BUILDING YOUR BRAND

ESTABLISHING A POSITIVE PRESENCE ONLINE

Like it or not, if you use the Internet you have an online identity. Some people call this your "brand." What's a brand? Think about a brand of soft drink, or computer, or jeans, or a band or a sports team. You probably have a certain idea about each one – what it's like, who buys it, and so on. Maybe you wear a branded t-shirt sometimes because you like what it says about you. That's what your online brand is: it's what people think of you based on what they see about you online.

Big companies spend millions of dollars making sure that you see their brand the way they want you to. You don't have to put that much time or money into it, but there are a few pretty simple things you can do to make sure that the "you" people see online is how you want to be seen.

1 SEARCH YOURSELF

A good place to start is to use a search engine to see what information about you is easily available. Try searching for your name – but don't stop there, especially if it's a fairly common one. Think about the search terms someone else might use if they were looking for information about you. Would they use a nickname? Your middle name or initials? A likely misspelling of your name? Maybe they add your home-town, or your school, or where you work or some of your hobbies. Type your name into the search bar and see what other search terms are suggested. Also, you can try putting "yourname".com (or .ca) into the address bar and see if anyone else has registered that site. If not, it's probably worth a few dollars each year to register it yourself, even if you're not going to use it right away.

Do the same thing with any social networks you're on. Someone may have created a spoof account with your name, or there may be someone with a similar name that people might confuse you with. Make sure to do an image search of your name, too!

2 IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, ASK TO HAVE IT TAKEN DOWN

If you don't like what you find, the first step is to try to get it taken down. It may be surprising, but just asking the person who posted it is pretty effective: according to one study, four out of five Internet users who've asked someone to take material down were successful. If that doesn't work, you can find out which ISP hosts the site and ask them to take it down. ISPs will usually only do this if the material is defamatory (untrue and hurts your reputation), if it's hate material or if what the site is doing could reasonably be called cyberbullying.

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3 OUT WITH THE BAD, IN WITH THE GOOD

If there are things about you online that you don't like – or if searching for information about you leads to information about someone else who people might think is you – then you need to make sure that there's enough positive material about you online to drown it out. Blogging, posting videos, commenting, leaving online reviews – anything that leaves a mark online is good so long as it sends the message you want. Don't worry that everything you do has to make you look good; so long as it doesn't make you look bad, it's building your online presence and overriding any bad stuff that may be out there.

If there's another person online that people are mixing up with you, think about using a variation on your name. For instance, if there's another John Smith who got caught selling fake Stanley Cup tickets, you may decide to go by Johnny Smith or John Q. Smith instead of trying to tell people you're not him.

4 BUILD A BASE

An important step in building your brand is to have a home base online. This could be a website or a blog (but don't use a social network profile as your home base – we'll explain why below) – what matters is that it's a place where you control your message and where everything you do online links back to. Why is that important? Because a lot of search engines count links when they're doing a search, so the more you link back to your home base, the higher it will rank in any search for you. If you registered a website with your name, like we talked about in "Search Yourself" above, that's the perfect place to make your home base.

You can have a "home base" picture, too: that's a picture of yourself that you like (if you don't want to use a real picture, there are lots of places online where you can create a cartoon version of yourself) that you use anytime you're asked for a picture online – social networks, commenting systems and so on. Having a single picture that you use everywhere helps to build you identity online.

5 DON'T LET YOUR FRIENDS CONTROL YOUR BRAND

Why not use a social network profile as your home base? Because you don't have full control over what happens there. Friends can post to your profile, comment on what you post, and link to things that you have no control over. You also can't ever fully control your privacy on social networks because you're counting on your friends, and their friends, to make good decisions.

That doesn't mean that you shouldn't have any social network accounts: actually you should have an account on any social network a lot of your friends are using, even if you don't do much with it, just to make sure that you have some control over your identity there. Just don't link back to it from other places online.

6 THINK ABOUT WHO YOU ARE IN OTHER PEOPLE'S SPACES

As well as making sure that your online spaces say good things about you, keep in mind what kind of impression you're making in the spaces you don't control – other people's social network profiles, for example, or public online spaces like games and online communities. Being a good "guest" and being a positive member of an online community can be a huge part of building your online brand. The Golden Rule – treat other people the way you'd like to be treated – is a good start, but you can also look for ways to be helpful and contribute to the online communities that you're a part of.

7 DON'T MIX UP REPUTATION WITH CELEBRITY

None of this means that you need to spend all your time thinking about every word and picture that you post, wondering how people will see you. It doesn't matter how many people are paying attention to you online: what matters is that the things you do online build a consistent image of you that reflects how you want to be seen.