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SEM and Reputation Management

By [Fredrick Marckini](#)

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The term "reputation management," once squarely in the PR domain, is increasingly sneaking into the search engine marketing (SEM) realm. Some SEM firms now include it in their offerings to differentiate themselves from competitors.

Monitoring search results for complaint-speech (sometimes called "flames") involving your brand name or trademarked words is intuitive. If users find a protest site in search results for your brand, they may click the link, and believe what they read. Worse, they may base purchase consideration on the site's content.

Reputation Ruined. Sale Lost.

Protest Web sites often seem credible, even when a complaint is frivolous or unfounded. A site owner may or may not be willing to speak with you to resolve the matter.

Worse, a number of Web sites offer complaint forums. Sites such as the Rip-off Report, Epinions.com, even Edmunds.com have moderated discussion boards where unhappy customers post complaints. Discussion pages from these sites can show up in search results, sometimes near your listings, sometimes on broader, category-defining keyword phrases where you're not found at all.

Imagine: The sole online voice speaking to your prospective customer is someone who hates you.

Amazon.com also allows customers to vent about products they've purchased. Someone who purchased Apple's iPod rails against its "[shoddy](#)" construction (search on "shoddy").

A Google search for "iPod" and "quality" returns a selection of listings Apple would surely prefer we didn't see, including this one in position two (at publication time):

[Shiny Plastic: Ipod Quality Problems](#)

April 15, 2004. **Ipod Quality** Problems. ... He mostly dismissed the reports and said he was confident of the **quality** of the **iPod** minis. ...

And this in position seven (at publication time):

[Lawsuits threatened over iPod, iBook quality | MacNN News](#)

... Lawsuits threatened over **iPod**, iBook **quality** Friday, January 2, 2004 @ 2:10am Several readers note that Reuters (republished by ...

Search Reputation Management Strategy

Search reputation management strategy is simple: Displace the offending search listings with favorable ones and with your own content.

Optimizing a company's primary content -- namely, its own Web site -- is the best place to start. Often, a site has an abundance of nonoptimized pages that can be leveraged, ranging from press releases to product specs, that can quickly rank higher in results than a protest site. Optimizing partner, affiliate, or other content sources (with the partner's cooperation) will usually accomplish the rest of the job.

Assemble a Team

Hire or appoint a team to assist in displacing protest sites. This team should attain high rankings in natural search results. This is the singular skill most necessary to produce the desired result.

Though understanding the importance and nuances of reputation management is valuable, ability and experience in attaining a higher ranking than an offending site must be the primary consideration.

Ensure the team can identify keyword search behavior. Not all offending content is found on searches for your brand. In fact, incendiary remarks can be more harmful in search results on keywords used by shoppers earlier in the buying cycle than those found on a branded search. Complaints can sour customers before they even discover your brand has a desired offering.

Search engine query vocabularies evolve. Be sure your team tracks how search terms emerge and how keyword construction evolves over time. Several years ago, we searched for "cell phones." Today, millions search "mobile phones."

Don't Forget Paid Search Advertising

Companies' brand reputation can be damaged in search advertisements, too.

Though major search engines don't allow advertisers to infringe on trademarked terms in search text ads, a surprising number sneak by.

Recently, a company discovered a competitor advertising on its trademarked term and using the term as the title of a text ad in Google AdWords. Although Google prohibits such use, trademark holders must often bring offenses to Google's attention. In this case, Google was alerted and the competitor was put on notice of the violation. The ad was taken down within days.

Be sure your team has the tools to track pay-per-click (PPC) search ads in an automated fashion. Unlike natural search results, PPC ads change by time of day. Some disappear as budgets expire. PPC ads from your competitors or trademark infringers are much more transient. They appear on some searches, not for others. They disappear on the weekends or evenings, and reappear during certain hours.

Final Analysis

Search reputation management involves two primary components:

- Identify offending content.
- Render offending content harmless by displacing it from top search matches.

Be sure your partner or in-house team can accomplish the second part. Otherwise, they'll diagnose the ill but won't be able to cure it.

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