

# Online Reputation Management: The Essential Internet “Digital Defense”

By Shannon Wilkinson

*In its early days, online reputation management (ORM) focused primarily on repairing malicious content: anonymous, negative online commentary posted on Internet forums and in the comments sections accompanying blogs and social media platforms. Now, because of the vast amount of data flooding the internet and the lightning-fast speed at which it can be duplicated, shared, discussed, and republished, ORM is more encompassing in scope, and more important than ever.*

## **Shaping Public Perception Where it Matters Most**

Today, amid the massive growth of social media and fake news, ORM is an essential proactive tool to shape public perception. It entails establishing, maintaining, repairing and monitoring the publicly available online information and Google search results of an individual or organization.

It is vital for subjects to “tell their story” before someone else does. Otherwise, they lose control over the conversation. Competitors, employees, the media, and internet trolls are all capable of altering the truth about an individual online.

Attempting to keep a deliberately low profile online is not a solution. On the contrary, if you lack a strong “digital footprint” – a significant, informative and current body of material about you on the internet —you have no “digital defense” against online attacks. That means whatever anyone says about you goes straight to the top of a Google search— and stays there.

## **Few Internet Laws in U.S.**

We have no [“Right to be Forgotten”](#) here, though European privacy experts are eager to help introduce them in the U.S. For now, few laws are in place to regulate the information available online, so it can be difficult and even impossible to find out who is responsible for making incorrect statements online. Website operators have legal immunity over what is said and posted on their sites (except, generally, in defamation cases). They will rarely respond to requests to remove inaccurate information unless it is in the form of a subpoena that meets the criteria of the one law that governs internet speech. That is very difficult to achieve.

## **Here are examples of how people can use your name against you:**

- Creating websites in your name that are intended to denigrate or attract inappropriate attention to you or your organization, including responses to your political views and public protests over your company’s activities and direction.
- Publishing anonymous and biased negative commentary about you on public internet forums.

- Posting caricatures and doctored photographs of you or your organization's logo or website.
- Posting photographs of your home and listings of your home address on internet forums.
- Organizing campaigns on Twitter and other social media platforms that attack your credibility and views in dozens of daily tweets and posts.
- Managing social media campaigns that hurl abuse or other negative messages that can damage your brand, destroy shareholder value, and cause company executives to step down.

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***Such material can come from surprising sources:***

- One CEO of a public company was found to have posted anonymous, derogatory information about a company he was planning to buy. Such tactics are used to drive down the stock valuations of companies to make them cheaper to acquire.
- A Harvard graduate was investigated by the FBI and found guilty of creating dozens of fake online personae that published reviews of famous scholars' works (and a multitude of other inappropriate and damaging information about noted experts).
- The former lover of an established professional posted dozens of anonymous, defamatory, and highly detailed items about him. He filed a \$1.25 million lawsuit that was dismissed by the judge, who failed to see sufficient merit in the case.

***When else is ORM utilized?***

- When your company is attacked in a proxy battle, and defamatory statements are hurled at you online— where they stick.
- When foreign nationals threaten to extort you and publish fake news to smear your reputation.
- When you are sued for divorce, sexual harassment, or other reasons—and legal notices fill the first page of your Google results.
- When you dismiss an employee or end a personal relationship and the person retaliates, whether through writing an anonymous blog they created specifically to demean you, or publishing confidential information and documents that threaten the shareholder value of your company.
- When your address and satellite pictures of your home are readily found online.

***How to start building your own digital defense***

To counterbalance these risks, ORM campaigns strategically tell your story online and make sure that story appears in all the right places on the internet. That narrative may be about a business, a CEO, a new product, or an organization. It can be told using text, video, audio, images, blog posts, Facebook, a website, and many other platforms.

Creating a personal brand is the first step in reputation management. This brand establishes a foundation for showcasing your value, differentiating you from your competitors and affirming your reputation. Given that you may dread the idea or prefer to keep a low profile, there are ways to take ownership of your name online while saying very little.

- The single most important step you can take to establish, build and protect your online reputation is to register your domain name (“yourname.com”) online. Many companies provide that service, but [Google Domains](#) is the least expensive.
- If you are an expert, a blog is the most effective way to publish consistent, quality and extensive content. It will occupy a considerable amount of valuable online real estate because it can be amplified on LinkedIn, Twitter and numerous other sites. (We create such content for clients who are experts but lack the time to write their own posts.)

If there is already substantial information about you online, those steps alone are insufficient to restructure top Google results in a search of your name. (For more tips, read [The Essentials: Online Reputation FAQs](#).) But if you are not a high-profile person, they are the first actions to take. Nine times out of ten, the prospective clients who contact us lack such critical content. Please don’t be one.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Shannon M. Wilkinson is the founder and CEO of [Reputation Communications](#), a New York City-based company specializing in online reputation management for business leaders, CEOs, rising stars, VIPs and their organizations, including many Fortune 500 firms. She is a frequent public speaker and commentator for *The Wall Street Journal*’s “Crisis of the Week” column.

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