

Fixing a Faulty Social Media Reputation

by Janet Wall

In this age of transparency, everything you and others post about you online becomes public information. Negative or offensive information can hurt a job search or admission into postsecondary education. Often young people are not aware of how important it is to portray a positive and professional online presence. There are some ways to repair a negative online reputation and it starts with knowing how you are perceived online. Career services professionals can use these tips for themselves and with their students and clients.

It is an established fact that more and more hiring authorities are looking to social media sites to gather information about a person prior to making a final hiring decision. A recent Microsoft-sponsored study revealed that 79% of US HR/Recruitment professionals use online information to evaluate candidates most or all of the time. Further, 70% of US HR/Recruiters have rejected candidates based on their online reputation. Only a little over one third of the consumers surveyed reported being concerned that their online reputation impacts their chances of getting a job or admission into a college or university in the future.

Performing pre-employment background checks of social media sites is becoming increasingly prevalent. Agencies and institutions are often outsourcing the tasks to other companies that have developed tools to automate the process. According to social media expert Courtney Shelton Hunt, PhD, Founder of SMinOrgs, “Even if you are not actively on the job market, your digital identity and activity can still be found through social searches. Therefore, it’s in your best interests to establish a strong positive digital presence and monitor and manage it regularly.”

How do you know if your online reputation is positive, and what do you do if it needs to be strengthened or repaired? Here are some steps you can take.

Google Yourself. Be smart about your online identity. See what others are seeing and saying. You may have an online reputation that is vastly different from what you thought or intended. Just enter your name into Google to see what comes up. If you have a strong online identity or brand, many of the entries on the first few pages will be about you. If you do not have a strong presence but a relatively common name, then many people with the same name will appear. That is important to know because their reputation may be mistaken for yours. In addition to Google, there are free programs like <http://addictomatic.com/> or <http://www.pipl.com> that will look for your name on several sites. You may be very surprised what you see.

Take It Down. If you find anything negative, the first thing you should do is remove the negative information from any sites over which you have control. That means removing embarrassing photos, inflammatory statements, or anything that can be negatively interpreted. If the harmful photos or information exists on a site over which you have no control, ask the site owner to take it down. Many times she or he will comply with your request.

Bury it Deep. But what if you have tried everything and still there is some digital dirt out there about you? By increasing positive activity on the web, you can bury the negative information so deep that it has less likelihood of being found or given credence. When recruiters or admissions officers search for your name, they are not likely to delve into the web many pages deep. If you can fill the web with positive information about you, the negative information won’t rise to the top and thus may not ever be detected. Here are some ways to do that.

- It's been said that if you are not on LinkedIn, you don't exist. When googling a name, more often than not a LinkedIn site will be among the first entries a person will see. Google considers LinkedIn to be a high authority website, so LinkedIn results rank higher in Google searches. That's why you need to make sure that you have a complete and active LinkedIn profile. Include connections that are positive and recommendations that speak of your professionalism. Think of it as your online resume that is viewable and accessible to anyone in the world. Be sure that your profile conveys a message as to who you are and what you can do so that others can understand and appreciate your value. Use your profile to convey your skills. It's like putting keywords in your resume.
- Be careful of who you "friend" in Facebook. Unfriend them if you don't know them. Keep your privacy settings strong. Watch what you write on someone's wall.
- Use Twitter to share important information relevant to your field. Make sure your twitter name is professional. Even though Twitter is informal, resist the trend of "SPEAKING IN CAPS", or all lowercase, or with #!*#+^%. The message is that I do not care enough about you to use proper writing when I communicate with you. That is not a message you want to convey.
- Start and actively update blogs in which you share content and opinions directly related to your chosen major or field of work. Commenting on the blogs of others will also help elevate your positive profile.
- Review any photos you have posted on Flickr or similar photo sharing sites. Remove anything that has any possibility of being misinterpreted.
- If you have a YouTube account, take down any videos that can portray you in a negative fashion.
- Get active on Google + (<https://plus.google.com>). This new social media tool will likely show up high on the list of web entries when a person googles your name.
- Set up a Google Alert (www.google.com/alerts). By doing so, you will get a message anytime your name appears on the web. If you have a fairly common name, you will receive message about people who share your name, but it is important to know that as well, so that you know what other people might be seeing and how that may reflect on you.

Conclusion: It is important to manage your online reputation first by knowing what is out there about you; and second, removing negative information to ensure that your online reputation enhances your potential and promise in the workplace and your career.

Dr. Janet Wall, EdD, CDFI, MCDP, *is a career development practitioner with interests in assessment, technology, evaluation, online learning, and writing. She has authored several books related to assessment and career development topics. As founder of www.CEUonestop.com, Janet has created several online courses supported with CEU clock hours by NBCC and CCE. She also has created an e-book on free technology tools you can use to enhance your training, teaching, and business activities. Her website is <http://www.janetwall.net>. Contact her at careerfacilitator@janetwall.net.*