The complete guide to online reputation management

THE PHA GROUP

Build

Enhance

Protect

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As Creative Director, Ian Smalley heads up the Digital Studio at The PHA Group, devising engaging integrated campaigns, channel strategies and community management of social channels.

Ian has created multi-channel social and website solutions for a wide range of global brands, including many FTSE 100 and 250 companies. With over 20 years of concept development experience and a background in print production and video direction, he has produced award-winning digital campaigns and websites across various sectors.

Using our bespoke monitoring software, Ian's team provides digital brand analysis and live digital monitoring; helping to define, protect and enhance both brands and individuals.

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As head of Technology & Innovation at The PHA Group Nick has worked with brands such as Disney, GAME, BetVictor. UFC, Happn and Purplebricks.com and has a particular focus on international clients and consumer technology.

In March 2016, as a result of his outstanding work and credibility across the industry, Nick won the 'Young Professional of the Year' award at the PR Moments award ceremony. Nick is a regular commentator on Sky News and has contributed as an industry thought leader across many media outlets including Channel 5, Forbes and BT Sport.

Introduction

A positive online reputation is vital to the success of all brands, be they businesses, organisations or individuals.

In theory, it should be a straightforward task. Scratch the surface, however, and it all becomes a little more complicated.

You may have never put a foot wrong. But perhaps you haven't grabbed the social media megaphone to tell the world about everything you've done right?

That isn't going to cut it with the free-flowing feedback culture of a smartphone-wielding world. You can't establish trust in a vacuum. You need fresh and credible content to tell your story.

You might think that as a productive business or inspiring individual with sound values and solid ethics, there is no likelihood of your reputation ever needing protecting.

But the digital world is vast and complex.

Do you really know what your core customers truly think of all parts of your business?

Are you aware of the increasingly influential blogger who is berating you personally, badmouthing your product and putting the boot into your customer service?

Criticism aimed at you in the digital world doesn't disappear. It hangs around forever, warning off customers like the cross on the door of a 17th century plague house.

Knowledge really is power in this sphere. If you know who your critics are, you can assess their credibility and decide if – and how – you should engage with them.

What if the situation escalates? For every brand, the ultimate nightmare is to be plunged into an all-encompassing online reputation crisis.

Should you get your head down and dive for cover when the flak is flying? Or face it head on and fight fire with fire – as one of our clients did with impressive results.

Will you be able to follow the framework of the online crisis plan that you put together months earlier?

It sounds complicated – and it is complicated.

But the best businesses and individuals take sage advice to put them in control of their online reputation.

Now find out how from our experts exactly how they do it.

Why does online reputation matter?

Nick Braund

Head of Technology & Innovation

Individuals and businesses ignore negative online sentiment at their peril. It is now the norm for any consumer to check reviews, social media channels or simply news about a brand, product or personality. Whether or not this information is true it can affect how your brand is perceived and whether your potential customer engages with your brand or a rival.

Keeping regular tabs on your online activity and brand mentions, as well as regular engagement, is vital. Social media is often the easiest as these channels are 'owned', not 'earned' which means that you are in control of the messaging. However, ensuring a balance is struck between interesting, engaging content and self-promotion is key. If followers get bored, they'll quickly disassociate and stop 'liking' you.

Social media has become the new go-to customer service so must be treated as any other outward-facing communication channel. Negative correspondence with a customer or worse still ignoring them, will not only potentially lose them, but also be visible to the world. Social media cannot be an afterthought and due care and process must be implemented at all times.

Not only is the internet immediate, it also never forgets. Just search for your own name or any company you are interested in and you will see a plethora of information that exists, and is visible to anyone. This needs to be carefully managed to either benefit or protect a party regardless of the veracity of the information available.

We have countless clients where older, positive stories and reviews on high-domain authority websites have resulted in sales or leads later down the line. These pieces turn up time and time again on page one of a search engines results often months or even years after they were written. This is the same for stories with a more negative sentiment. The impact of these search results is undeniable.

As more and more information is uploaded each second and subsequently shared across the world, how you appear online is becoming all the more important. Individuals and companies both need to recognise its role in society and impact on the behaviours and attitudes of the billions who log on every day.

85%

of the British adult population own a smart device

Do you know what people think of you?

Measuring the online value of your brand

Ian Smalley
Creative Director

In today's 24/7 multi-channel, connected world, the power of the web and social media can break reputations faster than you can say 'United Airlines'. However, when managed correctly, with the right messaging, content and engagement, multi-channel content can be vital in establishing brand equity and connecting with audiences.

You might know how many followers you have, but do you know who is talking about you online? Furthermore, do you know who your advocates and your detractors are?

By understanding what exactly people think of you and your brand, you empower yourself to tune into your audience and address your critics.

Many of the tools that are used to map and analyse the digital value of a brand, can help. They also provide a benchmark against competitors, enabling you the opportunity to view what has worked so you can bring this into your own marketing strategy.

The measurement criteria

We use our in-house analytics tool, PHA Pulse, to help map our client's digital footprint. This includes evaluating every live social media channel and digital website against a set of keywords, links and hashtags.

The search includes historic data, which looks back across all your social and digital channels over the past six years. The key measurement criteria when assessing any online brand values include:

- Sentiment and tone: (measured from positive to negative)

- Reach: (measured by figures and where required geo-location)

- Visibility and engagement: (from the growth of a social channel, to the success of a specific campaign)

Our own social media monitoring service allows you to track consumer reaction and sentiment to publish content across all online channels, from Twitter and Facebook to forums and blogs.
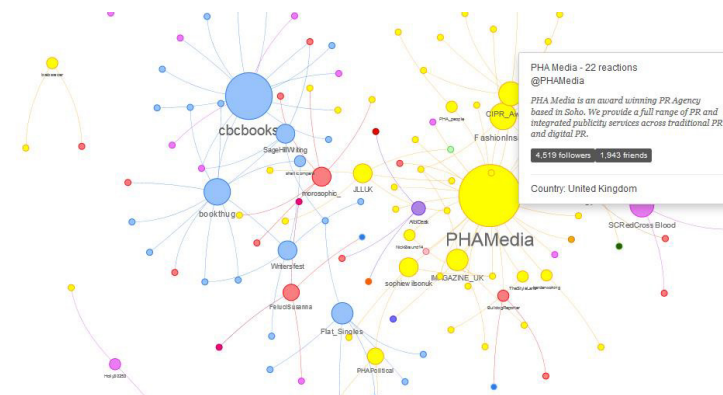
Snapshot taken from PHA Pulse

Analysing content

Each individual piece of shared content can be analysed to determine consumer sentiment, actual reach and visibility.

This can then help brands determine sentiment, activity and reach amongst a certain demographic, from gender and age to location and social following.

Discovering key influencers

Evaluating the digital landscape enables you to discover key influencers within an industry, including bloggers and journalists. By tracking a series of key words, you can handpick individuals based on their audience reach, blog traffic or general visibility. Knowledge is power. Once you know who creates waves in your industry sector, you can reach out to them for partnerships, collaborations or mentions and thus vastly expand your online amplification.

Highlighting keywords

When tracking a campaign on your brand, keyword monitoring provides insight into the terms and topics your online audience most associates you with. Once you understand what people are searching for, then you can tailor your content accordingly.

Competitor analysis

Whilst understanding your own digital currency is invaluable, it's also vital to understand exactly what your competitors are doing.

Monitoring a rival's key social channels to analyse their influence and content compared to your brand's social offering, can help you inform your own strategy.

We can compare your share of voice to that of your rivals, giving insight into which online channel/s where you're most prominent and which channels you're lagging behind.

Beyond your rivals, we can compare your social media activity to the industry benchmark, including audience reach, engagement levels and total following. Similarly, we can offer the same comparison for your competitors.

Why shaping your online reputation is important

Understanding exactly what your audience think of you will enable you to develop and sculpt your online strategy, both for websites and social.

This is wide reaching, from developing positive stories to understanding what content works best and on which channel.

Are images working better then video? Is Twitter the best channel to reach your audience?

Whilst the sentiment of all content and comments within a brands social sphere may be positive, is this true across all social channels and digital platforms?

Are key influencers (from bloggers to journalists) creating a negative impression of your brand, or maybe enhancing that of a rival? Has a consumer, who feels as if they have been unheard or mistreated, taken to social media channels to outline their dislike?

We analyse your data, answering these questions to help change perception, enhance engagement, drive click throughs and importantly, generate a positive online brand value.

Ultimately, in a world of instant content, fuelled by instant opinions, mixed with powerful, influential online voices, understanding exactly what an audience thinks of you can help you to develop the correct digital and social strategy. In doing so you can maintain your hard-won online brand equity.

Build

Enhance

Protect

Neil McLeod

Head of Strategic Communications

To think of online reputation management as solely a crisis management-linked term would be far too simplistic.

It ignores the very complexity of the internet, and the importance of how people consume and analyse online information.

Moreover, it ignores the sheer power of influence of search engines and the information readily available at our fingertips. More importantly it ignores the importance of what online reputation really means.

When a customer searches for your business, the first page of Google should reflect how you wish to be perceived as a brand. Which is why online reputation management should not be focussed on only in times of crisis.

1 | Build

A more common issue than having a terrible online reputation is not having one at all, or least, having one which is dictated by third parties only or appears opaque.

Surprisingly, this is still evident in relation to established businesses, business leaders and individuals, even today.

Customers, potential clients and would-be business partners will almost always use search engines to run due diligence during their research. They will expect page one to contain a host of information for them. But what if there is a significant lack of information? This could rise suspicions as to your businesses influence or prominence in your industry. Ultimately where the good-looking business deal can turn sour, the investment you were seeking goes awry, or the new customer you were hoping to hook, goes somewhere else.

Consequently, their viewpoint is altered, and so, potentially, is their approach when it comes to dealing with you.

It isn't your fault. Your story isn't being fairly told, and gaps in the narrative are sometimes filled with false perceptions. Neglecting to build an online reputation – often out

stemming from the thought it isn't important – can result in a negative perception.

The same prospect also faces new business, and businesses which have undergone a name change and / or a make-over.

All cases underline the need to build an online reputation. The first question should be: what do you want to say to the world? What do you want the world's perception of you to be?

When it comes to online reputation building, there are three great quick wins:

- Well managed social media communications

- Optimised, accessible website

- Regular updates, news and blogs generated

To build your reputation with more sophistication – which should be the end goal – will need a clear public relations strategy. In this way, a far more compelling and longer lasting online narrative can be achieved.

2 | Enhance

Unlike the printed journal or article, online communication is fluid and constantly evolving. With both negative and positive outcomes.

The question is: "How can I tell my story better than I am already?"

We bet your competitors are asking just that.

The key is with content and exploring different media. Online is not just about the written word on your website, blog site or social channels. It is also about how you choose to distribute this information. Infographics, videos, podcasts and pieces published on external sites are all key tactics.

The other element to consider is what potential customers and

clients are finding when they type search terms that relate to your business. The basics of online reputation is your company or you as an individual will sit proud when your company name is entered into search engines, but who and what is being found when other relevant terms are being typed? Do you appear? Or are you missing out on key opportunities?

In the end your online reputation needs to extend beyond the reaches of page one of Google. Your strategy must involve publishing news, articles and long form content. Clearly having your name as a by-line will also establish you as an authority in your industry.

3 | Protect

Online problems such as negative articles and blogs, troll activity or poor online reviews - are something which most businesses or people believe they will not have to deal with.

The truth is, at some point in your life-time, you may be at risk of one or more of these online reputation issues.

Having the grounding by building and enhancing your online reputation, will create a strong foundation from which to then deploy a protection strategy. If you own the narrative and have established enough of an authority through your own content creation then you are operating from a position of strength, through which you can attack or rebuff any criticism.

You can also prepare for a crisis: with a robust plan in place and ready to go, you will be ready, should you be faced with an online attack.

If worst does ever happen, it is advisable not only to pursue a route of legal action. A joined-up approach with a strong public relations strategy, comprising digital solutions, is advisable.

BUILD

- Identify the gaps

- Implement management of social channels and website

- Create a public relations strategy

ENHANCE

- How can I tell my story better?

- Get creative with content, video, infographics and more

- Investigate your search results

PROTECT

- Prepare a robust crisis plan

- Take a joint approach to PR and digital solutions to online attacks

- Keep calm and act swiftly

Social media and online crisis management

Ian Smalley
Creative Director

Maintaining and monitoring your online reputation

Smartphones and connected devices serve as a real-time portal through which online information can be accessed and shared at rapid speed. In this sense, an individual or company's reputation – past, present and future – can be strengthened or weakened just like that, through as little as a quickfire news story or a series of Tweets. Digital environments have never been harsher and as such, remaining savvy to one's online reputation has never been more vital.

What to do when the storm hits

In today's age of 24/7 multi-channel communication, online reputation issues in the digital landscape can strike at any time. When an issue arises, it can leave a brand, business or person feeling exposed amidst a deluge of messaging across multiple channels.

The most vital piece of advice is to remain calm. Consult your communications experts and set your online crisis management plan into action.

Tips to help you manage an online crisis

The following overview focuses on dealing with an intense digital and social crisis, but aspects should also be considered, by brands who may currently possess a positive brand voice.

The key to dealing with online reputation issues essentially falls to three key areas:

1. Immediate action

Take some control back of the situation. Issue an open, honest response as soon as possible. Host this on your website, and post to your social channels, so that media outlets have an original source to either quote or respond to. Contact your legal advisors if necessary.

2. Monitoring and evaluation

With a multitude of negative content attacking from every angle across each channel, it is impossible to try and defend and respond to every single social post, website blog or comment. It is vital to address the key influencers. Knowing who or where the source of the issue is will allow you to tailor the appropriate response.

3. Response

Once you have determined the source of the key threats to your online reputation, you can then further develop your response strategy. This can include a range of options, including legal routes.

Monitoring your online reputation in a crisis

When you're engulfed in an online crisis, the first thing you need to do is discover exactly what it is your audience is talking about, and where. You need to gain a firm grasp of how the conversation started, what information is being shared and, most importantly, the sentiment.

A manual search across search engines and social media can help you scratch the surface and provide top-level insight into conversation, but you need to dig much deeper.

Using advanced online monitoring software, it's possible to scour the online landscape, monitoring every major channel from online news, social media, right through to blogs and forums, pinpointing how the conversation started, the sentiment tone, and the size of the audience engaged.

Are there any key influencers shaping the discussion? It is more effective to understand the actions and issues of someone with 50,000 followers, rather than someone with 10.

Is discussion confined within one country, or has it evolved into a global conversation? If the latter, where precisely has the crises spread and who's partaking in conversation? We can supply the answers to these crucial questions and help to construct a recovery to your online reputation.

When time is very much of the essence, you might not be able to spare the minutes to assess the online impact. This is where regular reporting becomes vital. By extrapolating the data into visual and easy to read reports, you can gain a clear understanding of the online conversation as and when you need it.

You don't need to be told that social media and the internet is a 24/7 business. It's unrelenting. This is where alerts come in. You can be alerted to a surge of discussion at any time of the day thanks to our software that monitors in real-time.

Should volume increase by as little as 5% during any passing hour, you can be alerted straight away. If sentiment dramatically decreases in the middle of the night, an email alert will signal this change and provide you with the opportunity to respond immediately.

As we have said, the internet is a constant pool of conversation. In crisis, when every passing minute is a minute finding a solution, you'll need to be able to respond to online conversation before it swells out of control.

Online crisis support

Of course, when a crisis shifts to the online sphere, and thousands of people are engaging, you cannot silence every individual. After you've launched your monitoring search and have begun to gain an understanding of the scope and breadth of the conversation, you now need to evaluate how best to respond, and which community takes priority when it comes to neutralisation.

Map your audience

If you identify a user with a very large reach who is playing a significant role in spreading negative sentiment about you or your business to an extensive audience, the obvious step is to neutralise them.

Our software can map every single connection the influencer has made, determining their impact based on audience reach, volume of mentions, visibility and location. Taking them out of the equation won't solve your crisis, but it will go a long way to stifle discussion, and offer you more online space to begin fighting back.

Identify brand ambassadors

Unless you're a global business with an unrivalled audience reach, you won't be able to combat negative sentiment using just your online channels; you'll need an array of ambassadors and key influencers to help diffuse the online conversation and begin to seed your positive response.

This influencer could take the form of a blogger with a significant subscriber base, a prolific Twitter user with a loyal audience, or a community of specialists and experts from within your industry.

We can help to identify these groups, communities and individuals and establish a dialogue which will provide you with the foundations to start fighting back.

Social media crisis management

In the digital world, public opinions and expectations often lead the charge. No brand, company or individual is immune to reputational assaults via social media.

Social media and reputation go hand in hand. Reputation is fragile. It is critical that all businesses have a social media crisis management plan in place for when their reputation is threatened. Businesses and individuals must listen and respond in a way that aligns with the brand and satisfies the needs of the customer.

Here are some guidelines for preventing a social media catastrophe:

1. Monitor, listen and be available to your customer on each channel
2. Establish a consistent tone of voice which resonates and aligns with the brand
3. Be transparent and honest - always

4. Set expectations clearly and always be 'on message'
5. Respond consciously – do not lose your cool or attack critics on social media
6. Implement some 'house rules' and social moderation etiquette within your terms and conditions
7. Hire professionals. Use experienced social media community managers who can deal with unhappy customers and take any negative conversations offline
8. Have a crisis management team on-hand including PR, legal and marketing

Your social media crisis plan

A social media crisis can hit at any time. Sometimes it can be hard to manage. There are six simple points of a basic social media crisis plan, that can both buy you time and enable you to take control.

1. Your social channels

It sounds basic, but which channels do you have, and who manages them? Is it a dedicated social media team, or is it left to the most junior member of the company because "they're always on Twitter?" Ensure that the correct people have access to your channels, and importantly know the passwords.

2. Establish a structure

Simple preparation can save greater damage. If a crisis hits, who will be the lead point of contact? Is it still the office junior? Delegate roles and responsibilities, so that everyone knows what their individual tasks are, who will be creating the content, who will be approving and who is in ultimate control.

3. Establish a communications plan

A simple messaging plan can be developed in advance. What tone of voice will be used? Which channels?

4. Monitoring

Once points one to three are established, you will be more effective in dealing with social media issues that suddenly arise. It is however vital that you are monitoring the social conversation around your brand. If you're unaware of an issue, it can quickly escalate. Whilst it's impossible to read every single tweet or post, keeping an eye on your channels it will allow you to maintain awareness and some control of what is being said. You can also use a range of social tools to alert you to sudden changes in sentiment, again, potentially giving you time to plan and react.

5. Evaluation

As with most online reputation, evaluate the source of the issue. This includes the authority or either the individual or the channel.

6. Response

Based on the evaluation, then respond accordingly. The key elements are:

• Respond quickly

• Be open and honest

• Where possible, aim to take the conversation offline

Finally, ensure that the response action is communicated internally so that everyone is aware of what has been said and when.

How to recover from online or social reputation issues

Time

Unfortunately, time is a key factor. Indeed, the continued presence of false or slanderous messaging after an event is one of the key issues that affects individuals or brands.

Whilst many spend time and effort getting to the top of search engines with positive messaging, negative results can quickly appear.

Due to indexing and sharing, it is almost impossible to make content just disappear. Whilst inflammatory content may be removed from a source website or blog through the legal route, the page may have been copied, linked to or shared.

Indeed, despite Google's 'Right to Remove' policy, it may still be accessible across different territories.

Along with legal action, there are three methods which can be adopted to help displace the negative content from search.

1.   Positive content

Crafting positive content, ideally across a range of formats including written and video, can help to reposition your brand. Where possible content should be seeded across sites with high domain authority (for example news outlets).

2.   SEO

It's important to make sure that all aspects of your website and content is fully optimised so that they are indexed by Google.

This includes the correct use of tags and links. Check that your social media profiles are also fully optimised as social channels are also indexed.

Finally ensure that all your own existing assets will not lead to further issues. Remove potentially damaging content or social posts.

3.   Keep on monitoring

Continue to monitor and evaluate the digital arena. Whilst the storm may have appeared to pass, the potential for a rogue blog or key influencer to re-ignite the embers, can happen quickly.

The cost of monitoring each month will never ever cost the same as your brand being destroyed.

How much does online reputation management cost?

By its very nature, online reputation management is very time intensive, specifically during a full-scale crisis situation, which subject to a brands global presence can pull major resources.

By planning and developing a crisis strategy, some of these costs, and importantly time, may be potentially reduced as planning and preparation can reduce initial set up and output at the time of a crisis.

Similarly, establishing background online monitoring provides a safety net by providing an early warning system. In respect to the value of a brand, a price that is worth paying.

Case study:

Changing a business's
online reputation

Neil McLeod

*Head of Strategic
Communications*

In 2017, The PHA Group was called upon to help a bespoke finance company which was facing a range of online reputation challenges.

The firm, based in London, had existed under a previous name prior to contacting the agency, and in its former guise, offered a different business proposition entirely.

Upon embarking on the new direction, with a fresh impetus and a new board, it quickly realised it had a need to address some online issues before it could move forward. The challenges were varied.

Its main hurdle was under its former name, it had found itself under scrutiny from journalists, resulting in negative online articles.

A high-profile former director of the company (again, under its former name), had also received press attention earlier in his career.

The new company had been linked in articles – and as a result, on Google searches – to the former name.

To compound these issues, Google searches of the new brand returned no credible content, either in third party publications, or on its own website.

The combination of these issues resulted in one central problem: a lack of online credibility which threatened to dent new business enquiries through Google, and raised more questions than answers with potential investors.

The PHA Group's first task was to fully audit the situation, including a review of the harmful content on Google use of the company's website, and social media channels. We also advised on a full SEO audit.

We then set about learning about the company: who were the experts, what made it tick, what did it have to say to the market it was aiming for?

The PHA Group advised the company that all content on their new website needed to meet search engines high-standards to create relevant articles which would position them as thought leaders.

Therefore, we advised – and then devised – a full onside content programme which mapped out a constant flow of blogs that would speak to their market.

The company's use of social media was limited. We provided a advice to open out their channels, and a full content strategy to complement the onsite blogs.

Aside from producing relevant content which spoke of the company's expertise and finance offering, PHA – through its own discovery work – had reached the conclusion that external media would be interested in hearing more about the company.

Therefore, we advised the company to take a leap of faith and enter into an activity which was completely new – media engagement via a PR programme to target online publications.

The strategy was to introduce the company to the media, produce thought-led content they would be interested in carrying, and offer insightful comments on a range of stories, both sector specific and political/economy-led stories, to gain traction.

This yielded positive results very quickly – respected publications were keen to publish the company's content, and this resulted in visibility on search engines.

The social media and onsite content strands meant there were positive reference points on Google appearing.

The strategy was designed to create momentum, and this meant the company's increasingly positive online reputation brought further confidence to tell more of their story, which also interested top tier media publications.

Within months, a company which had a confidence-sapping lack of visibility on online searches and links to a past-life, had been able to tell its true story online. Its online reputation had been analysed, restored and built upon – holding it in good stead for the future.

Want to talk about managing your online reputation?

Don't leave it until it is too late
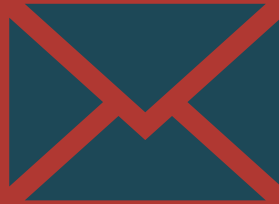
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