The game-changing focus of Web 2.0 is democratization of content. Today, we have a chance to hear what other people are saying – people who are similar to us. We trust what these people say (even people we don't know), often more than we do authoritative sources. This is the challenge for PR firms today and...the opportunity!

At a recent meeting with a Los Angeles-based PR firm, a colleague related how his parents were booking a hotel reservation at a specific hotel that he had recommended – he had stayed there and it was a great hotel. Dad decided that a few negative comments on TripAdvisor.com were reason enough to book elsewhere.

The public has become jaded not only by advertising, but also by the fading influence of the once mighty conglomerate media. It seems as if every day the major news outlets announce the progression of their own demise. Newsrooms are shrinking; network television numbers are down as the proliferation of new forms of content drain their audience. This is not to say that a positive article in *The Wall Street Journal* has lost all of its value, rather to acknowledge that the formula for building a brand's reputation has admittedly become more complicated. The real challenge is that the blogger from anywhere, USA can actually displace a hard-earned 'hit' the PR team got in *The New York Times*.

When they want to find out about reputation, they look to what bloggers and commentators are saying online. The public wants to know what *other* people think about your clients' brand – not the company line. Even the public is starting to perceive that the mainstream media's take, often with canned quotes from the CEO lacks the credibility of random opinions in a blog. Their logic is as simple as it is flawed; an independent blogger has no vested interest in distorting the truth. News websites have responded - giving themselves 'social media relevance' by including links to personal blogs as well as a forum for readers' comments. A perfect example of this is the client who fears placing a story in TechCrunch for fear that the active reader community will flame them resulting in a damaged reputation online.

Searching to Discover Brand Reputation

Every company needs a solid website that accurately reflects its brand describing the benefits of its products or services, but it's not enough. Potential customers view your client's website much as they do an advertisement – knowing it does not offer a balanced view of the company. Some websites attempt to address the need for third-party validation by adding 'Trust seals' like HackerSafe and Truste (think e-commerce), but the value of these symbols has become deflated.

To find out what other people think of a person, brand, or product, consumers 'Google' them. Thanks to Google's diversity algorithm, searches return a variety of results including websites, blogs, news pages and videos. By skimming the varied results, searchers feel they understand the brand's online reputation. Google search results are perceived as unchangeable - like the weather. Luckily, online reputation management can change Google results in a positive way.

In a recent meeting a crisis communications consultant described a client of theirs that had received negative press from an animal rights group years ago. The client's PR firm had done an excellent job offline, before turning to our firm for help online. Time and again we see Google results lag behind new messaging unless the company makes a concerted online effort. Our approach enables the client to influence the majority of sites in Google's top search results for their brand. In this way the PR firm can control the online message, while participating in the conversation with consumers online.

Taking Control of your Online Reputation with Web 2.0

Every participant online is a potential contributor to the conversation about your client's brand. Despite some pitfalls: ex-employees can post blogs that disparage your company and dissatisfied customers can chime in on various complaint websites, the advantages of Web 2.0 are unmatched. Your Clients can add their voice to the conversation. By creating a strong 'search profile' that includes Google results that best exemplify the brand's strengths and address any concerns, PR firms secure a positive online reputation for their clients.

The first step in taking control of what is being said online about your client's brand is to proactively plan their online search profile. Begin by analyzing the current situation and ascertaining the strengths and weaknesses of the client's situation.

Working with the PR agency we examine factors like:

- Frequency and distribution of press releases
- Utilization of YouTube video
- Corporate or personal blogs
- Prominence of positive news stories
- Existence of negative press
- Existing Wikipedia entries
- Content on Complaint sites

The agency then plans the ideal search profile, one that accurately depicts the client's strengths. The resulting plan usually includes several of the following tactics:

- Creating new web pages
- Purchasing and populating web properties
- Creation of a YouTube channel
- Creating corporate profile pages
- Optimization of existing web properties
- Weakening the link between the brand and the negative results

Online Reputation Management work utilizes some practices of web marketing, but because it is a PR endeavor, it requires a great deal more attention to the entire top 20 search results in Google as well as the other major search engines. The result is an effective displacement of negative results by positive ones in a gradual and long-lasting way.

In 2011 many companies are realizing that taking control of their online reputation is not just a solution to an online PR crisis, but also a necessary preventative measure. When the action is taken before a crisis, negative articles typically make a short appearance, if any in the search results and then fall out of the results completely. PR professionals are privy to 'bad' news well before it is announced. By "preparing the soil" for a negative announcement, agencies can ensure that its life within the top 20 Google results is short lived.

While most PR firms currently have a "blogger" strategy, few that we have met have taken the next step beyond optimizing the corporate blog and delivered on the promise to control the Google Top 20 for their clients. Those agencies that offer online reputation management can add an unprecedented value to their clients and retain accounts during these difficult economic times.

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About Five Blocks: The main focus of Five Blocks is Reputation Management for individuals and brands. Five Blocks' success has been built by a passionate and multi-talented team and strong relationships with partners and clients. The company has offices in Gush Etzion, Israel and Los Angeles, California.