

8 ways to SEO your personal brand



By Sean Egen
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ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS:

- Knowing and monitoring what's being said about you is the first key to reputation management
- Construct a personal website and update it frequently to boost your results
- Harness blogs, social networks, and visuals to round out your online persona

Personal brand management

Individuals need to protect and cultivate their own personal brands, the same way in which big-name companies do. I learned this lesson the hard way.

The year was 2003, and I was off to the Hollywood Bowl for what I thought was a Neil Young/Crazy Horse reunion concert. (Yes, I'm old and musically irrelevant.) Psyched to hear distortion-laden classics like "Cinnamon Girl" live, I'd shelled out \$150 for mediocre seats for me and my girlfriend. When it turned out that 95 percent of the evening was devoted to playing -- and acting out (there were "actors" onstage performing to the music) -- Young's new concept album, "Greendale," I was peeved... so peeved that I posted a scathing review on a message board, using language that would've earned me a mouthful of lather as a child. Little did I suspect this profane-laced post would follow me for years, popping up as one of the top search results every time someone Googled my name.

My sour-grapes post (I've since acknowledged Neil's right to experiment musically; however, in my defense, the concert was advertised as a Crazy Horse reunion show) taught me a valuable lesson about the need to protect and cultivate my personal brand. This is especially true online, where doing a perfunctory background check is as easy as typing a name into a search-engine field. And don't fool yourself, prospective clients and employers are searching your name, especially in today's tough economy and ultra-competitive job market.

So, in the interest of helping you better manage your personal brand, here are a few tips from industry experts on how to exercise more control over what's turning up when someone does a search of your name.

Monitoring and PR planning

Tip 1: Know and monitor what's out there

Knowing potential clients and employers will likely search your name at some point, the obvious first step in better managing what they'll learn is to see for yourself what's coming up.

Thad Kahlow, managing partner of Business OnLine, recommends doing a search of your name on each of the major search engines as a start. "But it's also good to know what's happening from a standpoint of the user-profile searches," he adds. "So, if you go to a website like pipl.com, you can begin to see what kind of information is gathered about you, all the way down from where you've lived (it's a little bit scary, actually) to your education -- a bunch of stuff that you may want to be cognitive of that's being collected on your behalf that can be fairly telling."

Of course, once you know what's out there, it's equally as important to keep track of any additions or changes. Senior strategist John Faris of Red Door Interactive recommends doing this through services like Google Alerts, Twitter Search, and Technorati, a site that helps bloggers keep track of the global online conversation.

"The easiest thing in the world is a Google Alert," says iProspect's COO John Tawadros. "They're the best at indexing and getting things quick, and that's where the lion's share of the population goes to find things. I think if you start out there, then you're in good shape."

Tip 2: Develop a personal PR plan

Once you're familiar with and keeping track of your online footprint, the next step for individuals looking to take more control, according to several of our experts, is to develop a personal public relations plan.

Kevin Ryan, CMO of WebVisible, says that having a good solid action plan -- or disaster plan, if you will -- needs to be top of mind for every individual marketer, just as it is for every brand. And, Ryan says, the first thing that's crucial in developing a solid plan is to ensure you have a solid presence.

Build your presence

Tip 3: Establish a solid web presence

The best way to develop a solid web presence is through web activity -- specifically, by generating the content you want to show up in search results. Along with putting out positive information about you that didn't previously exist, new content also helps push existing content -- some of which could be outdated, unflattering, or just plain wrong -- down in the rankings, where it's much less likely to be seen. Any new content will do this, but, ideally, the content should be about a subject for which you wish to be known.

"If you want to grow an association with a certain topic, make sure, wherever you're actively involved, you contribute to that association with you and that topic," Tawadros says. "I can actually engage, and start a dialogue, about the topics I want to be known for."

The vehicles for generating new content should include, at a minimum, a personal website, a blog, and active participation in social media. And if your intent is to take more control of your personal brand, it's important to know where to draw the line between your professional and personal life.

"Ideally, your personal life totally backs up your brand," says Andromeda Edison, CEO of Internet Image Management, a firm specializing in brand management for individuals. She makes the point that your online presence can't seem too perfect or canned -- it has to be open and real, or others will see right through it. "What I've told some of my clients is, if you're not open about it, somebody else is going to be 'open' about it, and then they can twist it."

The following tips go into more detail on how to build your personal web presence.

Constructing your personal website

Tip 4: Launch a website

It's pretty much a no-brainer that creating a personal website will help information about you that you want people to see turn up in search results. Having a website also "shows a certain level of understanding of the importance of the space," Kahlow says. "It's just a great thing to understand that a potential hire gets it and is actively participating on the web."

But merely creating a website is not enough. Our experts also recommend that you take the following steps:

Update frequently. "You follow it with updating information as often as you can and make sure that the accurate information, or the information that you want folks to have, is out there -- that it exists on the website," Ryan says. "That, to me, is the biggest mistake that both small businesses and large enterprises make -- they don't have the information updated as quickly as possible."

Updating includes posting or linking to any articles or blogs you've written; press releases about you; quotes, speeches, or presentations you've given; Twitter tweets from or about you -- in other words, anything that conveys messaging you'd like prospective clients or employers to see.

Own your name. "It's a good idea, even if you're not going to use it, to buy YourName.com, just to protect that," Red Door's Faris says.

Kahlow strongly recommends using an email address that's based on your website URL. "I can't tell you how many people that I've been looking for, from an interview standpoint, and I see that their personal email address is their website name," he says, adding that this gives him an incentive to check out that person's website.

Tag, link, and anchor away. "How you're setting up the title and the metadata behind that is absolutely crucial to showing up in the search -- you definitely want to start with your name as the key or No. 1 keyword phrase that you're targeting," Kahlow explains. "If you connect the metadata with the title data and your name in the URL, you have a very strong opportunity to rank well for your given name on a search."

"SEO links are everything," Faris says. He recommends creating a "mini-network" of links between your website and various other online profiles -- and be sure to use your name in those links. He admits, however, that strategy will only go so far. "You get busted pretty quickly in SEO if you're just linking a bunch of your own sites, but Google doesn't seem to frown upon it quite as much because it's sort of a given that you're going to link to your personal profiles," he says. "But I've found that you can see a pretty good bump in your stuff pretty quickly if you just drop some good anchor text."

Which begs the question: Should your optimizing efforts be search-engine specific?

"The rankings will be different, but the things you can do to try to influence them really aren't," says Danny Sullivan, SEO guru and editor-in-chief of Search Engine Land.

"Mentioning your name more on a page is probably going to work better with Yahoo and MSN than it is with Google," adds Faris, who says these two search engines are a bit more heavily weighted toward keyword usage than links.

"You want to optimize for Google," Kahlow says emphatically. "They're the 800-pound gorilla in the room that continues to own market share and continues to grow." Once you're done optimizing for Google, he adds, you can address the nuances that happen within Yahoo, MSN, and the rest.

Harness blogs, social networks, and visuals

Tip 5: Blog it out

A blog is an excellent way to generate positive personal content that will turn up in searches. And you don't have to be a subject-matter expert to blog. According to Business OnLine's Kahlow, passion -- not expertise -- is the key to a truly successful blog. "If you're passionate about travel or photography or whatever it may be, and you are launching a blog which shows expertise, that's something that would be more interesting to me as a potential employer," he says.

"Keep it fresh so that content gets indexed and pushes some things that you don't want to show down," Tawadros adds.

Of course, along with maintaining your own blog, it's important to participate in the blogs and forums of others as well. Just be sure to use your real name, or it won't show up in search results.

Tip 6: Get social

Social networking is one of the fastest and easiest ways to generate a lot of personal content fast. That's both the good and bad news.

"Certainly, they should make some use of the social sites," Sullivan says, though he notes that it's critical to make an informed decision about how much you actually want to share about your personal life.

"At the end of the day, for most of us, it's important to have a presence there," WebVisible's Ryan says. "But if you're going to have a presence on Facebook, if you're going to have a presence on LinkedIn, and [be] expanding your presence in these groups, you have to think of it as a marketing vehicle."

When it comes to social networking, Ryan says the biggest mistake he sees people make is when they to treat networks as private ones, without much consideration for the information they're putting out. He gives the example of a friend who, in 80 percent of her Facebook photos, was holding a cocktail. "What does that say about you?" he asks. While it may tell friends that you enjoy having a good time, it might tell a prospective client or employer a much different story.

Edison, of Internet Image Management, stresses the importance of participating on social networks that you legitimately enjoy, not just the ones you think you should be on for branding purposes.

Meanwhile, Kahlow says that getting a professional page up on LinkedIn is a must. "That can actually show up sometimes higher than your own website," he says. Even if you put more effort into your own site, the link power of LinkedIn can drive your profile higher into the search results, he says.

Tip 7: Be conscious of the visual

Searches are no longer just about keywords and terms. As iProspect's Tawadros puts it, "If you think of Google Universal and blended search, I think you absolutely need to think of your brand not just in terms of content but in any type of digital asset that can be found."

"People are doing image searches," Red Door's Faris says. "So if you're naming your picture files, include your name and be descriptive. Don't just drop your name everywhere." This includes any video or podcasts you may create, for which Faris also recommends doing a transcript. "Search engines are still pretty reliant on text," he says. "So if you do a video or podcast, it's a really good idea to do a transcript and include it." And if your name doesn't come up naturally within the transcript? "At least put your name in the text at the beginning of the transcript," he recommends.

The importance of responding

Tip 8: Don't take things lying down

As mentioned, the No. 1 way to suppress unflattering information about you on the web is to push it down by generating newer, more positive content. But, Edison insists, if the information is true, it's important to first fess up and take

responsibility. "If they're complaining about something that you did do, then you need to take responsibility for it and, in some way, respond."

And if it's merely someone's opinion, not true, or flat-out libelous?

"If they're just making up stuff and trying to slander your name, then you sort of have to out-create it," she adds. "You've got to just do so many other things that it just kind of buries it."

"If it's in a forum, you have the ability to go in there and post and retort," says Kahlow, who believes it's important to get your side of the story out as soon as possible. "That's why Google Alerts are so important -- so you can see something like that show up."

If posting a response isn't satisfactory, Ryan recommends taking the high road and going directly to the forum administrator and using a "light yet serious approach" to see if you can get him or her to remove the information.

"If it's slanderous, you can still take that professional approach and ask them if they'd retract it," Tawadros says. "If it really is going to have a negative impact, then you could also do the scare tactic and send a nice legal letter and see whether it goes down." However, Tawadros cautions that you really need to assess the risk before sending such a letter. After all, from the slanderer's point of view, "If I already don't like you, I'm probably going to take what you just sent me, post it online, and say, 'Look at this person,' which is just going to make the problem worse," Tawadros says.

"In extreme cases, if there are instances where you're just finding that the results are just dominated by negative information about you, you can start buying search terms and directing traffic to landing pages with the accurate information or the information that you want folks to be seeing about you," Ryan says.

And what about going directly to the search engines for relief?

"Google is most likely not going to give you much of an ear because, if it's content and it's not anything that is illegally posted or pirated, they're going to say, 'We're just a conduit here,'" Kahlow says.

However, the search engines do have specific criteria as to when they'll get involved, such as when personally identifiable information, such as your social security number, is given out illegally.

"In those cases, you can potentially go back and say, 'Look, this needs to be removed,' and hope that they'll do it," Sullivan says. "But that's a pretty rare case when it can happen."

Tawadros offers this parting advice: "I almost think, from a personal perspective, it may be better just to let things die." He suggests that your efforts may be put to better use concentrating on a strategy to keep people from discovering any unflattering information rather than trying to remove it. Namely, by creating fresh, new content you want people to see -- content that will push older content that you don't want people to see further down in the results.

In short, "out with the old and in with the new" should be your mantra when it comes to optimizing for searches of your name. It's now mine, and this article serves as one more chunk of inventory contributing to my own personal brand. I encourage you to Twitter away or post any positive comments you may have about it. I'm hoping they'll help push that pesky Neil Young review, once and for all, down into the bowels of internet obscurity.

Sean P. Egen is a freelance writer.