

Managing Online Reputation: What to Listen for, and Where

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The cost of managing an online crisis or reputation issue can seem limitless: PR, advertising, loss of sales, lost productivity, distracted executives, competitive maneuvers, additional customer service, litigation—all can burst budgets.

Worse, bad news travels online at turbo-charged speeds: A negative tweet or nasty video can end up on mainstream media within hours. Think [Domino's pizza prank](#), [Kenneth Cole's Cairo tweet](#), or [Gap's logo redesign](#).

A 2011 global [study on crisis preparedness](#) by Burson-Marsteller & PSB found that 79% of business executives expected a crisis within 12 months, about 59% had experienced a crisis in their current or previous company. Yet, although 81% said digital and social media increasingly influence reputation during a crisis, half the companies polled still didn't have a crisis plan.

Companies know to factor in social media as a key—if not foundational—element of a reputation monitoring strategy, but they fall short in having a systematic approach:

- What to listen for
- How to structure crisis listening
- How to identify critical issues

What to Listen For

A proactive reputation and crisis monitoring strategy requires that marketers monitor all key social media channels using keyword searches, and analyze conversations for baselines, trends, and triggers. In particular, you should pay attention to the following:

- **Quality of response.** If many people are saying the same thing about your company or brand, that's something worth noting. Are they a mob following each other, or individuals independently discovering something worth examining?
- **The "out of line" response.** Someone on the edges of typical responses could offer valuable insight.
- **Source and bias.** Who's seeking attention? Who wants favor with listeners or has an agenda?
- **Things you don't want to hear.** Such messages offer some of the most important information you can glean, especially for averting or managing crises.
- **More than just opinions.** For those with innovative ideas and product plans, find relevant ways to build relationships.

- **Evangelists.** Find and nurture those who would defend you should a crisis occur.
- **Reports to relevant stakeholders.** Sales, customer services, product management, R&D, etc. can benefit broadly from digital conversations.

Tune In to Crisis

So where do you start? There are three universal human motivations for digital (and offline) activities that you can readily track, quantify, and respond to. Focusing social [media monitoring](#) on these will help filter and organize conversations into more manageable segments:

- **Information:** I want to know about...
- **Transaction:** I want to be able to...
- **Support:** I want help with...

Take the example of a tire manufacturer. The "information" filter ("know about something") could be pricing, product information, vehicle types (cars, [SUVs](#), trucks), availability, and so on. "Transaction" ("want to do something") is action-oriented—buying tires, finding authorized dealers, or exchanging products, for example. "Support" ("want help with something") could be reporting defects, service complaints, product feedback, maintenance, etc.

Segmenting social conversations into those three categories, and sub-setting the conversations as needed, lets businesses correlate and extract relevant data, insights, event triggers, and recommendations across reputation and crisis management events and business issues. (Clearly, you tailor the topics and keywords for your specific business and industry.)

Identifying Critical Issues

Establish the relative severity of a reputation issue by correlating probability (likelihood of a particular crisis occurring) and severity (extent of real and potential damage).

Low-probability risks with mild consequences may be acceptable or manageable; high-probability risks with severe consequence are not. Medium risks need to be reduced as far as reasonably possible.

When monitoring social media, not just the hazard matters... but also the likelihood that such a hazard translates into undesirable effects.

Mining social conversations proactively for high-, medium- and low-risk crisis scenarios provides the footing for an intentional, strategic reputation monitoring program.

To define the criteria for assessing risk or identifying issues for your organization, work closely with your marketing, product, support, corporate affairs, and legal teams, and any other appropriate stakeholders, to catalog the qualifying criteria for key risk scenarios (tire recalls, drug adverse events, catastrophic product failures, etc.). Consider these factors:

- The extent to which the risk is voluntary or man-made
- The extent to which the risk is product-related

- The extent to which the adverse effect is demonstrable in the field (frequency of occurrences)
- The severity of the risk (death, life-threatening injuries)

Some Lessons

You don't need all the details, processes, and tools in place before incorporating social media into your corporate reputation and crisis monitoring efforts. Here's what successful practitioners say:

- **Start small.** Test the waters with listening options that make the most sense for your business.
- **Survey the landscape.** Take a 12-16 month view of your company's reputation online (blogs, social networks, forums, communities, etc.) to benchmark. Develop a clear understanding of reputation and potential issues. Identify advocates and detractors, and engage them accordingly.
- **Think multichannel for all media assets.** Think from an online and offline perspective to manage your reputation and crises. Successful reputation management requires communication across all channels.
- **Seek feedback.** Measure where you can, using appropriate metrics. But don't forget to involve team members, partners, influencers, and especially detractors. Their feedback will be invaluable in enhancing your brand-monitoring and reputation-management efforts.
- **Identify threats early, and plan for "worst case."** Analyze social media and develop reputation dashboards that chart company reputation, issues, sentiment, and media penetration. Consider building a ready-to-launch "dark site" to activate in a worst-case scenario. Use this site to communicate speedily with key audiences and as a point of focus during a crisis.
- **Adjust.** Tailor your listening framework and keywords to different audience types, influence levels, and engagement styles. Pursue options that work for you; get rid of ones that don't.

The key to a successful strategic social listening program is not to build a monolithic program first; rather, it's to manage your reputation and avert or cope with crisis, thoughtfully considering what you want to listen for and where.

For assistance, ask The Leaning Tree Marketing about online reputation management, (eRepMgmt).