Online Reputation Management

Introduction: Market places have become driven by web users who in effect are becoming the media.

"If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell 6 friends. If you make customers unhappy on the Internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends. If you do build a great experience, customers tell each other about that. Word of mouth is very powerful." said Jeff Bezos, the CEO of the Amazon.com. Your brand, your products, your company and your employees are now the potential subjects of conversations and attacks as well as positive rumors broadcast on the internet. Indeed, any individual is now able to broadcast his personal views easily using simple tools, by circulating his own information or commenting on information published by others.

With the appearance of Web 2.0 media, the web user has become an active player and can create, organize and broadcast content of his or her own. Expressing one's own opinion and relaying it to the widest audience possible is no longer the sole prerogative of journalists and technology buffs. Thanks to the availability of ever simpler and increasingly collaborative tools, every user connected to the net is a potential form of media: users may discuss your company on their blogs, post comments on a social news site (OhMyNews, TPM Café, Digg, Newsvine), take part in a wiki, give their views of your product on a consumer opinion platform (epinions, ConsumerReview), or create a file or page about your services on a social network site (Facebook, MySpace, Friendster), etc.

If a company, organization or local authority decides not to communicate on the net, its customers, users and constituents will often do it for them, effective making them the public voices of companies who remain silent.

Think of your most recent purchases: weren't you tempted to find out what other internet users thought rather than relying exclusively on the company's shiny sales brochure or presentation boasting about their product?

Every business and every individual, therefore, has the potential to become the object of a positive or negative buzz. Rumors, a time-old phenomenon, are now spread on the net at different speeds depending on the individual case. Conversations on 2.0 media need to be carefully analyzed in order to anticipate any possible larger-scale proliferation towards the classic mass media (radio, TV, print media) and halt potentially disparaging remarks about your organization.

There are virtually no rules cast in iron in the world of rumor-spreading on the net: a rumor may spring from a blog and then be picked up by a radio station, or conversely begin on television in a program with a small audience and then be repeated on a multimedia platform (YouTube, Dailymotion) and subsequently viewed by millions. One thing is for sure: traditional media now have to include (or even

incorporate through diversification) new Web 2.0 media to cope more effectively with high speed information creation and circulation.
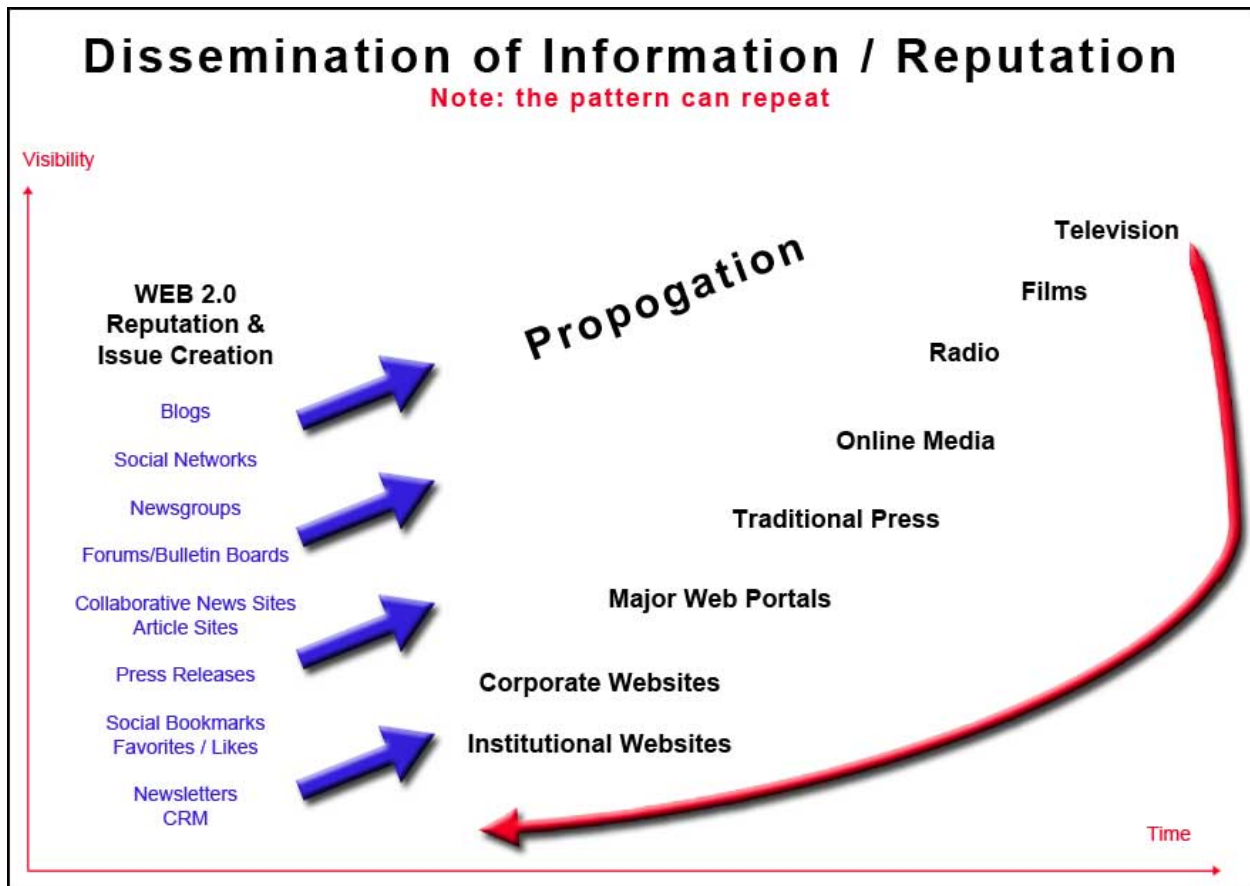
Business and the development of Web 2.0

With the development of Web 2.0 tools2 over the last 4 years, web users have acquired new and original ways of reading, distributing and sharing information.

The term Web 2.0 designates this 2nd generation internet, where the internet user is at the heart of the system: an internet that is more interactive and participatory, where web users can exchange and share information more easily.

The internet user can become a content producer: by writing, adding comments to blog articles and online news stores, or by creating articles in a blog, a Wiki or a collaborative press site.

The user can also organize content: by creating chapters for a wiki or a blog, by uploading photos or videos on a multimedia platform, by adding tags to identify and define content (i.e. insert labels with keywords).

Internet users will also often be circulators of information: by writing their own blogs, by commenting on entries in other blogs or on articles in the press or by publishing photos and videos. They are in fact spreading information of their own choice and to a very wide audience. The content may be anecdotal and inoffensive, or it may be violent, offensive and prejudiced against other people, organizations or companies. Furthermore, information can be propagated and circulated very quickly via RSS feeds, making it very difficult to identify the original source and to remove a damaging article.

Any company or person can be publicly humiliated or laid bare on the internet.

A study published on the American blog 97thFloor showed that 29 of the Fortune 100 companies were the subject of "negative" content, as shown on the first page of results found on Google, when you enter their name as a query on the search engine. Negative results, i.e. the transcription of unfavorable legal decisions for the company or one of its brands, smear campaigns, texts from dissenting sites or stinging remarks from unhappy customers or (former) employees.

Even the most powerful companies don't escape. The web now constitutes the largest worldwide public database, where criticism is permanently archived and cannot be erased. This is one of the major differences with pre-internet rumors which could disappear and be forgotten. At best, rumors on the net become buried in the depths of search engine filing systems, either naturally over time or with the help of specialized companies.

So the net is a platform where you can be discussed in positive or negative terms, that can have very significant and long-lasting impacts.

Typology of the consequences of online reputation management

Consequences of negative buzz

- Products withdrawal
- Drop in shares
- Image deficit

Methodology for managing negative buzz:

Generally speaking, any online reputation crisis management requires an ability to present the company in as favorable a light as possible under the circumstances by demonstrating an open mind and an ability to respond quickly to reputation issues as they arise.

- Confess guilt,

- Recognize company responsibility, right up to board level,
- Explain probable cause,
- Explain actions the company will take to reprimand guilty party,
- Report actions already carried out to compensate the customer.

The consequences of positive buzz

We tend to talk about the net in negative terms and more rarely about what works well, like trains that arrive on time. But the internet today, through buzz and viral marketing strategies, now forms an integral part of full communication.

A buzz orchestrated by agencies and their clients can generate positive feedback. But this can also be achieved through spontaneous buzz, where a company, its brands and its products are "naturally" praised by web users, without any money having been spent on communications campaigns. This kind of spontaneous buzz is often the fruit of a wise mix of minimal communication and brief messages on behalf of the company, leaving web 2.0 users to their own imagination and letting speculation do the rest.

Companies able to generate a very positive buzz through the grapevine effect, thanks to the successful combination of the following factors:

- The advertisement/article/comment/post is effective in terms of both aesthetics and message,
- Is easy to understand without any particular background experience on the subject matter,
- It continues to promote the image of the company, positioning the brand on the desires of clients and potential clients.

The world of real-time conversation: propagating and anticipating buzzes

Web 2.0 tools have generated a new paradigm that allows customers, consumers, patients, politicians, citizens, business companies, leaders, executives, employees and trades-unionists to express themselves freely on the net. They can unite into communities, talk amongst themselves, and exert pressure on other groups. All this sharing and working together happens in real time, independently from the daily publication of newspapers or the ritual of television newscasts.

This permanent flow of conversation is circulated in different ways: it may first appear on a forum or on a blog, be picked up by a magazine, further developed in a TV documentary and then be duplicated on a video platform. This process does not follow any fixed rules that stipulate which media should convey which message, the duration or speed of propagation or distances to be covered. But the stakes remain the same for companies: they need to anticipate any conversation or negative buzz that could harm

their image. This must be done as effectively as possible, before the rumor is developed on all types of media and a "crisis aversion" becomes too difficult.

Transfer of audience from mainstream media to Web 2.0

This new real-time conversation model, is forcing the media to change.

We are seeing a progressive rise in the Web 2.0 media at the expense of more traditional mass media, or mainstream media: namely print media, television and radio.

Unlike traditional media, websites offer many participatory features, which attract an ever larger audience to distribute information such as: blogs, chat groups, forums and RSS feeds. In addition, readers are free to give comments on all the articles. Any posting on a website can germinate into a forum, and it is not uncommon for articles to generate comments in the hundreds or even thousands.

Nowadays it is just as important, if not more so, to investigate the content and form of comments on articles as to read the original written by the journalist.

Web 2.0 functionalities have been developing in the press since 2006: **Time**, the **New York Times,** the **Washington Post** and **Business Week** offer RSS feeds or the option to save to social bookmarks.

Web users as propagators of information

Users who produce content on an increasingly common basis

As illustrated above, users are at the very center of information flow on Web 2.0. No longer just passive readers of internet sites, they play an active role, producing or providing content for wikis, blogs, video platforms and social bookmarks, or writing comments on news sites, with opinions on products and services, or voting online for products and information.

An ever-growing number of sites have a large proportion of their content, or even nearly all of it, produced by users, e.g. comments on a blog, articles on collaborative news sites, videos or photos uploaded on YouTube or Flickr or wiki files.

Through his or her active collaboration in producing content published on the net, each user becomes a "micro-medium" capable of giving an opinion on a brand, a company or an individual, thus building up or pulling down their e-reputation, or at least playing a part in the process.

Consumers, especially web-savvy consumers, expect a brand to be as transparent as possible in its messages. If they think there is no transparency or don't trust the messages, they tend to drop the company's official (information sources and look for other types of sources. Americans are more likely to

believe the opinions of other consumers than messages in classical ads and 61% look for these opinions on the net.

Moreover, Web 2.0 users often look for the views of other consumers before buying a product and say they have frequently decided against buying something because of what they read on the internet.

55% of Web 2.0 users have already posted their views on companies or brands of which they are customers and 20% on companies they think acted badly.

The Internet therefore has become a special source of information because it is multimedia, a communication channel for both the general public, specialists and the press and people appreciate this area for free expression all the more since no technical expertise is required to use Web 2.0 tools.

Propagation is fostered by participation, interwoven connections and conservation

As web users may potentially use multimedia outlets, information is propagated even more easily. The publication of information is no longer limited to an elite or specific community or company, they are no longer the only ones who control and enjoy easy access to communication channels: anyone can now express himself or herself on public media, for better or for worse.

The Internet has two specific features that impact the propagation of information, whether true or false

- **Data conservation**: the net constitutes the largest archive database in the world. Everything that has been written on it remains there (if search engines have indexed the content). As discussed above old information sits alongside new data and may even be displayed to a similar degree.
- **Interwoven connections**: the different formats of the media comprising the net (blogs, forums, social bookmarks, social networks, news sites, video or photo platforms, etc.) are interconnected.

  Content that has been published on a blog may therefore be repeated, commented on or distorted on social bookmarks or on participatory news sites. Content is rarely isolated. Furthermore, RSS feeds spread information very rapidly, meaning that it can be duplicated and appear on many media simultaneously.

Online Rumors

The process of spreading rumors is not new, but electronic rumors grow to unprecedented heights:

- Propagation is faster, due to the speed of the internet, and is no longer linked to the timing of mainstream media (a newspaper's time of publication),

- Propagation is more voluminous: there are a vast number of potential contributors; messages are multiplied into diverse formats and media.

Why did some rumors spread so fast? Several factors can explain this:

- The audience
- The status of the media involved
- The subject matter

Monitoring Online Reputation

Monitoring online reputation and associated buzz

We can understand that monitoring a brand or a company's reputation or an associated buzz means

- Carefully studying a wide range of internet sources: don't fall into the trap of looking only at blogs, or conversely, only at the sites of the main national newspapers.
- Tracking conversations on the net today implies responding to a large number of new methods, which we will explain next.

Identify the really influential sources

There is no point in simply selecting a maximum number of information sources to monitor. You need to focus on the sources "that count" and therefore have to continuously identify the blogs, sites, forums and multimedia platforms that might have genuine influence.

An influential internet source is one whose texts or images are likely to have an impact on its readers and, more importantly, on other web contributors. For example, the more the contents of a news site are read and used further (copied, paraphrased, commented on, analyzed) by other bloggers, the more influential the news site. A blog or website which is widely read but not often exploited by other Web 2.0 contributors will have average influence. A blog mentioning your company that is read only by the author's family and friends will have little influence.

To avoid monitoring sources that do mention the main subject but are not really influential, we suggest you ask the following questions:

- What is this source's direct visibility (audience, positioning in search engines, etc.) and indirect visibility (number of incoming links, number of subscribers to RSS feeds, number of sites or portals that regularly refer to the information posted on this source, etc.) and their orientation?
- How much does the source's audience trust the information?
- How has the source performed in the past in terms of triggering crises, is it a "scoop" source?

Through this preliminary selection, you can eliminate a good number of sources, but you need to constantly rank your sources as many unknown sources become famous overnight by covering some new story or a news item.

How can the influence of a source be evaluated?

Qualitative criteria need to be taken into account, in order not to be misled by various mathematical features of the internet. Any effort to monitor online reputation of necessity requires an analysis to calculate its influence to include studying:

- The audience of sources (when this is known or calculable)
- The source's position within search tools (standard and meta-search engines)
- The source's presence in "Web 2.0" tools (how many people subscribe to the RSS feed of a particular blog or webpage that mentions my company, how often has it been saved to social bookmarks?).
- The number of incoming links: directing users to the article or post that mentions my company, or directing them to the domain name of the blog or site that mentions my company.
- The frequency of site updates.
- The importance and quality of the media that pick up the source's information: if the NY Times refers to information that appears in blog X, it is more influential than if it is referred to in a teenager's blog.
- The average number of comments on a news site, forum or blog.

Account for the vast diversity of sources worldwide

This step is linked to the enormous wealth and variety of sources (websites, databases, blogs, web forums, newsgroups, mailing lists, newsletters, viral mails, social networks, chat groups, photo and video platforms, etc), formats (html, PDF, Word, PowerPoint, Excel, multimedia, etc.), languages – including non-Western languages such as Arabic, Russian, Chinese and Japanese, and different registers used etc. It is essential to master the capacity to monitor many different languages. The web is global. The expansion of blogs means that consumers can talk about your product abroad in their native language. A pharmaceutical company which distributes some of its consumer products in Asia (Japan and Korea especially), for instance, actively monitors Korean blogs. Korea is one of the countries with the most blogs in the world. Furthermore since blogs often comment on the population concerned by the products sold by the laboratory, it is strategically vital to monitor these blogs.

Anticipate buzz propagation

Finally, the last issue is how to identify the "spark" of a crisis in practical terms and in real time.

It is vital to be able to anticipate the development of rumors before they begin to spread like a wild fire in highly visible media.

As we have seen, reputation is no longer based purely on what is said in the mainstream media, but increasingly, and perhaps primarily, on what is communicated on the internet.

Companies need to professionalize their internet intelligence and integrate it in their mainstream media surveillance processes, turn it into a real "management tool" for corporate communication and products.

On the one hand it helps identify "weak signals", influential sources and points of origin in an attempt to prevent and manage risk and potential crises (rumors, badly handled customer complaints, calls to boycott, undermining of HR or PR campaigns) and on the other, it provides a constant watch for biased communicators thus allowing for timely off- and on-line communication strategies adjustments.

To identify the slightest weak signal, companies need to implement "360° monitoring", i.e. track all types of sources and an unlimited number (from blogs to forums, including databases, newsletters and specialized search engines). A buzz may flare up on a blog, a forum or a social network platform and then spread to news sites with large readerships, before being picked up by the television or radio.

There are no fixed rules governing propagation, which is an ongoing process: one appearance on the TV may be repeated on a multimedia platform like DailyMotion thereby archiving the message indefinitely and extending the buzz. Web 2.0 may create a buzz which more traditional media then amplify.

Careful and consistent monitoring of online reputation and its associated buzz is vital.

Methods for monitoring, analyzing and managing crises

To launch "360° intelligence" and conduct analyses on large volumes of data, it is not enough to create a system for the creation of "intelligence": you need to be able to limit monitoring to appropriate alerts regarding sources with real influence and once a certain threshold (in terms of time and volume) of negative criticism has been reached.

Consider the criteria listed below for tracking and analyzing your e-reputation and image on the internet:

1. For the monitoring phase incorporate an effective system of 360^{0} intelligence to include methods offering:

- Exhaustive coverage of all types of sources: all kinds of content and format are tracked, i.e. total coverage of all sources available on the net and of all digitalized hardcopy information.
- Understanding of the relevance of all types of documents (html, PDF, Word, XML, Excel, Power Point, etc.)
- Able to handle a large volume of sources

2. For the analytical phase employ methods which

- Enables you to analyze large volumes of unstructured data by representing them in chart form, making it easier for you to answer the core questions of market intelligence (Who are the most quoted people or subjects? With whom or with which companies / brands am I associated? Where is my company mentioned the most? How are rumors spread about me/my company? And how fast?).
- Can retrace the "chain of influence" i.e. going beyond the evaluation of popularity, the system follows up and analyzes the distribution of information on various internet and mainstream media to chart propagation. It can identify the level of influence, the speed and duration of propagation and the Buzz Point of Origin (BPO).
- Us analytical systems which should enable users to identify the initial distribution channels.

3. For reputation management and managing online "crises" employ systems which

- Help you easily detect information broadcast on the Internet about your company, brand, products, technologies, employees etc.
- Qualifies the information rapidly in terms of visibility and importance to let you know if it will have a major impact on you and if you need to take action.
- After activating the right channels of influence, assesses the impact on the crisis.
- Enables users to manage criteria for triggering crisis-alerts flexibly (can be modified at any moment). The criteria are: The appearance of keywords on certain qualified sources, considered as important (links, ranking and other criteria determined by algorithms...) according to a frequency above a given threshold in terms of volume and time.

  Example: I only want to be alerted if my company is being discussed in relation to sustainable development on 17 sources considered as influential, more then 10 times a week. On the other hand, if my new brand of cosmetics is discussed, I want to be alerted if the information appears on the 5 forums and 12 blogs indicated, more than 5 times a day.

Methods for correcting and promoting your image

Faced with a crisis: act…or do nothing

It is too late, how should you react? If it is too late for risk prevention, you need to act immediately to manage the crises and avoid a negative media buzz. From that point on, your key cards will be openness and dialogue:

Contact web users directly rather than producing an excessively formal press release that is disconnected from the readership.

- Start long-term discussions on forums identified as influential ones for one's industry. This can sometimes be done directly, if the company is credible on the particular subject - while avoiding "the voice of Moscow" – (empty official statements –) but you will probably need to identify and involve people who have favorable opinions of the company. This must be handled deftly and with great finesse if you are to avoid the impression of manipulation: proof, facts, frankness, honesty will pay better in the long term than any attempt at persuasion.
- Open a discussion on the brand's sites or official blogs which were, ideally, created several months earlier in anticipation of potential crisis management.
- It is also important to participate in discussions on forums and external blogs. The keywords are therefore: transparency, an attitude based on listening and explanation rather than attempts to spout out the "raw" truth.
- Last, react promptly to criticism, to nip negative buzz in the bud.

To counter criticism, it is often best to admit your errors, apologize and explain what your company will do to avoid repetition. This is how many other companies have successfully acted in the past.

You can only implement effective corrective actions on the right internet media after tracing the buzz to its sources and assessing the impact of your company's response, using appropriate tools.

In the face of an attack, to avoid the "snow ball" effect as it is sometimes better to do nothing. Many companies have given a boost to the negative buzz themselves by requesting the blog be removed, by threatening to take legal action without first attempting to talk it through. When this happens, negative buzz grows quickly and the company image is damaged.

Make the most of the network to boost your brands and market share

In the modern economy, your Brand is a key asset that often determines the value of your company. Besides its products, know-how and talent, a company's value is based on the reputation of its brand(s), or, to put it another way, the level of trust that the market players have in the company: its customers,

partners, opinion leaders, the financial community, experts in the field, consumer associations and other not-for-profit organizations, as well as recruitment firms and employees themselves.

Henry Ford understood this perfectly a long time ago, when he said "the two most important things in any company do not appear in its balance sheet: its reputation and its people."

In the past, in order to maintain a good reputation, it was enough to launch a good product, (to satisfy your customers), pay out substantial dividends (to keep shareholders happy) and regularly publish press releases to establish the company's dynamism and ambition (to keep the press informed).

With frontiers breaking down and the technological information revolution, companies now find it more difficult to keep their reputations under control. It is no longer enough to have a good product, be profitable and know how to present yourself to the press.

The internet, at the heart of the system, appears as a contributing factor in this loss of control or even as a threat. A rumor (well-founded or not) can come from anywhere or spring up suddenly as if it came out of the air, and tarnish your brand's image practically forever.

A number of companies have adopted a protectionist reflex, carefully avoided participating either directly or indirectly in any conversations about themselves on the web .As if what happened on the net had nothing to do with them.

This attitude had led some companies to disaster and seriously shaken others.

Some brands, on the other hand, have viewed the web's power of propagation as a fantastic opportunity to increase their visibility at a low cost, establish sustainable links with their particular public and extend their specific market influence.

They have understood that their present-day market share is increasingly related to their share in conversations on the net and the power and activity of their online network.