

Have You Googled Your Name Lately?

BY MARTHA CHAN

Reputation is important to all family law attorneys. Most strive to protect their reputations among peers, with clients, and prospective clients by being effective and professional. But what about your online reputation? How much control do you have over how others see you?

By now, most family law firms and lawyers have websites and use them to shape their reputations. However, your reputation may be tarnished by negative comments posted online, which you may or may not be aware of. In fact, even if you do not have a website and are not active on the Web, you may have a tarnished online reputation.

Whether justified or not, once negative information makes it online, it is there indefinitely and needs to be dealt with as soon as possible. Most family lawyers I work with rely a great deal on referrals. A tarnished online reputation can do a lot of harm.

You may have heard the saying, "You are your search results." This is especially true to prospective clients who google your name after you've been referred by a friend. Unflattering online information about you is bound to raise concerns and will not necessarily be dismissed out of hand because of a referral. One family lawyer sent me an e-mail from his former client who had recommended his services to a friend. When the friend googled the lawyer's name and found unflattering information, he chose not to hire the lawyer, despite his friend's recommendation.

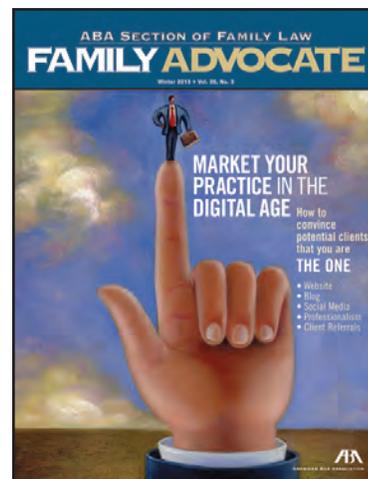
The Source of the Comments

When someone googles your name, what they see or don't see will become part of what they think about you. Let's take a look at some possible scenarios.

1. No reputation can create a bad reputation. You may think that having no information about you online means that you have no online reputation; thus, you are on neutral ground. But this is not necessarily the case. To some, not finding any online information about you may mean: "This lawyer must not be keeping up to date. How is it possible that he or she has no website or at least a page for me to refer to before I decide to call him?" This kind of reputation will hurt you, and you may never know it, because potential clients simply will not call your office.

2. A case of mistaken identity. If you have a common name, a Google search may produce many pages of information about people with whom you share your name. Depending on how much "Google power" your Web pages have, information about you may not show up on the first few pages of search results. When this happens, you could end up with "no reputation," or be misidentified as another lawyer who shares your name and has a poor reputation and lots of negative comments written about him. Likewise, you could be confused with a criminal defense lawyer who practices family law on the side.

3. You have a good reputation online. It is ideal if your Google search returns Web



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pages with positive things about you. This could include pages you and your law firm have created, such as your website, blog, Facebook page, Google+ page, your firm's Google Place page, and articles you have written for publication, etc. In other words, search results produce the content that you control and reflects your excellent reputation. Most importantly, this is content that you can always change. There could be other online pages about you, such as those of bar associations and charities for which you volunteer.

4. There is "bad stuff" about you online. Some Web pages, which you have not created, may contain poor reviews or comments about your services. This might be a simple one-page website created by a disgruntled individual with the sole purpose of letting the world know what a bad lawyer you are. This same disgruntled person could have posted on social media pages or websites that allow Internet users to rate lawyers, such as LawyerRatingZ.com, Avvo.com, Google Places, etc. Your online reputation can be destroyed in just a minute or two and can result in damage to your practice and reputation when these negative comments appear on the first few pages of search results.

It is difficult for anyone, including a prospective client, to know whether the comments are justified. In fact, a lawyer who does a good job for a client may end up getting negative comments and ratings from a disgruntled ex-spouse who has a different point of view. Online comments can be used as a "virtual assault" on your reputation and can be posted by anyone at any time.

Rescuing a Tarnished Online Reputation

Let's start with the bad news: it is highly unlikely that the negative information about you can be removed from the Internet. So, what can you do to minimize the impact of negative comments about you or your firm? You have a few options. The strategy here is to dominate search results by creating as many Web pages with positive information about you as possible to push the "bad stuff" farther down on the search results. If you want to bury the bad results on page four, you will have to create more Web pages than if you were only looking to push the "bad stuff" to page two. At the same time, you can raise the visibility of Web pages with good information about you by promoting those pages to search engines. This strategy is mostly based on the principles of search engine optimization (SEO).

1. Create social media pages for yourself and your firm. Start with the free and most powerful ones. If you have not created social media/networking pages (LinkedIn, Google+, Google Places, a Facebook personal or company page, Twitter, Pinterest.com, Xing.com—just to name a few), simply register and complete a page/profile with information about you. There are no fees, and you can update the information at any time. These are pages you control. You don't have to sing your own praises. For most of them, all you need is a 400-word factual profile about you and your firm. Google loves Google features. A Google+ page will show up within days on Google search results.

2. Create your own blogs. You also can create blogs for free at, among others, Wordpress.com, Blog.com, Blogspot.com, and Tumblr.com. These blogs will result in pages with Web addresses that include your name, e.g., janedoe.wordpress.com, janedoe.blog.com, janedoe.tumblr.com, etc.

3. Create videos and promote them online. You can create multiple short videos that can be promoted for free through video sites, such as Youtube.com, Vimeo.com, and Dailymotion.com. These videos can feature you answering simple FAQs. Once created, you can add these videos to enrich your website.

4. Create mini websites with your name in the website addresses. The words in a website address tell a search engine what the website is about. For example, let's assume your name is Jane Doe. I would advise you to register the following website addresses: janedoe.com, janedoe.net, janedoe.us, janedoe.ca, janedoe.biz etc., and build some simple websites. These mini websites may consist of a page about you, a page about your firm, and a page with your contact information. Note that for each site, you will pay an annual fee for registering the domain name and having the site hosted. Websites with your name in the domain name will show up high on google searches within days.

5. Promote your existing and new Web pages. This is where an SEO service is very helpful. A good SEO service can help push these pages to the top of search results. You also can purchase listings with a link to your website on sites that Google deems valuable and highly relevant for your firm, such as custody- or divorce-related websites. Make sure these websites have a high "page rank" by Google. Google assigns a numeric value (from 0 to 10) to a website as a way of indicating how valuable that site is to Google.

6. Post favorable ratings to counterbalance poor ratings. Yes, that's right, anyone can go to websites where the unfavorable ratings exist and post favorable ratings and comments. Most of the time, the latest ratings are displayed at the top of the page. The unfavorable ratings can be pushed to the bottom of the page. Of course, you can invite clients or colleagues to rate you on these sites.

7. Request that the information be removed. While this is an option, rarely will the information be removed. I manage multiple blogs and forum discussions on divorce. I get requests to remove comments on a regular basis. I rarely see a reason to remove them, because as a manager of these blogs and discussion forums, I view them as a platform for people to express themselves.

8. Address the dissatisfied person online. You can post a response to a negative comment or offer to speak with the person offline and look into the complaint. Before you do this, assess the complaint. If you know the complainant is a vindictive ex-spouse, then your efforts are likely to be rebuffed. However, if a client has a legitimate complaint, look at this as an opportunity to improve your process or service to new clients. When potential new clients see that you are responsive to a complaint, your actions may more than compensate for the negative impact of the initial comment. Remember, it is not about the fall, but the recovery.

How Long Will It Take to See Results?

To see results in a hurry, I recommend you begin by building mini websites with your name in the domain names. To have an impact on search results, newly created Web pages need to be optimized for search engines and be promoted using basic SEO techniques (which is beyond the scope of this article). Depending on how bad the situation is, you may not see the desired results for several months. And, depending on how persistent the disgruntled person is, this can be a longer-term battle.

Pros and Con Artists

Your next question could be, "Should I do this myself, and, if not, who should I hire?" Damage to your online reputation requires immediate and intense focus to produce the results you want. The effort may extend over time. My honest opinion is that yes, you can create some new Web pages for free on your own. However, given the time it takes to learn how to create well-designed and well-optimized Web pages and promote them, you'd be better off hiring professionals. Focus instead on what you do

best—practicing law and servicing your clients.

There are all kinds of reputation-management companies to help you when you have an issue with your online reputation. Some are solid and legitimate, but as always: *caveat emptor*. Be very cautious about any company that claims to be able to remove negative comments for you. If you Google “reputation management,” you will see stories about companies that take your money and do nothing. Some of these companies may even threaten to ruin your online reputation if you post anything bad about them. The irony here is that if they really could clean up negative information about you, why haven’t they done it for themselves? Some have such tarnished reputations that they have changed their company names to carry on their businesses.

Although I have not tried any of these companies myself, I recently filled out free evaluation forms from two reputation-management companies. The reports I received were not impressive. The first evaluation could not find anything on me. It reported “even with only five other Martha Chan(s) online, you have low awareness on the Internet, which limits your chances for new opportunities.” This company suggested a more detailed analysis was required. In reality, “Martha Chan” is a very common name and generates 9,200,000 Google search results. I am listed twice among the top five search results on page one. The second company’s report showed nothing more than what anyone could have seen by googling my name.

Reputation-management companies offer a variety of packages. They range from one-time charges of thousands of dollars, to monthly charges of thousands of dollars. If you are already dealing with an SEO company or a marketing agency that you trust, talk with them first if your online reputation needs rescuing. Before you hire any company, assess what is a fair price and ask each company exactly what they will do for you and by when. Interview a few companies and ask very specific questions so that you are confident that the company you hire will get the job done. Then be patient and let them do their job.

Be Proactive

Most of us tend not to worry about a problem until we have one. We are all busy and want to be smart about how we spend our time and money. By taking the steps I have outlined above, you can drive more traffic to your website or office and establish a more prominent and positive online presence. However, hiring an SEO company to market you and your firm will give you more immediate results and may prevent your having to rescue your reputation in the future.

At a minimum, monitor your name and your law firm’s name by subscribing to Google Alerts, so that you may be notified of negative comments as soon as possible. You can do so at www.google.com/alerts. Google will send an alert to your e-mail whenever it finds a Web page with your name on it. **FA**

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