

ANDY BEAL + DR. JUDY STRAUSS

Foreword by Robert Scoble, coauthor of *Naked Conversations*

Radically Transparent

Monitoring and Managing
Reputations Online



 SYBEX | SERIOUS SKILLS.

Chapter 1: Your World Is Now Radically Transparent

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Understanding Your Online Reputation

Companies can spend millions of dollars each year to promote and manage their brands, yet a single negative blog post can destroy a reputation within days. The switch from corporate monologues to customer dialogue online means that you have more reputation risk than in the past.

These chapters lay the groundwork for your radically transparent online reputation. You'll learn about the social media and how the balance of power has moved from companies to internet users. We'll focus on the company and its brands as well as individual reputations on this new playing field. You can use this environment to your advantage if you learn the new rules of engagement.



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- Chapter 2 **You Don't Own Your Company's Reputation**
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Your World Is Now Radically Transparent

The power is with the people. Companies and CEOs previously controlled their reputations in both business and consumer markets, aided by public relations (PR) firms and crisis-management plans. Individuals monitored their reputations via feedback from clients and people in their personal and professional networks. The switch from traditional media and corporate monologues on websites to social media on the internet makes every internet user a journalist. People will judge you, your company, and your brand. Reputation management requires new skills in this radically transparent world.

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JetBlue Airways Hits Bumpy Air

JetBlue Airways, the low-fare darling of the airline industry, had a bad day that lasted more than two months. A Valentine's Day ice storm in 2007 left passengers in planes on runways for ten hours and in northeastern U.S. airports for much longer. A total of 1,100 planes were grounded over a six-day period. How could their favorite airline do this to these loyal customers? What started with an understandable act of nature became a crisis due to JetBlue's internal communication system failure. Flight crews and airport personnel could not coordinate well with corporate decision makers to handle the unhappy customers.

JetBlue had over seven years of stellar reputation that became quite tarnished in just a few days. Scrambling to make this right, Founder and then-CEO David Neeleman responded with classic crisis-management savvy:

- On February 19, he accepted responsibility and made a public apology, which received national coverage across traditional media outlets. He also sent e-mail and paper letters to customers expressing his regrets on behalf of the company.
- Also on February 19, he posted a video on YouTube introducing the "Customer Bill of Rights," explaining what the company would do to make sure this never happened again.
- On February 22, JetBlue posted the Bill of Rights on its website.
- On March 19, Neeleman reported back about JetBlue's progress in a company blog entry titled "Talk is Cheap."

All this while the company was dealing with over 5,000 media requests and calls from PR professionals offering their counsel. In the meantime, the internet rapidly filled with public opinion. Customers posted their own YouTube videos on February 19, showing themselves abandoned in airports, eating junk food for 24 hours and hoping to get somewhere. Others commented on Neeleman's apology video: "I'll pass on the Kool-Aid, thanks. This airline is a joke and anyone who buys this B.S. from this moron deserves to be stranded for 10 hours w/ no food, water or toilets! Boycott Jet-Blew!!" Before the Bill of Rights appeared, the following comments were posted on JetBlue's website regarding the three-day posting delay: "I love Jet Blue...The message of the video is great, but, why can't I get the Bill of Rights on the Jet Blue website?" And: "I couldn't live without JetBlue! I appreciate your personal message and attention to every new problem. We ALL learn from our mistakes."

By May 7, nearly 300,000 people had viewed Neeleman's video and nearly 500 had commented on it. Like judges, the internet community was still critiquing this incident in May 2007, reviewing the company's reactions to both the crisis and the community conversation, and evaluating Director of Communications Jenny Dervin's every word and move. People also posted comments about new JetBlue incidents and compared them

to the Bill of Rights: Were they followed, they asked? JetBlueHostage.com emerged as a blog filled with customer, employee, and public opinion about it all. A six-day incident, handled well by the traditional PR book, did not completely return JetBlue to its previous high-flying status.

Conversation in social media amplified JetBlue's crisis, showing the need for new PR practices. This incident led to the replacement of founder and CEO Neeleman on May 10. The company handled this crisis reasonably well, yet it continues to plague JetBlue—what could they have done differently?

The Reality of a Transparent, Always-On, Wired World

JetBlue's problems started with a genuine crisis, but sometimes this mob mentality begins in a most unexpected way. In an article for MSN.com, columnist Scott Burns asked, "Is Home Depot Shafting Shoppers?" His description of personal experiences at the retailer led to the conclusion that home improvement company Home Depot "is a consistent abuser of its customers' time." That same day, the MSN staff received 10,000 e-mails and 4,000 posts in the story's Talk Back section describing all of Home Depot's problems. How could Home Depot CEO Frank Blake learn about and handle a huge reputation problem like this that blooms to gigantic proportion within hours?

The rise in social media means that anyone can post pictures or write about your company, 24/7 online, and will. Business customers and consumers alike actively judge your company and comment online for their network members' enlightenment. In the business-to-business (B2B) market, word-of-mouth communication influenced 53% of work-related purchases by business decision makers—some of it online, according to research firm Keller Fay Group. In the business-to-consumer (B2C) market, Jupiter Research found that 90% of large companies believe consumer recommendations are important in influencing other consumers' purchase decisions. Astonishingly, despite this awareness only 20% of corporations have a formal process in place for monitoring blog posts written about their company, according to Harris Interactive.

Defining Moment: Citizen Journalists and People Paparazzi

Citizen journalists are internet users who contribute their perspectives by posting writing, images, or videos to online blogs, forums, and websites. People paparazzi are those citizen journalists who take photos or videos and upload without subjects' permission. Citizen journalists can be B2B customers, consumers, prospects, or any other stakeholder. In contrast to media-employed journalists, citizen journalists rarely need editorial approval or fact verification before posting, and they are not held to the same standard of balanced and unbiased reporting. Citizen journalists are the authors of user-generated media (UGM), also called consumer-generated media (CGM) or social media.

Citizen journalists don't limit their reputation-tarnishing conversations to companies—they also threaten the personal reputations of individuals. A total of 23% of Americans search online for the dirt on colleagues, customers, and employees (according to Sean Michael Kerner of ClickZ, a resource for interactive marketing news). Recruiting firm ExecuNet found that 78% of executive recruiters routinely use search engines to learn more about job candidates, and 35% have eliminated candidates based on the information they found. Thanks to the availability of information on the internet, others can quickly learn about your actions, history, and point of view.

At risk are C-level officers, entrepreneurs, professionals, marketing executives, salespeople, job seekers, and others. Citizen journalists and people paparazzi have devices to capture your every move (cameras and video phones), software to create and manipulate content, and a network for distribution to millions of people in e-mail, blogs, or video posting sites (e.g., YouTube). “Nastiness can erupt online and go global overnight,” says *BuzzMarketingForTech* blogger Paul Dunay. All this without your knowledge—and potentially discovered first by your important business customers and partners.

Jack Welch, Sir Richard Branson, Dr. Deepak Chopra, and Dale Carnegie translated their outstanding personal reputations into business profits. Celebrities and politicians trade on their reputations, as do all of us. In one unusual example, Janet Schoenberg was evicted from her New York apartment and felt her case was not being properly handled by Judge Jerald R. Klein. Janet could find no way to attract attention to her perceived inequity, so she put the judge up for sale on eBay. She posted a picture and offered free worldwide shipping (according to *The New York Times*, the best offer after four days was \$127.50). The judge didn't discover this misuse of his image until a reporter called. Nor would most men think of looking for disgruntled ex-girlfriend postings about them at DontDateHimGirl.com.

Every day, people discuss your personal and corporate reputations on blogs, forums, and niche websites. This kind of transparency requires new reputation-management skills.

People Power

The balance of power moved toward consumers when the television remote control emerged, escalated with the computer mouse and digital video recorders, and is now firmly entrenched thanks to technologies that allow everyone to publish online. “The power of the consumer's voice has never been stronger... It is impacting consumer behavior and how companies operate,” according to David Daniels, vice president and research director at market research firm JupiterResearch. This is why *Time* magazine named “you” the person of the year in 2006.

Chris Anderson of *Wired* and author of *The Long Tail* calls this phenomenon a “pyramid inversion.” It is an inversion from corporate power (C-level executives and

PR firms) to consumer power, and it is a twenty-first-century reality. “What’s new is the extent to which consumer opinion drives reputations. A third of the population has reviewed something online, and any one of those reviews can be read by millions of people,” according to interactive marketing veteran Andy Sernovitz in *Fast Company*.

This view was validated by PR mega-firm Edelman in its 2007 Trust Barometer. Some 52% of survey respondents from developed nations said they find “a person like yourself” to provide the most credible information—equal only to the trust in doctors, and higher than any other type of communicator (see Figure 1.1).

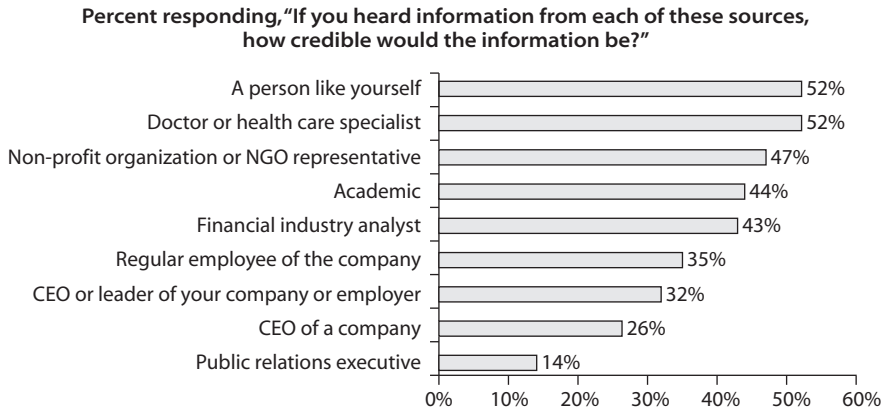


Figure 1.1 Edelman Trust Barometer 2007

Thought Byte: Credible Sources

You probably use a myriad of trusted sources for your information, including “people like you.” What special interest forums, groups, or blogs do you read? Do you trust what you read in them?

Who is a “person like me?” Traditional demographics don’t capture it. According to Edelman research, people place the highest trust in those who share similar interests, are in the same profession, and hold similar political beliefs. This follows academic research showing that consumers strongly consider the opinions of like-minded people and thus have an important influence on their purchasing behavior. This partially explains the power of internet special topic forums, blogs, and reviews on industry websites, such as tripadvisor.com

The internet special interest tribes have the power to build or ruin your reputation with their online chatter. This is why a single cyclist was able to bring Kryptonite

to its knees in 2004 by posting a video showing him opening the bike lock with a BIC ballpoint pen.

From Minimally Transparent to Radically Transparent

The Web ushered in an era of corporate transparency. It used to be that you had to attend Detroit’s North American International Auto Show each fall to see the new models. By the mid-1990s, companies began announcing new products online and communicating with stakeholders via websites. They now had a fine communication outlet for the press releases landing in traditional media wastebaskets. In 1998, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission began storing public company financial reports in its Edgar database. What was already public became accessible anytime, anywhere, from any connected computer.

Slowly it escalated. Secret corporate memos and private e-mails started circulating online, and celebrity’s private cell phone numbers were published. Comparison-shopping websites, such as bizrate.com and pricegrabber.com, compared online retail pricing for electronics, books, and other items. Amazon and other recommendation sites began publishing consumer reviews. A few people started badmouthing their companies in blogs and were immediately fired. Blogger Heather Armstrong has the distinguished title of being the first to get fired in 2002 for critiquing her colleagues and their work in her blog, Dooce.com. Many others followed. That was the age of minimal transparency, and it is now the “good old days.”

Today, it is completely “open kimono.” If companies, professionals, or just about anyone doesn’t reveal their weaknesses for the world to see online, someone else will—as with JetBlue’s critics who still evaluate every flight problem to see if the company follows its Customer Bill of Rights. The internet community demands transparency and honesty and those who don’t follow this new creed pay for it with a cyber-tongue lashing or worse (Kryptonite reportedly lost \$10 million due to a product recall after the BIC pen video incident).

Thought Byte: Your Online Reputation

You may be wondering what people say about you online. Google yourself, your brands, and the company name. Check yourself out in the blogosphere at Technorati.com or blogsearch.google.com. What surprises you? Things may have changed since the last time you did this experiment.

Examples abound. Wal-Mart and PR firm Edelman got a wake-up call with their flog (fake blog), *Wal-Marting Across America*, that was presented as a couple of customers talking about their experiences in a motor home—but was indeed an

orchestrated trip being paid for by Wal-Mart. It not only hurt the retailer and its PR firm, but author and freelance writer Laura St. Claire fell from grace too. Colorado State University professor Jonathan Rees uncovered the deception when he challenged the writers of *Wal-Marting Across America* because their descriptions of Wal-Mart were always glowing and positive. He wrote in his own blog, “They pay an unspecified sum to these people to say how great Wal-Mart is—I think it is deceptive.”

In a *Wired* article, “The See-Through CEO,” writer Clive Thompson suggests, “Fire the publicist. Go off message. Let all your employees blab and blog. In the new world of radical transparency, the path to business success is clear.” Show what you are doing, reveal your processes, acknowledge your mistakes, and participate fully in conversation that concerns you. Be radically transparent or risk your reputation and top line.

How Social Media Change the Playing Field

Businesses previously needed only to worry about something negative when it appeared in a newspaper or on the evening news. Individuals lived in relative anonymity, and potential employers knew nothing beyond the contents of a resume or testimony. The world of information moved at a snail’s pace, and public perception of a brand could be managed by those who had either the connections or the money.

Traditional word-of-mouth has long been considered one of the most powerful of market forces, and social computing makes it public. The internet provides a megaphone for the disgruntled—with no entry barrier, little legal accountability, instant commentary, full multimedia communication, and a free distribution channel to millions worldwide. And people like them find these complaints credible.

Positive words exist online, but the negative opinions seem to draw the huge crowds. It is easy to attack someone while in pajamas behind a home computer, and everyone has an opinion. “Online is where reputations are made now,” according to Chief Reputation Strategist Dr. Leslie Gaines-Ross at public relations firm Weber Shandwick.

All this is made possible by social media—online tools and platforms that allow internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences, and connect for business or pleasure. It involves multimedia and includes blogs, wikis, photo and video sharing, forums, and networks for meeting like-minded people. Social media are sometimes referred to as social computing or Web 2.0.

Characteristics of Social Media

Everyone is a publisher in the social media world. The name of the game is egalitarian participation by one and all—from the Fortune 100 CEO to your dentist. Company spokespeople and employees sometimes initiate conversations and are active participants

via blogs and such, but social media content is still primarily community driven in a bottom-up process. Although hamburger chain Wendy's International, Inc. and other companies have MySpace pages, their kind are in the minority among MySpace page publishers.

Whereas traditional websites and e-mail blasts broadcast the company line, product talk online now gives full attention to the consumer voice. The company line has traditionally been a slick monologue, full of marketing verbiage and unexciting spin. The consumer voice is honest, raw, fast, brutally direct, and humorous. It is no wonder that other consumers prefer to read it.

Sometimes following a mob mentality, citizen journalists are more revealing and critical than traditional journalists. Further, citizen journalists comment on rumors and opinion, and some don't check the facts as diligently because they don't have the same guidelines and editorial review processes as traditional media. Citizen journalists also deconstruct and reveal biases in traditional media reports. Then they challenge one another's views. No rock is left unturned.

This rich tapestry of corporate and consumer voices adds complexity and balance to the online conversations. It is a dialogue, not a monologue. Employees and just about anyone can and do join the fun. It is a rapid-fire conversation across numerous sites: discussion that mushrooms like an atomic bomb within hours and takes a Herculean effort for organizational monitoring and participation. Few have the time and skills for managing this 1:1 dialogue, but without it a long-built reputation can be damaged in hours.

There is broad distribution of consumer generated content over the internet network, as opposed to the communication centralization of traditional mass media and web page content. Marketers employing social media call it a *pull* tactic (with users asking for content of choice) versus the *push* of traditional media (where users passively receive content), as depicted in Figure 1.2 (adapted from Dion Hinchcliffe's *Web 2.0* blog)

Social media require honesty, disclosure, and as we've already said, transparency. There is little censorship in this world—the community values raw truth. The community immediately comes down hard on those who employ conversation spin, control, manipulation, or spam. Anonymity is discouraged, and nearly all posts to a conversation include the author's real e-mail address.

A multiplier effect quickly spreads information over the Web, often unedited and usually commented upon by new authors. Hot headlines show up on Digg.com and receive votes for the best story. Blog site content depends on keeping current with stories in its special interest niche, so bloggers are quick to pick up headlines and link to site originators. The negative news spreads like wildfire, fanned by citizen journalists, and this is why a full-blown reputation crisis can appear within hours. JetBlue experienced this firsthand.

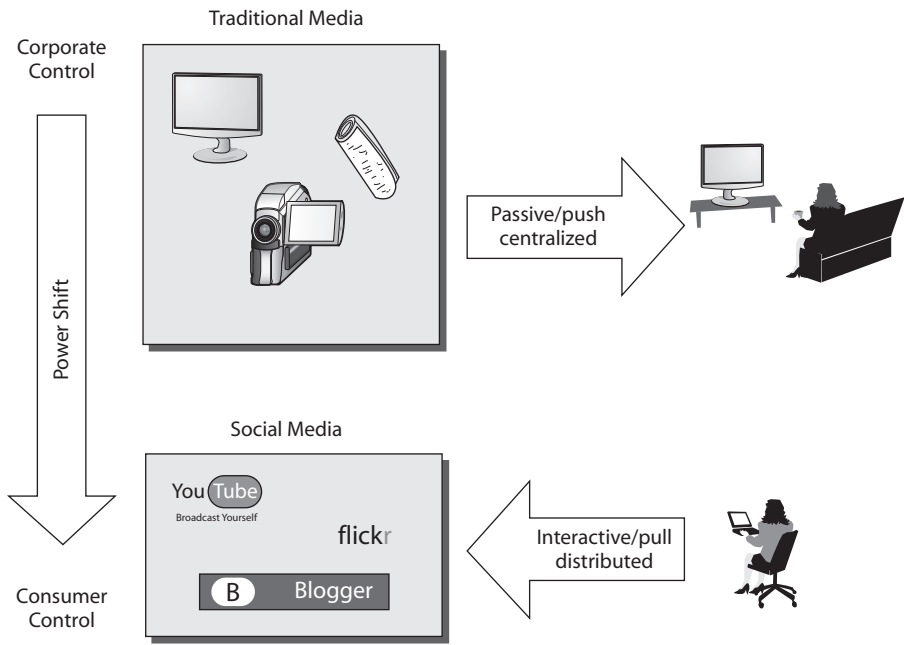


Figure 1.2 From traditional to social media

Thought Byte: Media Importance

Does your reputation rely more on traditional or social media? To answer this, consider the number and positive or negative sentiment of mentions your company, brand, or key personnel receive in each medium. Where do your biggest critics publish?

By now you are getting the point that the internet is abuzz with conversation, and some of it is definitely about you and your company. With the explosion of social networks and consumer-generated media, no organization, brand, or individual escapes online mention by stakeholders, like it or not. The people paparazzi can take your picture without your knowledge and post it online: such was the fate of actor Michael Richards, who was caught by an audience member's cell video phone during a racist tirade to a shocked crowd. That video will be available forever on entertainment blog TMZ.com.

It takes very different skills to build, monitor, manage, and repair a reputation in light of social media.

Social Media Abound

Technorati tracks more than 110 million blogs with 1.6 million daily blog posts (18 updates a second). The blogosphere continues to double approximately every 6 months—adding over 175,000 new blogs each day. Flickr, the photo sharing site owned by Yahoo!, hosts 485 million photos (up from 5.5 million in 2005). These are not all vacation pictures, but many contain reputation-damaging images. Entering **ycantpark** into a Flickr photo search reveals 335 pictures of cars and motorcycles poorly parked—complete with readable license plate numbers. Many of these are employee vehicles at Yahoo Inc.’s Sunnyvale, California, headquarters.

Google indexes more than 20 billion pages of content, and social networks such as MySpace and Friendster continue to grow their user base at a fantastic pace. Google maintains the entire archive of Usenet discussion groups dating back to 1981. As user-generated media such as blogs, forums, and social networks continue to multiply each day and remain archived forever, the power to create or destroy a reputation has moved from mainstream media to the average consumer.

Individuals and corporations now realize that their online reputations are very fragile. Social networks such as Digg, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Facebook continue to add thousands of new users each day, and this environment demands constant reputation monitoring. See Table 1.1 for an overview of social media.

► **Table 1.1** Social Media Overview

Social Media	What is it?	Examples
Social networks	Associations of internet users for social connection	MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn
Search engines	Databases allowing users to search for content	Google, Yahoo!, MSN, America Online, Ask
User review sites and forums	Special interest communities with user product reviews	Tripadvisor, Amazon, CNET
Blogs	Online multimedia journals with frequent updating	Technology: TypePad, Blogger, Wordpress. Site: Marketingpilgrim.com
RSS	Brings content to user desktops	Technology: Bloglines, FeedBurner. Sites: most media and blogs
Tagging	Metadata that helps users find a photo, news story or Web page	Del.icio.us, Flickr, Digg
Wikis	Collaborative publishing on websites	Wikipedia, Wikihow
Podcasts	Digital audio, and sometimes video, for user download to computers, iPods, or other devices	NPR, Comedy Central, National Geographic, ESPN

Reputation 101

Now for a short tutorial on reputation, just to be sure we are on the same page. According to Merriam-Webster (www.m-w.com/) reputation is defined as

“ 1) an overall quality or character as seen or judged by people in general, and 2) a place in public esteem or regard: a good name. ”

Reputation is not what the company or individual thinks about itself, but what others think. It is pure perception that may or may not be based on fact. It is the esteem that an entity has in the eyes of its stakeholders.

Contrast this with a brand or company image—the beliefs and attitudes held by stakeholders based on brand experience and company communication. Image is based on a product’s or company’s attributes and is much broader than reputation, which is solely based on character judgments. For example, JetBlue’s image is based on the brand promise, including its fares and routes, on time record, employee service and friendliness, and so forth. Its reputation is based on the trust to deliver what it promises and the respect for its corporate values and actions.

Character and Reputation

Abraham Lincoln once said that “Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.” Actions depict the character, and opinions in reaction reveal the reputation. Because reputation is based on a character judgment, it begs the question: What is character? In organizations it involves a complex set of features, including both performance and ethical behavior. It is not that different for an individual’s character.

Trust is a key component of any reputation. Stakeholders demand authenticity, credibility, and honesty. According to the 2007 Edelman Trust Barometer, “providing quality products or services” and undertaking “socially responsible activities” are the two most important things a company can do to build trust. We’d also include “quality workplace management” and “financial performance” (or at least lack of irregularities) based on commonalities in the work of Harris Interactive, Weber Shandwick, and criteria for *Fortune* magazine’s annual America’s Most Admired Companies list.

Radically Transparent will not aid you or your company in developing a good character: you already learned that from your parents, school, and religion. Slip and you will fall in the social media. Or, don’t slip and you still may fall when the citizen journalists get the rumor mill going. Even the best character can draw online criticism and if you or your firm are not yet being discussed online, you will be soon. Incidentally, if you are not the topic of online conversation this may indicate a bigger problem: you have no

reputation at all because no one cares. This book will help you monitor your online reputation and manage stakeholder perceptions of your character. These things were not taught in school.

Reputation Influences

The reputations of an organization, its brands, and its employees operate in a context that is sometimes uncontrollable (Figure 1.3). For example, a country reputation affects brand reputations exported from that country. Further, what people think of Bill Gates affects Microsoft's reputation. When Robert Scoble wrote his famous blog as technical evangelist at Microsoft (Scoblizer.com), his reputation influenced and was affected by those of Bill Gates and Microsoft.

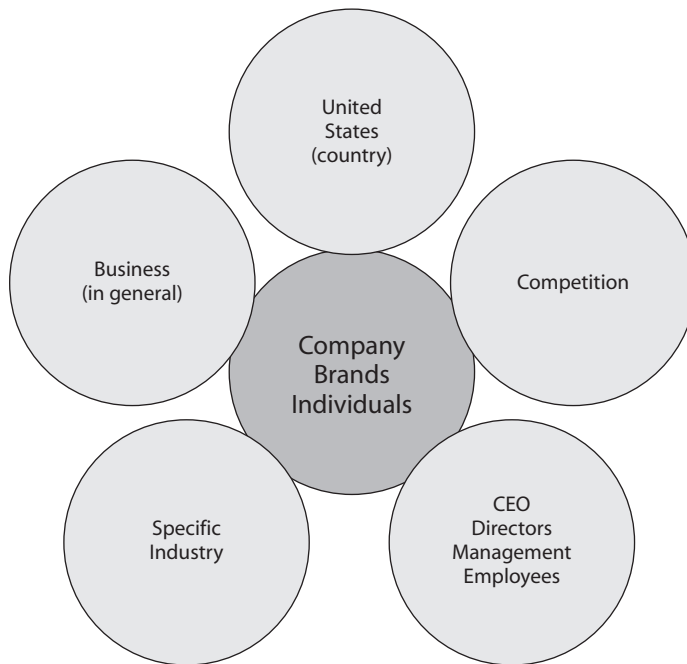


Figure 1.3 Reputation Influences

At the broadest level, a company's or brand's reputation includes that of its country of origin. The current reputation of the United States is quite low in many countries, and this has a real economic impact on U.S. firms selling abroad. For instance, in Edelman's 2007 Trust survey with college-educated, high-income residents, 60% of Americans trust McDonald's, but only 26% of residents in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom trust the company. Edelman concludes that for the third year in a row, American brands operating in Europe have a trust discount—other studies suggest a discount of up to 20% for U.S. brands in foreign markets. *BusinessWeek* suggests that this U.S. trust discount nears the top of "the list of the Biggest Problems No One Cares About."

Do consumers trust business in general? In the United States, 53% did in 2007, up from 44% in 2002 during the Enron and WorldCom ethics scandals (according to Edelman). This is an all-time high for business trust, but it handicaps an individual business in the reputation game.

Industry reputations affect its corporate members. An Ipsos MORI study revealed the proportion of consumers holding positive impressions of various industries: food industry (65%), banking (51%), and tobacco (14%). Companies operating in unpopular industries have an uphill reputation battle.

Similarly, the competition can affect a firm's reputation because buyers make comparisons. When Home Depot is in the spotlight for poor customer service, Lowe's suddenly looks better to consumers.

Now for the company management. The CEO reputation is a very important component of the company reputation, according to 87% of the respondents in a study by PR firm Hill and Knowlton. Also important are reputations of the CFO (75%), the company chairman (40%), and other nonexecutive directors (23%). When the company reputation is damaged, CEOs receive nearly 60% of the blame, according to PR firm Weber Shandwick. This may be why David Neeleman, JetBlue CEO and founder, left his post after the February crisis.

Finally, every employee can affect a company's reputation through interactions with customers, friends, and family. This explains why internal marketing is such an important tactic.

Obviously, some of these contextual influences are more controllable than others. In this book we present strategies and tactics for managing organizational and individual CEO and employee reputations, but it is important to consider that larger influences can derail the best plans.

Reputation Is a Valuable Asset

After removing radio personality Don Imus from his MSNBC program for making racist remarks on air, NBC News President Steve Capus noted that advertisers had begun pulling dollars from the network. Capus said, "I ask you, what price do you put on your reputation? And the reputation of this news division means more to me than advertising dollars. Because if you lose your reputation, you lose everything." Those advertising dollars may well have kept flowing out if NBC hadn't handled this situation so skillfully.

Much research validates the connection between a company's reputation and revenue. For example, a Harris Interactive study found that a sterling reputation increases consumers' "intentions to buy a company's products and services, recommend them to other people, buy a company's stock, and recommend the stock to other investors." In the pharmaceutical industry a PricewaterhouseCoopers study discovered that 78% of consumers consider a firm's reputation when selecting drug treatments.

The Hay Group, a global marketing consultancy and partner with *Fortune* magazine, noted that the top 10 “World’s Most Admired Companies” enjoy a total shareholder return of nearly three times that of the Standard & Poor’s (S&P) 500 as a whole (18.5% versus 7.1%). People and businesses buy from companies they like and trust. Further, they don’t want to be associated with firms that have poor reputations. It pays to monitor your reputation carefully and take action as needed to keep it stellar.

Pay special attention if it is stellar: JetBlue’s reputation crash was worse because of its perfect reputation pre-Valentine’s day 2007. Other airlines that also grounded planes and passengers did not get the same strong negativity in social media, perhaps because these delays were expected from them.

Thought Byte: Your Reputation Equity

What is the value of your reputation? Your organization’s? Think of some worst-case scenarios and how they could hurt your bottom line.

Loose tongues (and typing fingers), e-mail abuse, and internet fraud can kill your reputation in a minute. The Weber Shandwick PR firm estimates that it takes four years to recover from a reputation blemish, and another three to make it sustainable.

This huge asset needs careful guarding.

Now for the Good News

This same social Web we’ve been describing is full of treasures for astute companies. You can easily find and use them for improving your reputation online. One key is to follow the old adage: if you can’t fight ’em, join ’em. The citizen journalists want the object of their stories to join in the conversation.

The internet is a great research tool for hearing what’s on your customers’ and other stakeholders’ minds. Learn from the dialogue. It is a lot cheaper than holding focus groups in multiple cities. Academic research shows that two-thirds of customers never voice complaints to companies. The ease of internet discussion allows them to complain to other like-minded consumers with full transparency to the company. Unilever’s Axe personal care brands for men hosts private forums for selected customers and listens to them chat about life, love, Axe products, and more. Dell and Amazon are particularly adroit at listening to customers and designing products and technology to meet their needs. JetBlue created the Bill of Rights as a response to its customer troubles. What could be better than the opportunity to eavesdrop on a million customers as they honestly chat about your products online?

Thought Byte: Online Reputation Research

You probably have many ways of learning about customer perceptions. What systems do you have in place to research your reputation online?

It might seem overwhelming to monitor 110 million blogs, but that is unnecessary. Your stakeholders tend to hang out together online in special interest forums and blogs (remember: “people like me”). Sometimes called “centers of influence,” a firm or individual can identify a handful of important websites for monitoring. For instance, a hotel will watch reviews posted on travel agent sites, such as Expedia, Travelocity, and TripAdvisor.

You can also work with individuals to solve product problems. Research shows that a negative comment about a brand is about 10 times stronger than a positive comment in shaping public opinion. It is easy to identify an individual complaining online about a product or service problem and e-mail the consumer directly to make it right. Lenovo, the technology firm that acquired IBM’s Personal Computing Division, picks off a few extreme and vocal customer complaints a day and responds to them personally. What a great opportunity to find the dissatisfied and turn them into brand advocates.

As another bonus, you can monitor online conversation automatically. This is one of the great features of internet technology. Reputation watchers use Google and Technorati, Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, and more, to bring relevant conversation right to their desktop computers the minute it happens. We’ll show you exactly how to set up your own conversation monitoring in Chapter 13.

Companies such as Dell, Wal-Mart, Microsoft, and Kryptonite have all experienced the power of consumer-generated media. Even the U.S. government’s intelligence community has realized the wealth of information that can be gleaned from monitoring blogs. As Open Source Center (OSC) Director Douglas J. Naquin told *The Washington Times*, “A lot of blogs now have become very big on the internet, and we’re getting a lot of rich information on blogs that are telling us a lot about social perspectives and everything from what the general feeling is to ... people putting information on there that doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

The social media are not only for reputation monitoring and repair—you can also start the conversations that build your reputation. Honest, open disclosure and genuine interest in feedback will get the ball rolling. We’ll explain how to do this in Parts 2 and 3 of this book.

Become Radically Transparent

By now you are getting the picture—the citizen journalists are discussing you, your company, your brands, and more online. Maybe they are chatting about your CEO or

brands in blogs, posting images on Flickr and YouTube, and rating your actions on eBay and your reviews on Amazon or ePinion. Or perhaps your own online postings need a checkup to see if they support your desired reputation—for example, what image does your outgoing e-mail, website, and blog portray, and are your bio and contact information on your company’s website up-to-date and accurate?

Thought Byte: Start with the Low-Hanging Fruit

Check your bio, head shot, “About Us” and contact information on the company website and update if needed. Then, look for information currency in the signature file appended to your outgoing e-mail and the white papers and press releases referencing you online.

The guidelines in this book will make it easy to present your best self online without fanning the flames or getting into reputation trouble. They are based on best practices among the internet’s star brands. We’ve grounded them in solid marketing and corporate branding principles. You’ll find short tutorials in four key skills of online branding in social media: research, public relations, search engine optimization, and online content generation. It is ultimately about the content online, but no one will see it if you don’t have these other skills and know how to connect with people online. Research skills help you to find out where you currently stand online and to set up a monitoring system. Search engine optimization (SEO) helps you move closer to becoming the #1 listing on search engine results pages. PR gets the word out and also helps with SEO—these are tried-and-true strategies for creating a buzz about *you*.

PR and SEO are two very different skills because one focuses on building relevant messages for the media while the other concentrates on building relevant content for the search engines. Can’t write? We’ll help you with that, too. Social media require different writing skills than either traditional or web page writing (it’s about the dialogue, remember?).

We wrote this book as a menu of strategies and tactics, knowing that one size does not fit all. You may already be well known online and want to jump to sections on how to repair your image in the face of online criticism, such as what happened to JetBlue. Or, you may be well known only in the real world yet want to become #1 on Google for your personal or corporate name. Finally, if you are new to this, like most of us, we show you how to start at the beginning and build a stellar online reputation. No time? You get to pick how much to do based on your situation.

There’s a conversation going on about you right this minute. It’s time to learn how to join that discussion and become radically transparent.