



WHAT HAPPENS ON THE INTERNET, STAYS ON THE INTERNET. FOREVER.

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For anyone who is still unclear on the concept, let me repeat it: "The Internet is forever." Anything that you post or publish online will still be there years from now. Anything that anyone else posts or publishes about you will also still be there.

Try an experiment. Go to Google and search on your first and last name in double-quotes (e.g. "Joe Blough"). Are you surprised by what you see? Find anything that perhaps you wish wasn't associated with an online search on your name? See any search listings that don't necessarily contribute to your business or professional aspirations? Are your Internet fingerprints a source of pride?

Please feel free to post this on your blog or email it to whomever you believe would benefit from reading it.

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I thought so.

The bad news is that what's there now is not going anywhere. The good news is that, by being intentional about it, it's possible to "rebrand" yourself to reflect how you want to be perceived.

Defining your "online brand identity"

How you want others to view you – and your purpose for developing it – must first be defined. Is it for business or professional reasons? For personal or recreational reasons?



The choice is yours, but you can only create one online brand. Everyone who searches for you, whether their interest is personal or professional, will see the same “you”.

Once you know who you want to be, you need to begin an intentional campaign of personal brand building that is similar to the approach that a business would take.

Online Social Networks

Identify the online social networks that are consistent with your brand, and become a member of all of them (they are usually free to join at a “Basic” level, which is all you really need). Examples of these networks are: FaceBook, FastPitch, Naymz, LinkedIn, MySpace, Plaxo, and many hundreds more. Not all online social networks are appropriate for everyone – find those that are a match for how you want others to view you.

The beauty – and danger – of these networks is that they are indexed by Google, and typically will rank higher than someone’s homemade website or blog. The information that you post will be highly visible and easily found.

Ensure that your profile is complete, and consistent across different social networks. Include your email as part of your profile content – add it to a description if necessary – in order to ensure that your contact information not is limited to “Premium Members” only.

Join appropriate groups within the online network, and participate in them. Actively seek out discussions that relate to your area of expertise, and contribute your thoughts and opinions in an intentional way.

Every word posted by you will soon be visible in online searches – so don’t be stingy. Submit long, in-depth answers that are consistent with your online brand – and that are also related to the topic at hand. These long form responses not only supply plenty of content for search engines to index, but also help build credibility in your online network. Who ends up looking like an expert when everyone one else writes 1-2 sentences, and you respond with 6 paragraphs? You do.



Anytime that you participate in online Q&A or discussions, be sure that your name and appropriate contact details are always included as part of your response. Do not rely on your Profile for this – contact information is often suppressed for non-Premium members and the public at large. And – of course – if you are able to hyperlink back to your site – by all means do it.

Another approach is to ask questions in Q&A groups that relate to how you want to be perceived. All of those insightful responses will be associated with your question – and your name. Again, be sure that your contact details are included in the question, and that you've hyperlinked back to your website if possible.

Blogs

The process for branding yourself by means of blogs is essentially the same as for online networks. Find 5-10 blogs that are consistent with how you want to be portrayed, and subscribe to them. With blogs, popularity matters. When in doubt, those with the most subscribers are preferred.

Now that you've subscribed to the blogs, read them. Whenever there's a posting that relates to your area of expertise – comment on it. As noted above, try to submit detailed answers that showcase your knowledge and insight. Include your contact information as a part of your response. Hyperlink to your website if allowed.

But even if all you do is post "I agree", the content of the blog and all its responses will be associated with your name in online searches. Two-word postings are far from ideal, but better than nothing at all.

Should you create your own blog? There's no reason not to. But when it comes to creating your online brand, you'll see results much faster if you piggyback on the popularity of established blogs.



Choosing wisely

There are no do-over's once you've hit the "Submit" button. Controversies never blow over on the Internet. Ten years from now, the firestorm that you ignited with a provocative posting will still be there for all to re-live. Only a complete fool intentionally enrages the blogosphere.

Therefore, choose your words very carefully. If there are two ways to interpret your intent – one benign and the other not – you can be certain that others are going to assume the worst. If you need to emphasize a word, DON'T use all caps – try something like > this < instead. Be polite. Remember that the purpose of all this effort is to make you appear more impressive – not to make someone else appear less so.

Yes, you have to.

If this all seems like a lot of work, you're absolutely correct. Your alternative is to accept what the Internet has to say about you – good, bad, or indifferent. But the good news is that, unlike so many things in life, your effort > will < pay off. Each week that passes will bring a different flavor to the sum total of online references to you. Almost before you know it, your "online fingerprints" will be in alignment with the reputation that you set out to create.

THE INTERNET IS FOREVER. USE IT. WISELY.