

Google Yourself—And Enjoy It

A host of new companies are offering to polish and shine reputations online.

By [Lorraine Ali](#)

NEWSWEEK

Updated: 1:40 PM ET Feb 9, 2008

A Wall Street hopeful we'll call John didn't expect to see much when he Googled his name, but right there, at the top of the page, was an old campus news blog detailing a bar brawl in which John was arrested. Though accurate, the story was posted before charges against the otherwise model student were dropped. Now the five-year-old blog is embedded in cyberspace, with no follow-up piece to clear his name. "It's the first thing that pops up," says John, 25. "If potential employers type in my name, they're going to hire the other guy."

Clearly, you no longer have to be a paparazzi-plagued star to be misrepresented on a worldwide stage. Anyone can say anything online (it's estimated that 1.6 million blog posts are created daily), and dozens of new gadgets, as well as more-powerful search engines, give us easy access to all those indiscriminate bits of information. This convenient yet terrifying reality has created a whole new brand of damage control: Internet reputation repair. ReputationHawk out of Baton Rouge, La.; Washington, D.C.'s International Reputation Management; ReputationDefender in northern California, and Los Angeles's Done! SEO specialize in managing your online legacy, and business is booming. "Anyone can have their image tarnished on the Internet, no matter how good a person they are," says Jeff Henderson of Done! SEO, a search-engine optimization company that claims business increased tenfold when it introduced reputation-management services in 2006. "We're the next generation of public relations. From here on out, you need to own your first few Google pages."

For those of us who still don't know the difference between megabytes and RAM, "owning" online search results seems as elusive as harnessing vapor. But these rep agents for hire can push offending material down off the first couple of pages—which is a page beyond where most users venture. They do it by creating hundreds, even thousands, of links between third-party Web sites and positive content about you or your business. The labor-intensive service runs anywhere from \$4,000 to \$30,000, and it takes about six months to see all those negative hits clear off the first page. There are no guarantees, but according to John, who went with Done! SEO in November, "things are already moving in a better direction."

ReputationDefender of Menlo Park, Calif., offers a less-expensive and less-complicated service: it hunts down the host of the offending material and asks that the information be removed. Clients say sites such as MySpace have complied by pulling down defaming pages, though MySpace did not confirm or deny the claims and says it has no specific policy regarding reputation-repair services. ReputationDefender's services cost about \$30 per item, plus a small monthly monitoring fee; the company, which started in 2006, earned \$2 million in revenue its first year. While it is cheaper, this method has left clients vulnerable to more-virulent cyber attacks by the very bloggers they set out to silence.

Despite the risk, there just aren't a lot of other options when it comes to clearing your name online. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 provides immunity to sites so the hosts are not responsible for what users post there, and it's often difficult, if not impossible, to track down the anonymous culprits behind the offending material. And even if the libelous or defaming posts come from the host himself, it can be costly to drag these cases into court.

Reputation repairmen may be more effective in cyberspace than attorneys, but how can we be sure they're using their powers for good rather than evil? Some bad reputations are well deserved. Chris Martin, founder of ReputationHawk, says he draws the line if burying information would cause harm to others. "We research each case and turn down more clients

than we take on," says Martin. "Some people have made their bed and need to sleep in it."

Goliaths such as Google are aware that these online PR services are working the search engine's algorithms for more-positive page ranking. "If a person uses manipulative techniques to get this positive content to rank highly, we may take action on it," says Adam Lasnik, search evangelist at Google. According to Lasnik, Google has removed pages after its guidelines were violated. "But there's no problem in creating positive content to combat negative content, if done within the guidelines."

The reputation-repair industry is already looking toward the next step in image control: forging your own online legacy before someone else does. "We're now encouraging a proactive approach, building a wall of positive content so if negative stuff comes along, it has a harder time rising to the top," says International Reputation Management's Nino Kader. This means publicizing your own positive news—awards, community service, school honors—to pre-empt bad news.

But in the end, should our online reputations really matter, when we're all now subject to the whims of search engines and the mood swings of anonymous bloggers? "I shouldn't care what others think," says John. "But do you know anyone who can honestly say they don't care what's said about them? I didn't think so."

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/109612>

© Newsweek Mag