

## ***Managing Negative Comments on the Web***

Just as you will occasionally encounter someone in your daily activities that will challenge your perspective, the same is eventually going to happen on the Web. In fact, the anonymity of the Web makes this even more likely to occur. In virtually every situation, you need to be prepared to quickly address these unflattering comments about you or your work

Most of these comments are the result of misunderstandings. Although, once in while you will run into someone who likes to throw stones. Regardless of the reason, the prescription is the same.

### **Be the First on the Scene**

It is surprising how many businesses do not take advantage of Google Alerts to monitor their personal Web reputation and that of their business. When you do this, you can be the first on the scene to make an appropriate response. And speed is of the essence when your reputation is at stake.

If you can be the first to address a concern before others start piling on, you can more easily shape future opinions. This is much like being the first one at the scene of the accident. Everyone that follows tends to trust the eye-witness, which can be you if you are actively managing your brand with Google Alerts or other Web tools.

### **Put a Face on Your Business**

To address valid comments well, you need to get personal. This means you have to put a face on your business by clearly presenting your own image, as opposed to hiding behind a logo. This alone minimizes negative comments because people tend to attack companies or institutions, not other people.

When you make comments on blogs or other forums, you will sometimes be asked to sign in with Facebook or Twitter. This procedure uses OpenID to pull in your image, assuming you have properly uploaded it to your social media profiles. Another method is to register an account with Disqus.com. Disqus is a free service that not only inserts your image and contact information when you are commenting, but it also catalogs your comments for future reference.

You will notice that most negative comments on the Web are made by people without an avatar image, or an artificial one, such as a cartoon character. They will be discounted by others, and

you should do the same. Obviously, your focus should be those commenters that are candidly represented.

### **Build a Solid Foundation**

You have earned your reputation, probably over many years, and one little scratch is not going to bring it tumbling down. However, this only works if you have valid proof on the Web. This is one of the many benefits of blogging. Your blog tells your story through the tangible experiences you have had with the many customers you have served over the years.

Reasonable people, and especially your fans, will always weigh this body of knowledge against a solitary comment to draw a reasonable conclusion. Plus, remember that your blog posts are indexed by Google. If a negative comment should arise, it will be surrounded by favorable content for all to see. Also, you can point back to this favorable content in the future should circumstances arise, whether those circumstance happen to be on or off the Web.

### **Diffuse, Clarify, and Illuminate**

When you skillfully address negative comments, it can actually *enhance* your reputation. Commenting on the Web gives you the opportunity to use the situation to reinforce your credibility, and that of your business. Plus, you will learn more about how to shape public perception. With a little bit of luck, you can even turn a naysayer into a fan, or at least an interested follower.

You know your business better than anyone else, and you should use that to diffuse negative comments. Suggest to the commenter that they do not have a complete understanding of the situation. But above all, never be defensive.

Start off your response by thanking them. Why? They are giving you the opportunity to address a concern that others may also have. It also works wonders for diffusing any negative energy. Then affirm their perspective. "*Jeff* (be personal) I can understand how *one* (be indirect) may come to that conclusion if they are not familiar with ...." Now clarify why one could come to that unfounded conclusion, and try to provide documented proof. This allows them to save face. The intelligent person will take the bait and back off.

It can be tempting to prove how much you know or how right you are. However the one that says less is usually viewed more favorably. Brevity is a form of not needing to defend. When you are defensive, you are viewed as an emotional teenager. And regardless of how clever you may think you are, your game will be evident on the social networks because they illuminate everything. Avoid this tactic.

## **Let it Go**

Once everyone feels the topic has been fully exercised, be the first to let it go. Rest your case. Some people love a fight. You are not there to win a battle, but to address what needs to be addressed so that you can get back to your business. There are many people that make a sport of negative commenting. Their tactic is to bait you into an unnecessary fight, and one that will get indexed by Google for everyone to see.

When you have done all you can do, just let it go. We are entering uncharted waters where all of us will be increasingly visible on the Web. Do you all that you can do without compromising your values. Sometimes that isn't enough. All you can do then is gracefully move on. If you follow the steps outlined here and seek the highest ground, you will be fine.