

Top tips - managing your online reputation

For years we've been told of the importance of building a positive reputation and guarding it carefully. Nowadays an increasing number of people will check you out online before engaging with you, which means you also need to manage your online reputation to ensure that the impression people gain online is at least as good as what they'd see offline. This is important for any size of business.

An increasing number of UK companies have become more active online, using sites such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, business forums and other social networking sites. Some are experimenting, while others are simply using automated tools to promote themselves. Many are genuinely trying to establish a credible online presence and use it to attract new clients, generate referrals, or find new business contacts and suppliers.

Whether you've already started or are simply planning to consider becoming more active online this year, there are five key points to bear in mind when managing your online reputation.

1.) Update regularly

If you use social networking sites, make sure you keep your profile up to date, as this will often rank higher in online search results of your business website, especially if it is very new. If you have an account on LinkedIn, for instance, your profile will highlight your business but you cannot force people to go to your website before they read your profile.

A LinkedIn profile makes it easier for old colleagues, contacts and suppliers who knew you in a previous life to find you, so it can be short sighted to ignore this facility if you think there could be value in allowing those sorts of people to contact you easily online.

It is important to ensure that when someone sees your profile, status updates and related content, these are consistent with your business website.

2.) Your business expertise

Most companies who become active online do so with a view to attracting more customers. It can be a long slog, especially as overt adverts rarely work in this environment. Is it worth the effort? It can be as long as you don't sabotage your own efforts.

If your intention is to attract new customers or to evidence your credibility, it can help to adopt a consistent business focus across your websites, blogs, online networking and contributions to business forums. It also helps to show that you're a real person with more to your life than accountancy and tax, although you should try to avoid a situation where there are conflicting views of who you are and what you do as this causes confusion.

This is equally important for those currently in the job market. Imagine what you might think if you were recruiting and saw someone who you have established is active online. Their profiles match the role you're seeking to fill but all of their online status updates suggest a focus and experience of a completely different type of client. Do they really have the relevant expertise you are seeking or have they simply adapted their profiles due to the job opportunity?

Careless status updates and tweets can damage your reputation if they suggest a very different level of activity and focus as distinct from your website.

One company who claimed to have quickly established a busy retail outlet, routinely posted status updates that suggested they had very little in the way of customers and perhaps was not the success they claimed to be. Another company tried to use Twitter to highlight their expertise but their website highlighted their expertise in a completely different area. In practice they were simply using an automated tool to promote their business, badly as it happens. They didn't engage online and were only tweeting 'adverts'. This is generally regarded as a pointless tactic on Twitter.

3.) Be conscious of your online 'social' interactions

Many online networks and forums describe themselves a 'social networks', perhaps none more so than Facebook. Even this now has the facility to create business pages which raises the prospect of an increased overlap between business and social networking. There have already been plenty of stories about how people have failed to secure new jobs due in part to the record of their 'antics' on Facebook. Why should businesses be any different?

4.) Search for your company

It's important to check what comes up when you search for your own business to ensure you're happy it adequately reflects who you are and what you do. Try searching for your company, your brand name, the two together and also combinations of your name and what you do as a company. (N.B. Make sure that you're not logged into your Google account when you do this, otherwise your search results may be skewed). You can also use the Google Alerts facility to notify you of when key references to you or your practice are mentioned online.

Until recently, if a customer was unhappy with their supplier or professional adviser all they had was word of mouth. Social media makes it much easier for dissatisfied clients and prospects to publicise what they perceive to be bad service. Clients can now blog, post comments on forums and tweet about their experiences. In particular, Twitter provides a real-time facility for people to unload and share their frustrations, as well as their delights. It's worth finding out what people are saying about you.

5.) Testimonials

When someone is kind enough to post a testimonial for you on sites such as LinkedIn, obviously you should thank them but you should also ensure that the qualities they are praising and the impression given is appropriate. Effectively you want it to be consistent with the message that you seek to give through your website and other online activities. This can be especially helpful if you are currently in the market or may in the future be job searching.

REMEMBER!!!

For just about every business, an on-line presence is an essential part of their marketing strategy. Get it right and the world really is your oyster, but get it wrong and a company's reputation can be destroyed very quickly. Be aware of the dangers or years of hard work spent building a company's name will be undone, and the company may be lucky to survive.