

TECHNOLOGY IN MARKETING

Managing and Monitoring Your Law Firm's Reputation Online

By Joshua Fruchter

Warren Buffet once said, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

Buffet's observation is more true today than ever before. There was a time when law firms could control what was said about them in the media through careful and controlled spin. No more. Today, whether they like it or not, law firms are operating in an increasingly connected and conversational Web environment. Sources of information about a firm and its attorneys are no longer limited to the firm's Web site or firm-issued press releases. Instead, casual dialogue or references on social networks, blogs, directories, job boards and other Web sites all contribute to the reputation of a firm in the legal marketplace. In just a few hours, a single negative, biting reference about a firm on a single, well-trafficked blog can easily mushroom through viral marketing into widespread hostility or ridicule across the Internet.

GOOGLE

A major force behind the changed online environment is Google, which is no longer just a search engine that feeds up results to search queries. As Andy Beal and Dr. Judy Strauss explain in their ground-breaking book, "Radically Transparent," Google has become a reputation engine that

Joshua Fruchter, a member of this newsletter's Board of Editors, is president and co-founder of eLaw-Marketing, a provider of online marketing services to law firms and other professional service providers. He can be contacted at 866-833-6245 or at josh@elawmarketing.com. The firm's Web site is at www.elawmarketing.com and its blog is at <http://www.lawycasting.com>

stores links to every single reference — negative or positive — about a company anywhere on the Web, and displays them indefinitely to anyone who inquires. In short, the links and descriptive text that Google displays when someone searches for your firm will affect its reputation (for good or for bad).

So are you helplessly at the mercy of Google? The answer is no. Through a program of regular and ongoing publication of positive online content — e.g., articles, blog posts, press releases, seminar announcements — on their own and third-party Web sites, law firms can maximize the likelihood that positive references will dominate the results that display on Google in response to queries about the firm, and push down negative references, if any, to later pages.

While the issue of online reputation is relevant to both law firms and individual attorneys, in this article we focus on tips and strategies for monitoring, managing, and maximizing a law firm's online reputation. But bear in mind that many of the tips and strategies discussed apply equally to individual attorneys.

MONITORING ONLINE CONVERSATIONS

The threshold question any firm must address is how to monitor its online reputation so it knows what is being said about the firm outside of its own Web site and press releases.

The first step is to start monitoring the posts and comments on the leading legal industry blogs via RSS (for those unfamiliar with the term, RSS is a subscription mechanism that automatically delivers updates to a dashboard on your desktop of any new content added to designated Web sites and blogs, thereby obviating the need for you to separately check each one of those Web sites and blogs for updates manually). The blogs we would recommend that law firms monitor, at a minimum, are: *Above the Law*, *The Wall Street Journal Law Blog*, and Larry Bodine's *Law Marketing Blog*. The weekly *Blawg Review* carnival is also good to monitor for recent posts from across the legal blogging universe.

Next, you should be monitoring the Web sites of traditional media companies like The New York Times. Google makes this very easy with its Google Alert service, which allows you to plug any keyword (such as the name of your firm or the name of an attorney) into the application and receive daily e-mail updates from Google with links to any reference to that keyword on any of the media sites that Google tracks (which is pretty much all of them).

Finally, to supplement the above efforts, firms should also monitor sites such as Vault.com where feedback about the firm's work environment is published, as well as professional networking sites such as LinkedIn.

PROMOTING POSITIVE ONLINE REFERENCES

After setting up your monitoring mechanisms, it's time to proactively build a portfolio of positive references about your firm on third party Web sites (of course, this assumes you are already regularly publishing content like new articles to the firm's own Web site). The more positive content associated with your firm that appears on other Web sites, the larger the number of positive references to your firm will appear in Google.

One option here is to periodically issue press releases through an online service like PR Web announcing recent firm successes, new publications (e.g., white papers) and upcoming events (e.g., Webinars). Once a release about the firm is published on PR Web, it typically gets picked up by a host of other media sites, all of which are indexed by Google.

An added benefit of publishing online press releases is that they will associate your firm with particular keywords that a client or prospect might type into Google when searching for a firm practicing in your specialties. Since these press releases will remain indexed by Google long after their release, they can help your firm establish a strong long term presence in search results generated for those keywords.

Finally, because services like PR Web allow you to embed links to your Web site in your press releases,

continued on page 8

Technology in Marketing

continued from page 7

online press releases can also become a strong source of traffic.

The key steps in releasing an effective online press release are:

- Identify the keywords and phrases that prospective clients might use to search for the subject of the release;
- Compose the release using the identified keywords and phrases;
- Determine what pages on your Web site you'd want people to visit after reading the release (known as "landing pages"); and
- Hyperlink keywords within the release back to the identified landing pages.

Another option for building a stronger positive online presence (for individual attorneys, in particular) is blogging. Regular blogging by an attorney on a niche topic associates that attorney's name with the topic in Google's index. The blogger's firm also benefits because (so long as the blog references the blogger's firm) an additional positive reference to the firm is added to Google. Firms with multiple blogs will see multiple separate references to the firm in Google over time that can help entrench positive references at the top of Google's search results.

The key "best practices" for successfully launching, maintaining and promoting a lawyer blog are:

- Identifying appropriate keywords: If you want Google to rank your blog highly for specific keywords, these keywords should appear in your title and description tags, and published blog posts.
- Employing a professional design: While many of the earlier successful blogs actually have atrocious designs, those blogs were launched years ago when there was less competition for readers' attention. Nowadays, new law blogs are launching every day, and professional design will become a key signal of quality that can sway a reader to start follow-

ing your blog rather than that of a competitor.

- Identifying content sources: Because most "niche" law blogs comment on breaking legal trends and developments in a specialized area of the law, it's important to identify sources (like Google Alerts) that will keep you up to date on developments in your specialty.
- Publishing frequently: Constantly displaying fresh content to search engine spiders helps boost rankings. Two-three posts with short but insightful commentary four to five times a week is ideal. However, to build a long-term, loyal readership also requires occasional longer, analytical posts to demonstrate the kind of expertise that shorter posts cannot convey.
- Developing inbound links: Because Google ranks Web sites (and Web pages) in part by how many other topically related sites link to them, it's important for a blog to become part of a community of like-minded peers who will link to posts of interest on the blog. Other strategies for developing inbound links more within a blogger's direct control include submitting a blog to various blog directories, employing trackbacks, and hosting a blog carnival (further details concerning these strategies are beyond the scope of this article).
- Promoting readership: Make it easy for readers to spread the word about your blog by offering "viral marketing" such as a Share This button.

In addition to online press releases and blogging, other methods of increasing positive online references about a firm include submitting work product by the firm's attorneys to online legal resource directories such as JD Supra, submitting articles to leading ezine sites, and creating an article and other entries about the firm on Wikipedia.

It's also possible to boost awareness of the firm's work product online using social bookmarking sites

such as Digg, StumbleUpon, delicious and Reddit.

DEALING WITH NEGATIVE REFERENCES

What if, despite all your best efforts, negative content about your firm shows up on Google? First, if you've already invested resources into building a portfolio of positive references, the negative references may not break into the top results on Google. If that's not the case, then it's time to start building those positive references as per the guidelines above.

In terms of how to respond to any negative stories, it's important not to ignore them. "Ostriching" doesn't make the story go away. Rather, it allows outside parties without a vested interest in your firm to control the story, and add their own, often "inaccurate" commentary.

As such, it is important to acknowledge a negative story, and then share the firm's viewpoint in a measured and respectful (even humorous, where appropriate) tone. Arrogance and disdain has no place in today's conversational environment.

Aside from using the firm's own Web site and blogs to share its point of view, consider also participating in conversations on third-party blogs where the story has gained steam and you can share the firm's perspective.

At times, it may be necessary to correct inaccuracies, and possibly demand a retraction by the blog or other source of the inaccuracy.

A PR firm specializing in crisis communications can be an invaluable resource in dealing with negative stories. Just make sure they are well versed in the culture of blogging and social networking so they don't make a bad situation worse with poor advice based on an online environment that no longer exists.

CONCLUSION

Law firms and individual attorneys with reputations to protect need to wake up to the reality that Google has become a reputation engine, and start proactively maximizing positive online references about the firm and its key attorneys.

