



Ten ways to take control of your online footprint

Every time we communicate publicly via the internet, we leave a little trace of ourselves. If we post a message on social networking sites such as Twitter or Facebook, for example, we create a record that others can access.

While this has numerous promotional benefits, it also means that a misjudged comment could reach thousands or even millions of eyes and ears in a matter of moments. We need only look at the media furore surrounding [Stephen Fry's Twitter argument with a member of the public](#) last October, to know that what happens on the internet can be big news.

If you run your own business or are representing one, then managing, controlling and maintaining your online presence has never been more important. Here are ten simple tips to help you ensure that your 'online footprint' doesn't trip you up:

1. Change your perception

Information published online is often seen as more transient than the tangible permanence of pen and ink. In some respects, this is accurate, in that online can be tweaked, moved or deleted at any time, yet because of the way search engines index data, and the speed with which it can be duplicated, in reality, quite the opposite is true: once something appears online, it could stay there forever, whether you like it or not.

2. Know that you are what you tweet

Everything that you say or do online will, through association, be linked back to either your own company or the company that you work for. Therefore, it pays to be professional, courteous and personable at all times, even outside of working hours. Remember, the internet never sleeps.

3. Watch your mouth

If you are looking to portray a professional image, your choice of words is important. It's generally wise to keep text-speak (e.g. GR8 for great) to a minimum and avoid using expletives, which can turn a lot of people off. As a general rule of thumb, you should aim to talk to people online as you would in person at a public conference or business meeting.

4. Set out rules

If you task your employees with managing your online presence, then ensure that they are fully trained in how to communicate your brand and have clear policies in place in terms of what can and can't be said or done in your brand's name.

5. Watch your privacy settings

There's absolutely nothing wrong with having a personal internet page that is separate from your business one, but if you do then you still need to think twice everything that you say or do, especially if your page can be accessed by the general public. The likes of Twitter and Facebook allow you to restrict your page so it can only be fully viewed by people you approve.

6. Understand the limitations of online privacy

While online content can be made private, some will argue that if you don't want something to be made public, then don't say it online. Websites like Twitter and Facebook have a private messaging facility that allows you to speak to just the people you want to, but remember you are still putting your thoughts in writing, so think before you hit send.

7. Carry out regular audits

No matter how well you control your online footprint, there will inevitably be times when something slips through the net and appears online. A drunken tweet from an employee, a leaked press briefing, or a Facebook photo album accidentally left public could all seriously damage your brand.

To make your carefully designed policies stick, you should regularly search for any product, service or employee name associated with your brand so that you can address problems quickly. You can also [set up alerts with Google](#), so that you will know immediately when something referencing your company is indexed.

8. Beware identity theft

During your regular audits, you should also be able to identify any websites or social media profiles that fraudulently purport to be associated with your brand. If you find yourself in being falsely represented, it is best to contact the user themselves, or the service provider (such as the webhost, Twitter or Facebook) and request that the fake material is removed.

9. Don't start something you can't finish

Creating an online presence is only the beginning of a long term, ongoing commitment. If you aren't able to devote the time to continuing conversations, then you are not ready to take a dip into the world of social media. While a well-maintained profile can do wonders for your credibility, a stale profile, with no activity for months can make you look fickle and out of touch.

10. But remember the conversation goes on without you

Of course, as the above points have illustrated, in reality, mentions of your brand can and probably will appear online, whether you are involved or not. Employees will probably have social media profiles, and other internet users could post opinions of your brand at any time, so while you might prefer to keep a low profile, you may find that the rest of the world has other ideas.

If you're only just emerging online, think of your internet presence as a sapling you can either nurture or neglect. You can let it wilt, publicly, or you can put the time into helping it blossom, and enjoy the attention this wins for your brand.

About the Author

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