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### Doctors, lawyers, polish online image

Reputation management firms help professionals defend against bad reviews.

By Cara S. Trager

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Two years ago, Manhattan immigration lawyer Douglas Rosenthal created a YouTube video in which he offered tips for a Stokes interview—an interrogation to determine whether a foreign-born spouse has married a U.S. citizen simply for immigration benefits.

While many viewers expressed gratitude for the advice, the video also spurred one person to post negative comments laced with profanities. Rather than let those remarks slide, Mr. Rosenthal wrote back, "I can assure you the information contained in this video will come in handy in the event you are scheduled to have a Stokes interview!"

Soon after, the viewer apologized online, claiming he didn't understand the video. But to ensure that neither crackpots nor cranky clients have the last word on the Web, Mr. Rosenthal signed on with a reputation-management firm that crawls the Internet in search of content that potentially could harm his practice. The service also uploads positive comments from Mr. Rosenthal's clients to lawyer-rating sites and has helped him secure Google search results among the top positions for his field.

The Web is brimming with more than a thousand sites to research, review and rate a professional's credentials, competency and character. And hundreds of reputation-management firms have surfaced in recent years to help doctors and lawyers, in particular, foster a sterling image, making them crucial tools to developing and sustaining their practices. Since 2010, for instance, Reputation.com has been aggressively marketing its services with local newspaper and radio ads.

Because doctors and lawyers often lack the skills and time to police the Internet themselves, many are turning to these virtual image consultants not only to prowl cyberspace for practice-besmirching remarks but also to create and upload blogs and press releases that can help eclipse any negative content.

Since the First Amendment to the Constitution protects free speech, except in cases of slander and libel, reputation dot-coms generally try to inundate the Web with enough positive material to offset, if not bury, negative content. This approach helps to ensure that disparaging materials don't appear on the first page of search-engine results—which dovetails with what experts say about Web searchers: Most people click on a first page of results and don't proceed to the second page.

Online-reputation management isn't cheap. Fees can soar to \$15,000 a year, depending on such factors as the authority of the sites that mention the doctor or lawyer and the number of people with the professional's name. Reputation.com's professional clients typically shell out \$2,000 annually for services that include searching cyberspace for misleading or negative content, pushing down such content to pages 2 to 3 in search results, and receiving reports that track their online images.

"We're not saying there shouldn't be any negative reviews," said William Rivas, founder of Reviewboost.com, a firm in Carlsbad, Calif., that counts Mr. Rosenthal as a customer. "We're just giving new and prospective customers a fair and balanced perspective."

## CONSUMERS SEEK HONESTY

Exclusively gushy comments and high scores can backfire. According to Lauren Fairbanks, a partner in Stunt & Gimmick's, a search-engine optimization and reputation-management company in Manhattan, the public is savvy enough to realize that real businesses don't satisfy "all their customers all the time."

While online-reputation firms are helpful in attracting and retaining new business, their efforts don't "put you on easy street or mean the phone is ringing off the hook," Mr. Rosenthal said. Still, he credits Reviewboost.com as a "primary source of new business."

Since 2010, a Manhattan foot surgeon, who requested anonymity, has been paying about \$2,000 a year to Reputation.com. In practice for 32 years, the doctor said he saw the financial value of using a reputation company after a patient backed away from having him operate on her foot. The patient's husband, the surgeon said, had read a very poor review about him on a doctor-rating website.

"The negative comment was on a site that was so obscure that I wasn't able to find it using a Google search, but [Reputation.com] found it right away," the doctor said.

The maligning statements slammed the doctor, calling him a "monster" and other offensive names, recalled the surgeon, who doesn't know who the commenter was or what precipitated the outburst. When the doctor contacted the site, it responded by replacing the most damaging words with stars.

"Most people won't admit to using a reputation firm because it sounds like cheating, but the negative review did harm to me economically," he said. "With this [service], I know someone is looking out for me. Nobody has the time to patrol and peruse the Web themselves."

## PROACTIVE APPROACH

Keith Orenstein, a partner in the 28-year-old Manhattan law firm Orenstein & Orenstein, has attracted new clients by polishing his image at a site called Awo.com, which serves as a national directory of lawyers and doctors, and includes reviews and grades. Since the site allows professionals to improve their Awo score with additional biographical tidbits, Mr. Orenstein has achieved a perfect 10 with posts that include an article and an award. In addition, he pays Awo.com "several hundred dollars a month" to ensure that his name surfaces in the top three spots when a visitor to the directory types "family law" and "New York" into its search box for lawyers.

"I know people are increasingly going online for professionals they want to use," Mr. Orenstein said, "and I want to put my best foot forward."

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