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From Mocking To Hacking: How To Protect Your Digital Reputation

By Shannon M. Wilkinson

Online reputation management (ORM) is the buzz phrase of the moment. It is also a booming industry. ORM entails monitoring, and controlling where possible, the publicly available information about you on the Internet.

Everyone can benefit from ORM. But VIPs – celebrities, industry leaders and such public figures as politicians and philanthropists – face special challenges in managing their digital footprints. With the release of the 2014 Forbes World's Billionaires list, this is a timely moment to explore why.

VIPs a Target for Hacking, Parody Sites

None of us has complete privacy online, and no one has complete control over the information that appears about them. But VIPs face more pervasive threats to their privacy, and these threats are more likely to impact their physical security. It also makes them more of a target for hacking, phishing and other invasions of their personal cyberspace.

These invasions can range from parody websites to Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms that mock them or pretend to be them. (Donald Trump recently won a cybersquatting lawsuit over four such sites.)

A VIP's opponents can overwhelm the Internet with inaccurate and derogatory commentary, in attempts to erode his or her credibility. ORM can't stop such attacks. But VIPs can utilize it to create an authentic counterbalancing voice. First, VIPs need to take control over their publicly available user names and confidential information. Here are three ways to start:

1. Know how much of your personal information is online. Conduct a search of your name in Intelius and Spokeo, two of the many public databases that collect and publish data including home addresses and age. If any personal information appears, it likely appears in many other such sites.

2. Protect yourself from the type of email scandal that ended Petraeus' career: clear the "sent" and "trash" sections of your email accounts daily or weekly. When emails sit in your inbox and elsewhere, they are easily available to hackers.

3. Reserve a Google mail account in your name, if it is available. Google has many publishing tools online, from Google Profiles to Google Authorship. All use Google mail accounts as the user name. Reserving an account in your name protects it from being used inappropriately by others, including imposters.

Clear your browser and run a Google search in your name and review all of the information that appears on the first five pages of results. If you like what you see, read no further. If not, begin taking an active role in determining how others perceive you. Make a list of everything you would like to add (or change)…including the publicly available photographs of you.

With those tools you can lay the groundwork for managing your digital footprint—though your game plan will continue to evolve as the Internet becomes more and more interwoven into our personal and professional lives.

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