

strategies

Protect your good name online

Your most valuable asset—your reputation—could be under attack.

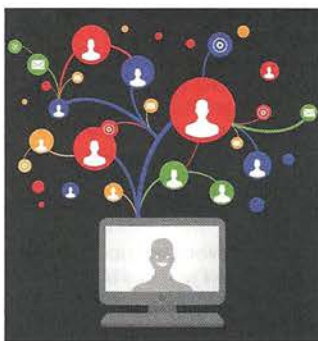
Embarrassing photos. Youthful indiscretions. Unguarded comments. In a world where everyone can be—and is being—Googled by everyone else, the past can come back to bite you like never before.

If you're searching for a new job or applying to a program to further your education, someone in that process is likely to investigate you over the Internet. And if you're a self-employed professional or small-business person, technology now serves up user reviews about you even to people who aren't looking for them.

Positive information, of course, can open doors, but negative views might keep them shut. One consultant, worried about a bad critique that popped up when he searched his name, spent \$1,000 for help removing it. You can preserve and protect your online reputation for a lot less—but not if you hide offline like a hermit. You have to get in the game. Here's how:

1. Google yourself. Start by looking for your own name on that search engine as well as on Bing.com and Yahoo.com. In the Internet age, you should regularly keep tabs on what's being said about you. You can even automate this chore. Go to google.com/alerts to set up a daily, weekly, or as-new-things-pop-up scan of your name. The results will be e-mailed to you.

2. Post your own profiles online. This will quickly polish your online reputation, because search-engine algorithms tend to push your own positive online disclosures to the top of search results. That pushes negatives lower. Get your name and profile out there by signing up with several key social-media sites. Your profile page on LinkedIn.com, essential to anyone employed or looking for a job, will zoom to the No. 1 spot in search results. If you create a YouTube.com profile page, that will probably climb to No. 2 thanks to new blended text-image-video search techniques. Those and Facebook.com, Twitter.



com, and Google+ will help fill up page 1 of a Google search, which “89 percent of people never look beyond,” says William Arruda, founder and president of Reach Personal Branding, which helps professionals manage their business reputations.

3. Buy the Web address of your own name. Do this even if you don't intend to launch a website. That prevents someone else—say, an evil ex-spouse—from getting it. (Shop at a domain-name registry service like GoDaddy.com or NetworkSolutions.com.) You can also create your own websites at personal portals like About.me and Flavors.me (no “.com” extension).

4. Create positive content. Don't be intimidated by the need to fill up pages on all those sites. Although more content creation is better than less, you can choose

your own pace. “A lot of people establish a bio on Twitter but never actually tweet, because the bio itself will come up high in searches,” says Shannon Wilkinson, founder and chief executive officer of Reputation Communications, which works with businesses, philanthropies, and politicians. Or you can curate your own content. If you read an article online that's meaningful to you, write a one-sentence description and send the link to your friends. Voila! Content discoverable in a Web search.

5. If you're really gung ho, start a blog. The easiest way is on a hosted blog site like Blogger.com, Squarespace.com, TypePad.com, or WordPress.com.

6. Take down bad content. The previous steps should go a long way toward burying bad news. But if you think that more action is required, start by contacting your Facebook blabbermouth or website tormentor (find the site owner's or administrator's contact information on Whois.com) and ask that the information be removed, says Bennet Kelley, attorney and founder of InternetLawCenter.net, a Los Angeles law firm. Appeal to the humanity of your nemesis. If that doesn't work, Kelley advises that you attack the problem as a violation of law, regulation, or hosting platform policy—which ever may apply. Finally, a cease and desist letter from an attorney can be a powerful persuader. It can cost \$750 to \$2,000, but that's still cheaper than your other option: a lawsuit. \$