



Managing your online image

What happens online *stays* online. Every comment, post, share and tweet adds to our digital reputation -- or what marketers refer to as our brand. That brand can both positively or negatively affect our future job prospects, professional contacts, and personal relationships.

Branding tells customers what they can expect from a product, service – or person -- and what differentiates them from competitors. Companies work tirelessly to promote and protect the integrity of their brands, knowing that one misstep can have dire consequences to how they are perceived by the public.

It's also becoming standard for employers, educational institutions and political parties to vet candidates' social media activity before granting an interview or accepting an application. As a result, protecting our own online image or brand is of greater importance than ever before.

Assessing your brand

Social media was once a way to connect with friends and people who share our interests and views around the world. They “liked” our silly vacation photos, “shared” our cute cat videos and retweeted our angry political comments. Is that how we want prospective employers, indeed the world, to perceive us? In fact, how exactly *are* we being perceived online?

There are many free monitoring tools available but the simplest way to assess your digital presence is by Googling yourself. If you use Facebook, search your name. Both are quick, easy ways to find out if your online image is in alignment with your goals for the future.

Building your brand

Once you've assessed your existing online footprint you need to begin building your brand. Here are some steps to get your started:

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- **Adjust your privacy settings.** If you don't want co-workers, customers or prospective employees to see pictures of you clubbing or those adorable videos of babies or kittens, make them private – just between selected individuals. Do the same with who can tag you to better control what appears on your public timeline.
- **Change your name.** You can always use your real name for professional purposes and another for your personal social media usage. If you have a common name or your name is similar to a well-known figure consider adding your middle initial to differentiate yourself.
- **Use a good quality picture of yourself on your profile.** Don't use a selfie or an overly serious shot. You want to appear professional yet friendly and approachable.
- **Watch what you share.** You want your brand to be interesting, engaging, and representative of your best characteristics. Don't dilute your message with irrelevant posts. While you want to promote yourself, be careful not to come across as conceited or pompous.

Do's and don'ts of social media

Protecting your digital reputation doesn't have to be difficult. It simply means following a few do's and don'ts. These include:

- **Do watch your language.** Don't use profanities and be aware of your grammar.
- **Do be careful with humour.** Not everyone will share your sense of humour. It's okay to be funny – just make sure it's appropriate for a diverse audience.
- **Don't debate online.** A good rule of thumb is to not say anything online that you wouldn't say face-to-face. Besides, any heated argument, virtual or otherwise, is rarely constructive.
- **Don't friend or follow everyone.** Use Facebook to connect with like-minded people and Twitter and LinkedIn to follow industry leaders and influencers.
- **Do be careful with game requests.** Facebook games can be fun but your contacts may not be amused receiving constant requests to play Farmville or that you've reached a new level in Candy Crush.
- **Do not post, tweet, share or comment when angry.** Think before you click.

Today, first impressions are often made online. As a result, it's important to manage and monitor your online image to ensure you always put your best digital footprint forward.

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Talking to teens about self-image and esteem

Healthy self-esteem is an important factor in good mental and physical health. It affects how we view ourselves, our abilities, appearance, beliefs, behaviours, feelings and most importantly, our overall worth. When our self-esteem is low, we place little value on our talents and strengths and focus more on what we perceive as our faults and weaknesses, and that can hold us back from reaching our full potential. However, too much self-esteem can be equally destructive, resulting in self-serving attitudes and actions, lack of empathy for others and anger and bullying when thwarted. Healthy self-esteem is when our image of ourselves remains *balanced*. In other words, we have a good opinion of ourselves and our abilities but recognize our flaws.

Teens and self-esteem

Adolescence is a time of enormous physical and mental changes. One of the most significant, and unseen, changes is with the frontal lobes of the brain — the seat of decision-making, empathy, judgment, insight, and impulse control. We're well into our 20s before this part of our brain is fully developed. As a result, healthy self-esteem is important during the teen years, helping kids tackle challenges, act independently, take pride in their accomplishments and manage strong emotions. That's not always easy in today's digital world.

The role of social media

Having supportive friends is central to our feelings of self-worth and social media allows even the shyest individuals to connect with people around the world at any time, in any place. We all feel good when our posts receive several "likes," positive comments or sympathetic responses. However, social media can also have a negative effect on how we feel about ourselves. Constant postings of other people's professional successes, holidays, nights out, and family events can make us feel lonely, insecure, and inadequate.

For young people, there's also the growing issue of online shaming and cyberbullying. Bullying through social media sites is mostly but not exclusively, experienced by school age children and youth and it can have devastating consequences on both their physical and psychological health. According to recent U.S. statistics, more half of adolescents have been bullied online, and one in three have received threats online. Less than 50 percent do not tell their parents when cyberbullying occurs. Healthy self-esteem helps teens keep things in perspective and focus on what's important in their lives.

How to help teens develop healthy self-esteem

Developing healthy self-esteem begins early. If children have strong relationships with their parents, siblings, friends and others in their community and generally receive positive feedback, they're more likely to enter their teen years with the confidence to make good choices and overcome setbacks.

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Here are some suggestions to help you build your child's self-esteem:

- **Set standards of behaviour.** Don't allow criticism that involves shaming or ridiculing from your child or anyone involved in his or her life. Some people may not realize they're doing this, insisting they're "teasing" or "joking," but ridicule can severely damage self-esteem.
- **Encourage your teens not to compare themselves to others.** Remind them that other people's lives might appear to better than theirs but the reality is that they too have problems – they just don't mention them.
- **Encourage positivity.** Psychologists have found that negative self-talk – "I'm such a loser," "I hate how I look" – is often at the root of depression and anxiety. Encourage positive self-talk. For example, "I did my best and I'm proud of myself," or "I'm short – and fabulous!"
- **Foster problem-solving.** We can help teens improve their ability of overcome obstacles and make wise decisions. When confronted with a problem, ask them questions that pinpoint how they feel about a situation and what may need to be changed. Then brainstorm possible solutions and suggest alternatives.
- **Involve teens in family decisions.** Adolescents like nothing better than to be treated as adults and showing them you value their input can be valuable in bolstering their self-esteem.
- **Encourage their passions.** Everybody is good at something. For teens that can be a sport, a musical instrument or academics. Even interests that may seem frivolous to adults can provide opportunities for teens to feel good about themselves.
- **Encourage volunteering.** Many teens find self-worth by helping make a difference in their community.

And finally, let your teen know that everyone needs help from time to time. If they don't want to discuss their feelings with you, encourage them to speak with a counsellor through their school or your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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