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STRATEGY

Social Networking Are you listening hard enough? Monitoring your online reputation

“Rechargeitnow.com is cheating people...they are a bunch of crooks!” That was a customer venting his ire on iComplaints, an online grievance forum. His gripe, targeted at the provider of an online payment service, involved a top-up that he was charged for, but which never made it to his account.

Given that the contact details of the company were not listed on its website, the frustrated consumer had no option but to use the only channel available to him—an online forum. Thankfully, the RechargeitNow team responded quickly to his complaint, providing a number for the consumer to call, and managed to salvage its reputation.

This was but one of the many instances in which a customer resorted to an online portal to seek justice. Social networking sites, such as Flickr, Facebook and Twitter, have added new channels of communication between a brand and its consumers. They’re cheap and accessible, and the level of interactivity ensures that others are quick to pick up on a thread, thereby making the brand highly visible. The empowered consumer now makes sure that a grievance



finds its way to the internet—and, to prospective buyers. Therefore, it’s imperative for a company to track its reputation online.

“By listening and responding, a brand can take responsibility for bad service, and leverage great feedback to build credibility. This, in turn, helps generate more visibility, leads and sales,” says Pradeep Chopra, co-founder and CEO, Digital Vidya, a digital marketing training company.

Called online reputation management, or ORM, this involves keeping track of what’s being said about you in the virtual world,





and responding to queries, grievances and opinions. And it isn't just about a response. "The key lies in responding in time and appropriately," adds Chopra.

Ask Ajaay Gupta, CEO and managing director, Capital Foods, which sells the Ching's Secret brand of Chinese ingredients. "A regular consumer from the US pinged us on our Facebook, mentioning that the product was not available in a particular store. Ten minutes later, we had contacted her. Within two hours, the sales head had alerted the distributor in California, who delivered the product to her house," relates Gupta. Such is the power of the internet.

Having decided to monitor its reputation online, where does a company start? Using Google Alerts is the basic way of keeping track of what's being said about you. All you need to do is select keywords that need to be tracked, and you will receive an email update every time it appears on the web. Other options include Lithium, SocialOomph and Social Mention, or tools, such as TweetDeck, Sendible and Seismic, that can be used to keep track of what netizens think about your company.

Where should you look?

The internet is the new encyclopaedia. No matter what you seek, you shall definitely find it online. Now, thanks to social networking sites, micro-blogs and such other information sharing platforms, people can find information about new products and services, experiences with brands, and so on. Companies, therefore, need to keep an eye on what's being said about them. While checking out Facebook, Twitter and Flickr is obvious, you have to widen the net. Here are a few sites that will help you keep an eye on your brands.

MouthShut: A review site for anything and everything under the sky. Customers share their experiences with a particular product, or service—everything from cars to books.

Epinions: It is an online customer review platform. People share their feedback on varied things—from electronics to tourist guides.

ConsumerComplaints: Many consumers express their unhappiness on such sites. Other sites include ConsumerCourtForum and ComplaintsBoard, among others.

YouTube: World's largest video publishing and sharing network operating round the clock.

Q&A sites: Question and answer sites reflect on consumer buying trends and give ideas for prospective products and services. Yahoo Answers, Answers.com, Wiki

Answers, Answer Bag, and many other such sites.

LinkedIn: Largest professional networking site in the world. Helps you keep track of what people are saying about either the company's profile or the person heading it.

Xing: Another professional networking site, which helps people to either make new contacts or follow the trail of colleagues and experts.

Social Mention: A search and analysis platform. It collates all information about a company, person or a product, from across the internet and streams it to a common platform.

Burrp: People share reviews on myriad subjects—restaurants, gyms, movies—almost everything that a customer may have used or experienced.

"Paid tools are useful when the amount of conversation is huge. One needs sophisticated, analytical platforms that can be used by team members in collaboration," explains Chopra. That's where software, such as VeristLabs and Informm, come in. They provide what can be called "listening on the net" services—trawling the internet and collecting content that matches the keywords. The data is analysed before being presented to the company.

For those who aren't happy with merely collecting data, there are extra services offered by portals such as VeristLabs. It can manage online conversations, queries, or complaints, and even post entries on blogs to promote one's brand or product—all for a fee.

"The benefit of directing customers to a common site is that complaints and grievances do not spread all over the web. It becomes easier for a firm to monitor complaints," says Arjun Anand, creator of VeristLabs.

ValuePitch, too, works in a similar fashion. It shares quantitative (graphs, charts, etc.) as well as qualitative feedback (customer happiness, dissatisfaction, and so on). It not only manages reputation, but also senses the pulse of the market.

It is commonly accepted that fast moving consumer goods companies are separated from the end consumers by five to six layers. This includes stockists, distributors, sub-distributors, retailers and media. "Through social media, we have cut across and reached out to our consumers directly. We track popular flavours that can be launched, thereby transferring the ownership to end consumers," adds Gupta, who runs the ₹300-crore Capital Foods.

That's not applicable to every company, though. "ORM is more useful for an established brand with a secure market. For a young company, which is still finding its niche, it may be a futile effort," explains Praval Singh, co-founder, Media Redefined, a social media agency.

Many B2B businesses, too, do not consider ORM as a feasible option, since they do not deal with customers directly. But companies, which have a widespread customer base, should monitor their reputation online. It also makes sense for internet businesses to deploy resources for online monitoring. Companies that have a relatively urban or semi-urban market in India should also give ORM a shot.

With this single tool, one can understand customer needs and buying habits, and keep an eye on the competition. Go on, plug into the virtual world and find out who's saying what about you.

—Sunaina Sehgal

