



Plastic People

With the internet enabling individuals and brands to be more visible than ever before, the face we present to the world becomes increasingly important, says Gwyneth Holland. However, our virtual appearance is now nipped, tucked and airbrushed as we attempt to perfect our personal brands for the virtual audience of peers, employers and consumers.

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ID-ME

The internet was originally built on anonymity, but it's increasingly becoming an identity engine. Kim Cameron, Identity and Access Architect at Microsoft, has said that, 'Identity was the missing layer of the internet'. Identity is now the only layer that matters, whether you're a Rolodex Teen or a global überbrand.

The rush to embrace the social aspects of Web 2.0 has enabled individuals to create brands for themselves, with profile pages, blogs and video sites to promote their me-brand. According to a recent Ofcom survey, '51% of adults with broadband access at home had accessed online video clips with 26% saying they did this weekly. Some 43% of adults with broadband at home had uploaded images while 15% had uploaded video content at least once.'

'Individuals have always had brands, but their audience was limited to their colleagues, friends and family. Now, thanks to the internet, they have a global audience', says Andy Beal, co-author of *Radically Transparent: Monitoring and Managing Reputations Online*.

Indeed, social media such as social networking sites have rekindled interest in the internet as something more than a brand clearinghouse. Instead, it offers creativity, visibility and a way to connect. A recent study by The Future Laboratory for MySpace found that 18-to-24-year-olds prefer to spend their free time on social networking sites (45%) rather than talking on their mobiles (4%).

Social networking is so popular that people spend more time on these sorts of sites than any other. In 2007 the average visit length to the top 20 social networking sites was 25 minutes 27 seconds, compared to 10 minutes two seconds for other types of websites.

WATCHING ME, WATCHING YOU

Peter Bradwell, researcher for independent think-tank Demos, comments, 'We live in a surveillance society. We're watched in more areas than ever before, but there is also an increased need to be seen.'

Individuals are relishing the opportunity to explore and exaggerate different parts of their personality, to create an online image that is removed from their offline image.

The recent 'FYI: The new politics of personal information' report by Demos found that many users' online personalities were exaggerated extensions of their offline ones: 'Social networking sites allowed these people a degree of detachment from their offline lives to portray an alternative version of their identity.'

'A person's online image no longer needs to relate to their offline image', says Bradwell, co-author of the Demos report. 'The internet is a medium giving people tools to develop different parts of themselves.'

The web is becoming an identity engine

Individuals and brands alike now have a global audience

Social media such as social networking sites have rekindled interest in the internet as something more than a brand clearinghouse

Individuals are relishing the opportunity to create an online image that is far removed from their offline image and to update it frequently

For 18-24-year-old social networkers, photographs are the preferred mode of expression, making perfect images essential

Image manipulation is becoming increasingly important as digital natives realise the size of their audience

There are early signs of the less positive effects of being too open online: users have no control over who sees their online material

38% of internet users say they have taken steps to limit the amount of online information that is available about them

This shift in controlling online image is giving rise to a whole new industry: Online Reputation Management (ORM)

ORM aims to perfect the online images of individuals, brands and celebrities

It boosts positive coverage, maximises interest, and buries negative references

ORM is developing rapidly as reputation management becomes an increasingly important aspect of brand PR



'We're in a more changeable environment, and the reference points for identity are constantly changing. There's more of a need to perform.'

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In the most extreme examples, online images can be completely different, secret characters like the everyday superheroes such as the UK's Angle Grinder Man and New York's Direction Man (who remove wheel clamps and offer directions to lost pedestrians, respectively), or Slash/Slasher Paul Griffiths, a MySpace celebrity who is virtually unknown in the offline world.

PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Constantly being on show drives young people to update their image faster to keep themselves fresh, dubbed the 'Rolodex Teens' by The Future Laboratory. 'We're in a more changeable environment, and the reference points for identity are constantly changing,' says Bradwell. 'There's more of a need to perform.'

These teenagers have an acute understanding of life in front of the lens, partly due to the proliferation of celebrity culture but mainly to the democratisation of technology. Everyone has a camera on their phone and digital photography is also more accessible as prices of point-and-shoot cameras drop.

The MySpace survey found that for 18-to-24-year-old social networkers, photographs are recognised as the preferred mode of expression, making perfect images essential to promoting your me-brand. Looking as attractive as possible can boost your online popularity, according to a recent study by Michigan State University. The researchers found that Facebook users who had posts on their wall from attractive friends were considered to be significantly better looking than people who had postings from unattractive friends.

PRO-AM AIRBRUSHING

As a result, we are seeing the rise of pro-am image manipulation tools that even photo-Luddites could use.

To ensure that profile pictures and photo albums are perfect, Snapmania Tourist Remover will edit commoners and interlopers out of photographs, while Microsoft's GroupShot beta program helps you create a perfect photo out of a series of group photos. The program selects your favourite parts in each shot of the series to automatically build a perfect composite image.

Shai Avidan and Ariel Shamir, formerly researchers at Mitsubishi Electric Research Labs, have created an algorithm called Seam Carving that can resize images without distorting figures or objects. The Seam Carving program finds the least interesting path in a photo - one with the least changes in colour and gradation - and duplicates or deletes it, expanding sections of the landscape, or deleting certain sections so that a cropped image can fit in more information.

There are also services such as Nip Tuck My Photo springing up, which can alter and airbrush digital images. The company boasts that, 'Whether for family portraits or professional & glamour portfolios, sending to dating sites or just personal gifts we can enhance, enlarge, airbrush, crop and re-touch your prints into works of art, bringing out the 'model' you that's been hiding inside'.

In-camera tweaking technologies are also on the rise, from HP's digital camera 'slimming' facility, to Sony's Happy Face Retouch feature, which literally turns a frown upside down.





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Mary Madden, co-author of the *Digital Footprints* report by Pew Internet & American Life Project

IMAGE MANIPULATION

This kind of personal and visual image manipulation is becoming increasingly important as digital natives realise the size of their audience. With over 100m blogs, 200m social networkers and 1.4bn internet users around the world, the online audience is enormous, as are the number of other personalities to compete with.

While many young people have been liberated by the ability to express themselves online, there are early signs of the effects of being too open about yourself. ‘The cumulative traces of our online activity are more visible in the age of Web 2.0,’ says Mary Madden, co-author of the Pew Internet & American Life Project’s *Digital Footprints* report. ‘The more content we voluntarily contribute to the public or semi-public corners of the Web, the more we become not only findable, but knowable.’ The report found that 53% of adult internet users have looked for information connected to family and friends, romantic interests and business colleagues.

‘People have been wrapped up in the thrill of the medium,’ says Beal. The potential is for millions of people to see images, blogs and other postings about you – but users have no control over who will see their profiles, and how it could affect them.

‘There’s no doubt that there has been an explosion in people being open about their lives, but they are becoming more aware of the impact of that openness. As a result, many people are keeping their profiles in place, but editing them a lot more closely to foil both fraudsters and employers,’ says Nick Thompson, Solutions Development Director at Ceridian, one of the world’s largest HR service providers.

OPEN SEASON

In education and employment, how people choose to represent themselves online can have far-reaching consequences. In 2007, Oxford University graduates were fined more than £10,000 for the disruption caused by their post-exam celebrations, based on information that college proctors gathered from their Facebook pages. Students at a Toronto school were banned from a school trip after defamatory remarks about teachers were found on the students’ profiles, while Miss New Jersey, Amy Polumbo, was blackmailed over photos on her Facebook page that could damage her crown and squeaky-clean reputation.

According to a YouGov report, one in five employers have searched for and found personal information about job candidates on the internet; 59% say it influenced their recruitment decision. Indeed, a quarter have actually rejected applicants based on information found online.

‘The basic rule of thumb is that people shouldn’t post anything on their profiles that they wouldn’t want their parents to see,’ says Thompson. After all, everyone has skeletons in their closet. Social media just makes them easier to find.

LIMITING ACCESS

Some 23% of 18-24 year olds say they have been embarrassed by finding ‘incriminating’ photos and video clips online, according to the MySpace survey. This new realisation of the problems of over-sharing is leading individuals to limit the amount of information that people can see about them – a seismic shift in the progress of Web 2.0, which blossomed from people’s need for sharing and transparency.

‘The drive to manipulate our identities is about control,’ says Bradwell. ‘People have willingly given away so much information about themselves, without thinking who ultimately gets to see it. They aren’t willing to shut down their social networking profiles, but we are seeing people starting to restrict access to their Facebook pages, for example.’

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 38% of internet users say they have taken steps to limit the amount of online information that is available about them. ‘Social media is a juggernaut – people won’t stop using it,’ says Beal, ‘but they will begin to realise who else might see their posts.’

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

It is this shift in controlling your online image that is giving rise to a whole new industry – Online Reputation Management (ORM) – that aims to perfect the online image of private individuals, blue-chip brands and even celebrities. ‘Individuals and businesses are starting to realise that they can be affected by the global interaction of the internet without even knowing it,’ says Nancy Williams, Managing Director of online reputation management specialists Tiger Two.



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ORM, SEO, OMG!

Services like International Reputation Management, Naymz.com, Reputation Defender, Distilled and Tiger Two are booming, as individuals, especially those in the public eye such as politicians, CEOs and celebrities, realise the importance of a pristine online image. And now brands too, are beginning to place more importance on ORM.

These services manipulate the transparency on which the internet was built in order to create the optimum image for individuals and brands. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the ‘entry level’ approach to boosting brand image, using algorithms to maximise links to brand pages, so that they come up top in Google searches.

ORM takes this a step further, by boosting the amount of positive coverage of a brand or individual, and maximising the number of people talking about them. Often this is done by creating more links between positive discussion and a brand or individual’s site, but sometimes it’s as simple as setting up a blog or social networking profile so that the client can have their say. Costs can range from £10 a month for a basic monitoring programme for an individual, to £300k a year for a major brand. The prices may seem steep, but they’re a drop in the ocean for marketing and advertising budgets, and as Beal comments, ‘a company’s entire advertising and marketing spend can be undone by a single blogger’.

For personal brands, such as celebrities, a pristine online image is especially important, and has become a key part of any PR offensive. ORM drowns out bad coverage by maximising links to good coverage, as Kate Moss is believed to have done in the wake of the ‘Cocaine Kate’ scandal that threatened to destroy her career. Now, searches under Moss’s name bring up only positive coverage in the first few pages, and her career is thriving.

BRAND AWARENESS

CEOs and celebrities may have led the ORM charge, but it is brands that are taking it to the next level. ‘It’s becoming more important for brands to look after their online image, as potential customers will now check out a brand online first, before they make any purchasing decisions’, says Williams. ‘And now that advertising holds less sway with consumers, their online presence is incredibly important.’

According to The Future Laboratory’s Brand Personality Register, the internet is the most important place for people to find out about brands and products, with 62% of respondents saying they look here for brand information.

However, it’s not the brand’s own site that consumers are going to – it’s the wealth of review sites, product blogs and consumer ratings that influence purchasing decisions. ‘Brands can no longer just have a site to say what they have to and try to sell some product,’ says Williams. ‘They need a greater

presence, and looking after their online presence is insurance against anything bad happening.’

Even the world’s biggest brands are not immune to the power of individual comment on the web. For example, a Google search for retail giant Wal-Mart comes up with WalMartWatch.com on the first page, a US campaign ‘to reveal the harmful impact of Wal-Mart on American families and demand reform of their business practices’, while Googling the Coca-Cola corporation brings up brand boycott sites and an entry on War On Want, looking at the brand’s dubious ethical record. A McDonald’s search turns up links for McDonald’s Workers Resistance, which aims to fight exploitation by the fast food industry, and Nike’s first page of results features the site for a boycott campaign. Given that most web searches don’t go beyond the first or second page of results, getting brand image right upfront is paramount.

POSTMODERN PR

ORM often works as crisis management for those who have been unprepared for the onslaught of online comment. For these image perfectors, the first step is to find out what has caused the problem and what could happen in the future as a result. In many cases, the problem is down to poor product quality, or unethical brand behaviour.

‘On one hand people want to be transparent, but on the other hand, single mistakes should not leave a permanent scar on your online record. It’s a chance to display the positive part of yourself.’

Andy Beal, co-author of Radically Transparent: Monitoring and Managing Reputations Online

Of course, ORM is not just concerned with improving brand perception, it’s also about increasing the brand or individual’s profile, and boosting sales. ORM services such as Tiger Two will identify who is the audience for the brand’s shiny new reputation, whether it’s the brand’s detractors and dissatisfied customers, or those for whom the brand isn’t even on their radar.

‘We hope to achieve a viral effect, which works because people talk to each other, says Williams. ‘You have to enable discussion. As a result, the negative information gets shoved down the ratings.’

ORM may seem like a nefarious practice in a world where brands are encouraged, nay, forced to be transparent about their business dealings, but ‘we’re not here to cover up iniquities,’ says Beal. ‘We want to educate people as well. On one hand people want to be transparent, but on the other hand, single mistakes should not leave a permanent scar on your online record. It’s a chance to display the positive part of yourself.’

IN THE LOOP

ORM practitioners claim that rather than misrepresenting a brand’s image, ORM practices such as setting up blogs, messageboards and ‘feedback loops’ between the brand and its consumers actually improve a brand’s relationship with its customers. ‘ORM means engaging customers, monitoring what’s said and opening a dialogue with them,’ says Beal, which is what many brand strategists have been exhorting brands to do in the first place.

‘If the negative stuff is coming from consumers, then the first action is to address their issues – this helps to build advocates for your brand, says Williams. ‘If that doesn’t work, you need to build your own advocates. If there’s a group that thinks badly of you, there’s likely to be an equally large group who think well of you.’

Most ORM companies stress that you can’t eliminate or erase bad coverage, you can only push the bad stuff down to the fourth or fifth page, ‘which is effectively burying it as most people don’t search beyond the second page,’ says Williams

As with teens tweaking photos and creating exaggerated me-brands, there is a tension between telling the truth, and wanting to make yourself look good. But presenting yourself in a positive light on the internet is the same as dressing up smart to go out, claims Beal. ‘It’s about putting your best foot forward.’

FUTURE REP

Although ORM is a new discipline, the industry is developing quickly. Reputation management is becoming an increasingly important part of brand PR, and will increasingly be run from within companies. There are even new services springing up, which claim to automate ORM, using automatic tools to monitor the company’s presence, or automating the posting of comments or articles. ‘I don’t think you can get a machine to do it,’ says Williams, ‘people equate ORM with SEO, which is technical. The target audience of SEO is Google. The target of ORM is people, so it needs to have real people working on it.’

Resources

Radically Transparent: Monitoring and Managing Reputations Online by Andy Beal and Judy Strauss, Sybex (2008)

FYI: The New Politics of Personal Information, Demos, December 2007

Angle Grinder Man:
www.myspace.com/anglegrinderman

Paul Griffiths: www.myspace.com/soundfxandoverdramatics

Snap Mania:
www.snapmania.com/info/en/trm

Microsoft’s GroupShot beta program:
www.research.microsoft.com/projects/GroupShot/

Seam Carving: www.seamcarving.com

NipTuckMyPhoto:
www.niptuckmyphoto.com

‘The role of friends’ behavior on evaluations of individuals’ Facebook profiles: Are we known by the company we keep?’ **Human Communication Research**, 34, Walther, J. B., Van Der Heide, B., Kim, S., Westerman, D., & Tong, S. T. (2008).

‘Digital Footprints: Online identity management and search in the age of transparency’, **The Pew Internet & American Life Project**, December 2007

International Reputation Management:
www.reputationinsurance.com

Reputation Defender:
www.reputationdefender.com

Distilled: www.distilled.co.uk

Tiger Two: www.tigertwo.co.uk



VIEWPOINTVIEW

Online reputation and impression management are set to become major new areas of concern for brands and those who manage and promote them. This isn't merely a process of image manipulation (although as we have seen, it can be) but about manicuring and maintaining your brand's online reputation in a way that is both fair and honest.

It is also about developing a trustworthy online dialogue with your customer in a way that encourages them to become your staunchest critics and guardians.

This should not be seen as online brand manipulation, or online brandwashing (which we believe many companies advertising their services in this area are doing), but rather about assiduous and careful monitoring of online activity with a view to putting things right and answering critics in a fair, open and transparent way.

This is especially important at a time when consumers tell us their first ports of call for information on a brand, product or service are friends, then the internet. Reputation, on and offline, is all, as Othello would undoubtedly tell us. Just as we should be concerned with how our own sites represent us, we should pay attention to how we're represented by others.

But before attempting to condemn or erase their criticism, ask yourself this. Is any of it legitimate, is any of it valid (or indeed useful), and is it possible to engage critics in a positive, useful and collaborative dialogue?

Dell – perhaps not known for its obvious creativity – has of late engaged in a social networking initiative that has seen some of its staunchest critics become its keenest fans and, indeed, designers, as the company works with them to make the products even more market friendly and customer specific.

Similarly, Wal-Mart regularly taps into sites that criticise the brand to pick up tips and strategies it can use to improve its public standing. Reputation may be everything, but when it is being tarnished perhaps it is worth listening before striking, to enter into dialogue before trying to silence the voices of dissent. On the other hand, the internet has become the soapbox for the unfair carper forever keen to bend the ear of whoever will listen. Unreasonable criticism must also be met with a reasonable, strategic and comprehensive response. This is what good online impression management can do: not only help to understand the reasonable critic, but likewise help disarm the lunatic fringe. And on the internet, as brands are discovering, there are plenty of these. So watch, listen, learn, engage and act.