

Managing Your Online Identity

What does your digital footprint say about you?

In the United States, fifty-five million adults, nearly one third of the population, visit social networking websites at least monthly according to Forrester Research. The explosive growth of online social networking has blurred the lines between professional and personal lives and exponentially increased the risk of inadvertently damaging one's reputation. The decision to post videos, photographs, thoughts, observations and experiences can create far-reaching consequences.

Job seekers should be particularly aware of the risks and benefits of electronic communication. Hiring managers and recruiters now routinely Google and use social networking websites to screen and source job candidates. In a recent Career Builder survey, 45% of hiring managers confirmed that they use of social networking sites to research job candidates. A shocking 35% of them found information that kept them from hiring a candidate. They cited provocative photos, inappropriate language or content, discussions about alcohol or drug use, derogatory and/or discriminatory comments, lying about qualifications, and even the use of text language (OMG!) among reasons to reject candidates.

Even judges and bar associations are getting into the act. The ABA Journal recently published an article featuring a Texas state court judge who stumbled upon disturbing information on Facebook. An attorney appearing before the judge sought a continuance citing the death of her father. However, the same lawyer had earlier posted a string of status updates on Facebook detailing her week of drinking, hanging out and partying. Needless to say, the judge was less than sympathetic. Similarly, the Florida Bar Association has advised bar applicants that it will proactively search social networking sites of applicants who have been flagged.

The management of your online identity is an essential element of your professional and career development. You must be careful and deliberate in all of your online communications. Always assume that any and everything you post, or that others post about you, will be available for public consumption. In the often informal mode of communicating online, it is easy to forget social skills and discount social graces. Sharing a racy joke with a friend or group on Facebook may seem harmless when it's done on your Smartphone between classes but, regardless of the medium, tasteless is still tasteless. Statements and images floating around in cyberspace can and sometimes will come back to haunt.

What can you do to proactively manage your online persona? Start by finding out what's out there. Google yourself and read everything carefully. Consider monitoring your online ID at www.onlineidcalculator.com or subscribing to Google alerts for your name.

Next take down any content inconsistent with the image you wish to project – the questionable photos, the inappropriate language, etc. Be sure to clean up the less obvious footprints such as the comments you’ve left on social networks and even your Amazon wish lists. As one writer recently quipped, “you don’t want your list of ‘Best Movies for Worshipping the Anti-Christ’ to catch up to you.”

Re-evaluate your friends, links, groups and those you follow and consider how their online activities and personas may affect you. Those connections can speak volumes about you. Also examine how and why you use online communications and consider whether the benefits outweigh the risks.

After identifying the Web 2.0 tools that best enhance your career prospects, develop your own online persona. Take advantage of the social networking sites that meet your needs. LinkedIn, for example, is an excellent personal marketing tool essential for job seekers in today’s market. Research and implement appropriate privacy and security settings in an effort to control what information is viewable by whom. Recognize, however, that no settings will guarantee that content will not be revealed to an unintended audience.

Also consider contributing to blogs related to your area of expertise. Be selective about where, when and about what you choose to post. Don’t use the blog as a forum to rant, criticize or brag. Consider very carefully whether you really have something valuable to contribute.

When you do communicate electronically, make sure that in form as well as content it complements the professional presence you wish to project. Check your grammar, spelling and punctuation. Don’t write email, blog entries, comments or chats in abbreviated words, slang or symbols.

The bottom line: presume that your online communications are accessible to everyone and simply exercise good common sense to create, enhance and manage your online identity.

There are many free tools available to monitor your online presence. Several are listed below.

Blog Monitoring

1. [BackType Blog Comments Monitoring](#). This tool indexes conversations from blogs, social networks and other social media. It also has an alert function that e-mails updates whenever a search term is mentioned in a comment.

2. [BlogPulse](#). BlogPulse is a blog search engine with several complementary tools such as Trend Search and Conversion Tracker that analyzes the data it collects.

3. [Google Blog Search](#). This is a Google beta search engine for blogs.
4. [Technorati](#). Technorati is the leading blog search engine indexing millions of blog posts in real time. It also tracks the authority, influence and popularity of blogs.

Twitter Monitoring

5. [Monitter](#). A real-time Twitter monitor for up to three keywords at a time.
6. [TweetBeep](#). This tool provides hourly Twitter alerts sent via e-mail. You can specify keywords, people and links to track.
7. [Tweet Later](#). TweetLater has a number of features for Twitter users, and it also monitors Twitter and e-mails you a digest of the tweets that contain your specified keywords. You can also use this to track your @replies.
8. [Twitter Search](#). Twitter Search was formally Summize. It searches all Twitter activity for keywords, links or user activity in real time.

Link Monitoring

9. [BackTweets](#). This is a service by BackType that provides an engine to search for specific links mentioned on Twitter.
10. [WhoLinksToMe](#). A link search tool that tracks back-links and makes them easily sortable by anchor text, origination, and by the target URL with enhanced reporting capability. You can also import links from Google Webmaster Tools for enhanced analysis.

Other Tools

11. [Google Alerts](#). Your keyword search results are sent via e-mail for keyword mentions in news, web, blogs, video and groups categories.
12. [BoardTracker](#). This tool searches discussion boards and forum threads for your specified keywords. You can also sign up for e-mail alerts.
13. [MonitorThis](#). MonitorThis is a search aggregator for up to 26 search engine feeds.
14. [Naymz](#). A social network focused on reputation, personal branding, and identity verification. Basic version is free.
15. [Purewire Trust](#). An online portal that helps people verify reputation information about themselves and those with whom they interact online. You can search by e-mail address, URL or web application.

16. [Yasni](#) – This is a search engine dedicated to finding people on the web through publicly available information, including images, videos, social networking profiles and posts.

With the number of tools available, you will probably need to do some research to determine which services fulfill your needs. Usually a mix of a few of these free services will cover your bases, but you will need time to do the manual work necessary for the tools that are not automated.