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## Scrub-a-dub-Web

**Online reputation-management companies can wash away all that Google-able embarrassment and negativity from your profile. It's high-tech PR.**

By Lini S. Kadaba  
For The Inquirer

For 20 years, the Center City psychotherapist had treated his clients' anxiety, fear, and depression, and built a healthy practice along the way.

Then in late 2006 he noticed a precipitous drop in new patients. At a suggestion, he Googled himself and made a devastating discovery: The top search hits questioned his credentials because he had earned a distance-learning doctorate from an institution that was later shuttered. Essentially, a popular consumer health blogger had deemed him a quack.

"I just couldn't believe it," said the licensed therapist, who is 71 now. "I just felt powerless. I didn't know what to do."

Enter ReputationDefender. For a few hundred dollars, the California-based company scrubbed clean the therapist's badly smudged Internet profile. And within weeks, a search of his name delivered hits - bios and even a blog entry - that characterized him as a respected mental-health professional. (It worked so well, he did not want his name used in this article. To do so would revive the negative information that once threatened his livelihood.)

In an age of tell-all status updates, real-time video feeds, and Everyman bloggers with caustic opinions, the cyber-reputations of individuals and businesses - really the only image that counts these days - are constantly in danger of attack, according to Internet profile experts. As a result, in the last three years, the business of online reputation management has flourished. Even parents of college applicants are eager to dispose of those Facebook pictures before admissions officers discover them.

"It's like antivirus protection for your life," said Michael Fertik, who was at the leading edge of the fledgling industry when he launched ReputationDefender in October 2006. Companies such as ReputationDefender and Reputation Hawk promote themselves as the superheroes of the Internet, often with names to match.

"Everybody was being analyzed, digitized, and compromised," Fertik said. "I set out on a course to fix that."

For fees ranging from a few dollars to a few thousand dollars a month, reputation-management businesses track a client's digital dossier and then take steps to repair negative impressions. Besides asking websites to remove the offending items (which seldom succeeds), the companies post a barrage of positive content - websites, reviews, news releases, blogs, pseudo news stories - and use the wizardry of search-engine optimization to "push down" negative material so it ends up

on the latter pages of an online search. The assumption is that most people rarely look beyond Page 2 of a search result.

"It's not about what you do. It's what everybody else does," said Fertik, who coauthored this year's *Wild West 2.0: How to Protect and Restore Your Online Reputation on the Untamed Social Frontier*. "You have been opted in, whether you like it or not."

Even ReputationDefender has had to defend itself from negative blasts on sites such as [www.scam.com](http://www.scam.com). Because nothing stays in Vegas anymore, sooner or later we all may need a reputation fix. It's all part of a permanent virtual record broadcast to the world - and no doubt re-Tweeted.

"I call the generation growing up today Generation Google," said Daniel Solove, a George Washington University law professor and author of *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet*. "This is the first generation that a lot of fragments of their lives are available on Google searches. Things happened in college or high school or middle school that used to be forgotten or known just by a few people that are now captured and put online and known around the world."

One infamous example is the so-called Star Wars Kid. As a teen, Canadian high schooler Ghyslain Raza made a video of himself awkwardly swinging a golf-ball retriever like a light saber. The tape was later discovered by another student, who showed it to a friend. That student made an electronic file that was sent to classmates. Soon, a fourth student uploaded the file to the Internet, where it went viral. Remixes set the action to music and added light effects.

The boy was harassed by classmates and became the butt of jokes around the globe. He sought psychiatric care. All this happened in late 2002 through early 2003, but YouTube continues to feature a clip that has counted nearly 20 million views. "If he runs for president, he's going to be known as the Star Wars Kid," Solove said.

Even if he's less ambitious, he likely will face challenges.

In a Microsoft-commissioned survey titled "Online Reputation in a Connected World" and released this year, 70 percent of the 275 U.S. recruiters and human resources professionals surveyed said they had rejected candidates based on information found online. Most went well beyond Google, searching social networks (63 percent), photo and video sharing sites (59 percent), and Twitter and other news-sharing sites (41 percent).

Given that reality and an especially tight job market, some individuals are taking a super-proactive approach - hiring rep managers to scan the Web for information to see what's out there and, as an insurance policy, add positive content. This year, Syracuse University offered its graduating seniors a six-month membership to Brand-Yourself.com, an Internet reputation-management company focused on social media promotion and started by Syracuse students in 2009.

But first a person has to get into college. According to a 2009 report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, about one-fourth of the 479 higher-ed institutions surveyed said their admissions officers inspected social networks and used search engines to find information on prospective students.

"I hear personally stories every day how this has impacted students," said Katie Koestner, executive director of Wayne-based Campus Outreach Services, a not-for-profit that provides educational outreach on student wellness and risks.

On this day, she has learned of a teen who was expelled from a selective private school for filming sexual behavior at a party that was electronically shared. "Most teenagers or young adults think, 'No one will ever find my stuff.' That's just a gambling game," she said. "Your digital dossier is typed out with every button you push. It will be aggregated into who you are."

Koestner tours the region and the country speaking on risky behavior. Increasingly, online posts and their pitfalls rank next to the dangers of alcohol and drugs or date rape.

"When you've had a bad day, pull out the old-fashioned diary and write about it," she said. "Take a walk. Call the person and talk to them, but not through Skype."

Students who lose college scholarships because of party photos may capture the media's attention, but it is businesses, both large and small, that are discovering what's truly at stake when their online reputation falters.

After P. Michael Schelkun, a dentist, physician, and oral surgeon, settled a lawsuit against a former business partner, anonymous negative comments about his Warminster-based practice started appearing online. He signed a yearlong, \$3,000 contract with Miles Technologies in Moorestown to post raves sent in by actual satisfied patients to doctor review sites. The company also worked on search-engine optimization and the design of the dental practice's website. "It was well worth it," he said of the expense.

In a highly publicized instance, Sue Scheff, 48, of Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., who runs a resource-referral service for troubled teens, posted critical comments about an alternative school her daughter attended. She was sued for Internet defamation but won the case. Afterward, she was attacked online as a "fraud" and "con artist" by another parent affiliated with the school, and, as a result, her business declined. She sued the woman and in 2006 won \$11.3 million- a judgment at the time considered the largest over Internet postings.

But the scurrilous comments still lived on the Web, "one of the largest tattoo machines out there," Scheff said.

She hired ReputationDefender. "My lawyer vindicated me in court," Scheff said of the big win, which she has chronicled in her newly released book *Google Bomb*. "But [Fertik] gave me my life back." The company created an array of content, including as many as 100 blogs with URLs that use her name in different combinations and touted information articles. "I don't keep up with all of them."

Reputations are saved, but do these businesses deserve them? Did Scheff earn her improved status? Is the psychotherapist really respected? Is this any different from the old-fashioned PR that a Toyota or a BP practices after suffering a beating? (ReputationDefender's policies exclude customers accused of child abuse or convicted of major or violent crimes.)

John Bialous, chief operating officer at Miles Technologies, said his company gives small- to mid-sized businesses a fighting chance. Disgruntled customers can blast information to the online masses. "Positive information can get out to the masses too," he said. But, he allowed, "if a company is bad, reputation management is not going to change that."

William Cowen, coordinator of the public relations program at Villanova University, said profile cleanup crews are essentially "strategic communications firms. What they do is rooted in persuasion and public opinion. They're there to create an opinion and solidify it, or change an opinion and solidify it."

Until the law says otherwise, it's all fair and legitimate commerce, he said.

Solove, the George Washington University law professor, agreed that tort law was "slow to change" and had not caught up with the Internet's impact.

Meanwhile, he said, the message to be stressed, by parents, by society, and by the online community, is that "with power comes responsibility."

The Internet mantra is "share, share, share," Solove said. "We need to push back. There are consequences."

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