

Make a Name for Yourself: Managing Your Online Reputation

by Holly Jahangiri

We are natural storytellers. In his 1997 article, “THE BRAND CALLED YOU,” Tom Peters wrote: “...you've got to become relentlessly focused on what you do that adds value, that you're proud of, and most important, that you can shamelessly take credit for.” The most important story we have to tell is our own, and it is essential that we be the first to tell it and the first to defend its integrity in today’s hyper-connected, online world.

Tell Your Story Before Someone Else Does

Recently, my daughter informed me that she was dating someone. “His name is Michael,” she said, “and he is president of his own company.” She mentioned the type of business he ran.

Within thirty seconds – because it was a slow day at work – I messaged her with his last name, the name of his company, and said, “He has a nice smile.”

“How do you do that?” she asked, before calling me a little stalkerish and creepy.

That night, I got a frantic text from her: “Michael says he’s watched videos of me, because ‘your mom posts all the things’ – what things?”

Ah, yes – two can play at this game. The “things” were ten-year-old YouTube video clips of her playing violin. I also had a new Twitter follower named Michael who tweeted, “Hi!! Has the CIA offered you a contract yet? Hope to meet you soon!”

I approve. He checks out on social media **and** he has a good sense of humor.

My point? Every life transaction – from merely wanting to get to know someone better to making a hiring decision – now begins with a search.

A coworker once said, “If you don’t value your secrets enough to keep them, why should I?” Remember that the Internet is not your secret-keeper. Anything you post on the Internet is public. Even bank accounts, medical information, “private” emails, and “friends-only” posts are just one glitch, one bug, one hack, one keyboard slip away from being public.

You can’t really stay off the Internet – you can just refuse to participate. But that leaves your reputation in the hands of others. A better strategy would be to tell your own story first – and tell it best.

For a writer, this should be fun.

Go Ego Surfing

The first step in proactive reputation management is to stake a claim to your social media space. Your goal is to dominate the first three pages of every major search engine with *your* content, your version of your story, not someone else’s version – *and to have fun doing it*.

Your first mission is to know what others see when they search for you or your books on the web. Here's how you do it:

1. Go to each of the major, popular search engines, one at a time, and search for the following:
 - Your name, including your full legal name, your mother's maiden name, your nicknames, your pen names, and whatever Stinky McBubblebottom called you in third grade.
 - Your book titles, major characters' names
 - The name of your blog or website

Before searching, you may want to log out and clear your browser search history, in case "personalized search results" affect what you see.

2. Highlight results found on each of the first three to five pages. Copy and paste them into a Word document or a OneNote page. You will use these results for reference in crafting more effective profiles and content and for comparison to results you will get when repeating this exercise one, three, and six months from now.
3. Carefully review the results from the first ten to twenty pages – is there anything there that might be considered embarrassing or negative?

IMPORTANT: If you find credible threats of violence against you, libelous (untrue and damaging) statements about you or your business, or evidence of other criminal activity, such as identity theft, immediately contact the police or your attorney to discuss your options.

4. Record all of the social media profiles you can find for yourself. This includes forgotten accounts and accounts you may have created in order to comment on a news story – for example, on Today.com – because those provide hidden opportunities to promote yourself if they include a profile page.

You may find many results that are irrelevant to you and results that do not serve you well. These are the results you will work, next, to bury. Getting things taken off the Internet is time-consuming, expensive, and nearly impossible no matter who you are. It's much easier and more effective to let go – then to take the reins and start a new conversation.

Effectively Choose & Use Your Playgrounds

You cannot be everywhere at once. The key is to establish your claim on your favorite top social media spaces and to update them on a regular basis, because search engines are just like you and me – they like their food fresh.

Register Your Domain Name

Back in the 1990s, someone registered whitehouse.com. The official White House web site is whitehouse.gov. Whitehouse.com was a porn site. Due to the First Amendment, the government was not able to shut down whitehouse.com, though the original owner ended up keeping it and taking down the porn when his own children were old enough to log on to the Internet.

You could ask Ted Cruz why it's important to register your domain name. A trip to tedcruz.com shows a black page that says "Support President Obama – Immigration Reform Now!" Or ask Carly Fiorina – who failed to register carlyfiorina.org, which shows tens of

thousands of frowny-face emoticons for each of the employees she laid off during her tenure at HP.

If your name is very common, it's unlikely your first choice of a domain name will be available. Consider variants of your name or pen name, create a "brand" or "catch phrase" and aggressively link it to your name through content you post, add a descriptive word to your name – such as jsmith-author.com – and consider domains other than .com, .net, .org. Newer domain extensions include: .me, .info, .world, .guru, .media and more.

You can register your domain directly through a domain registrar such as GoDaddy.com, or you can buy a web-hosting package to set up a domain, a website, and a blog for yourself through a company such as HostGator.com. You can do both; your domain registrar and your web-hosting company do not have to be the same company. The cost for a .com domain generally ranges from about \$3 to \$30 a year (unless it's a premium or already-owned domain).

The price for your chosen domain may increase if the search frequency increases, so before searching to see what's available, make a list of possible domain names on paper. Search for each in order of preference, and then be prepared to buy them on the spot. If you wait, you may end up paying more than you should.

Create a Blog Using Your Domain Name

The costs for this are minimal, and the advantages are great:

- You control the conversation
- You provide fresh content on *your* schedule

- By linking all your social media sites to and from your blog, you are telling search engines that *you* are the foremost authority on *you* – and they will rank all of your sites higher.

You should decide whether you want to create your blog on one of the free blogging platforms like Blogspot or WordPress, or whether you want the added control and flexibility of running a full, self-hosted WordPress installation. The cost for a fully hosted site can be as low as \$5 a month, but requires a bit more work and technical know-how on your part. Consider your own comfort level when it comes to technology – blogging is mostly “do-it-yourself” and some platforms are easier to set up and maintain than others. Before diving into a self-hosted WordPress blog, you might want to learn how to use the basic features of WordPress.com – and that costs you nothing. Also consider whether you intend to run ads or sell products, such as your books, on your site. Free sites may limit your ability to do this, and may support your “free” site with their own ads.

Choose Your Social Media Platforms

Focus on the top five to ten social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, and Flickr. Add in specialized sites like DeviantArt, National Geographic, Goodreads, and Amazon Author Central. These help to establish your expertise in an online community of people who share your focused interests, such as art, photography, and writing.

If you don’t already have accounts on the top social media sites, create them and save your login information in a safe place. Strive for consistency. The name you use should be the same or substantially similar on each site, if possible – this is part of your brand identity. Refer to

your “ego surfing” search results to help you build a list of all of any old, forgotten social media accounts. Make sure that you can still log in. If you have forgotten your password, request a new one and record your account login information. Keep it in a safe place, so that if you need to change your passwords you won’t be scrambling to find yourself on the Web! Update any old passwords to newer, more secure ones and record them offline.

Personalize Your Social Media Space

After claiming your space, make sure each profile you set up is working for you. Your goal is to dominate the first three pages of search results, since most people never further than that when searching. Complete your profiles as fully as possible, using all the tools each platform has to offer.

Your Bio Blurb

On Twitter, you have only 160 characters to tell the world about yourself. On your blog, or Facebook, you have much more room. Develop a very short bio, a medium length bio, and a longer bio. Use all the space each platform provides – be creative, personable, and purposeful in how you introduce yourself to the people of the Internet. Link back to your blog, whenever possible. Set up a page on your blog to link back to your profile on each social media site. This tells search engines that these sites are the foremost authorities on you.

Your Profile Photo

While it's tempting to post a "glamor shot" as your profile picture, it's better to use a natural photo that shows off your personality. Give your visitors a sincere smile—be approachable.

If you are extremely uncomfortable showing your face on the Internet, you can use a high resolution caricature of yourself, a clear book cover image or logo graphic, or something else that represents you and your brand and can be *strongly* associated with *you* – not with a million other people on the Internet. Unless you own the original "Grumpy Cat," your pet is probably a poor choice. Never use a stock photo of a person who isn't you. If you are particularly creative in the kitchen, you could design your own "Mr. Potato Head" from a real potato – but a photo of your face will have more social media appeal, because it is more honest and trustworthy.

You will use this photo on most social media sites, including Gravatar, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, and your own blog. Ideally, it should be 1200x1200 pixels, though you should save several smaller versions, for sites that limit the file size: 600x600, 250x250, and 150x150 are good dimensions. Always use the largest version you can, and never "upsized" a smaller photo. A large image, saved to a smaller size, will look fine; a small image, enlarged, will look fuzzy and out of focus.

Your Cover Image

A "cover image" is a page header that allows some room for you to creatively express yourself. The best cover image is a photo or illustration that represents you—it could be your book's setting, a bookshelf full of your books, an illustration from one of your books, a picture of your writing desk, or you – doing something in your favorite spot.

Sites that currently support a cover image include Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, and YouTube. In general, this image should be 1200x627 pixels.

Your Blog Images

Visual content is shared more often than words, alone. Whenever possible, use your own original photos or illustrations to pique readers' interest. They should support and enhance the text.

Important visual content should be centered in the frame, if possible, for sharing on sites where images will be cropped square, such as Google+, Instagram, and "featured thumbnails" on your own blog, if your theme uses them. For finer control over composition, on sites that allow it, upload two versions – the large, original version and a second, square-cropped image that shows the part of the image you want to highlight. Most simple image editing software will let you crop an image.

Images for Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and other sites:

Design different images for different audiences. Each social media platform has its own character! Imagine, too, a fan who follows you on *all* the popular platforms—don't leave them thinking, "Ho, hum - THAT again?" If you automate the sharing of your blog posts to the top sites, be sure to have real-time conversations and post status updates manually to occasionally sprinkle in some unique content for each platform you use.

Avoid the temptation to use free stock photos found on the web, if possible. Some "free stock photo" sites aren't too careful about where they obtain photos. It's hard to get into copyright trouble with pictures you took, yourself, or with illustrations that you drew.

“But what if I’m not an artist? And what if half the photos I take are blurry or cut off people’s heads!” You can learn to take a halfway decent photo, or find a friend to do it for you. You don’t have to be a professional photographer or illustrator to add authenticity and visual appeal to your profiles and your posts. Spend a little time viewing the most popular videos on YouTube, and you’ll realize people are eager to see real people doing real things, just as much as they are eager to see the latest high budget special effects movie released by Hollywood.

If you have a smartphone with a camera, that’s probably good enough to take some great shots and add visual interest to your posts. Most newer cameras take photos that are at least 2MP, and that’s just perfect!

Photoshop is the gold standard in image editing software, but you can find less expensive, easy-to-use alternatives. You don’t have to be a photographer or a graphic artist to put together good visual content to enhance your words. Try Paint Shop Pro from Corel for less than \$100, or download Gimp, a free image-editing program. Use Canva.com to combine free, stock images from a trustworthy source, or your own photos, with text in creative ways.

Focus Your Efforts

Focus the majority of your time and effort on your own blog and your *favorite* top social sites – such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. Feed the search engines fresh content and images on a regular basis so that you consistently show up on the first few pages of search results.

Accentuate the Positive

It is extremely difficult, costly, and sometimes impossible to get negative content removed from the web, especially if it's true. In some cases, trying to do so can make a bad situation worse. A better approach:

- Respond to it with sincerity and humility, if it's a fair criticism. You can often turn a loss into a win this way.
- Ignore it. As a business, there's only so much you can do with an anonymous opinion that your product or service "sucks."
- Bury it. Keep in mind that about 93% of people will never go deeper than the first page of search results.

Nastiness is a First Amendment right; repeated nastiness is harassment—don't play.

There's an old joke about a sadist and a masochist, locked together in a padded cell. The masochist says, "Beat me! Torture me! Make it hurt!" The sadist looks calmly at the masochist for a long minute, and finally says, "No." When it comes to Internet trolls, *be the sadist*.

If you feel someone is making *credible* threats or harassing you online, contact law enforcement. If someone is writing damaging, *untrue* things about you or your business online, contact your lawyer. Don't cause worse damage by slugging it out with trolls in public or enlisting the aid of friends to retaliate on your behalf. If you have a good reputation and are well known in the Internet community, your friends and customers will ignore the trolls and stand up for you while your lawyer or law enforcement figures out what to do.

Monitor Your Reputation with a Google Alert

Email alerts are helpful, although not infallible, ways to find out quickly what's being said about you on the Internet. You can set up email alerts, at no cost, at

<https://www.google.com/alerts>

You should still repeat the ego surfing exercise every couple of months, just to be sure that your efforts are working and that your story, told your way, is still filling the first three pages or so of the search engine results.

Never wrestle a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it. So, always take the high road:

- Tell your own story before others do;
- Acknowledge and respond to negative criticism quickly, with courtesy;
- Monitor your online reputation; and
- Never feed the trolls.

Write a Happy Ending

Managing your online reputation is not a one-time, set-it-and-forget-it activity. But with a little energy, effort, and enthusiasm, you can be the best storyteller of all – when it comes to the story of you.