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Reputation management: the opportunity to improve your customer service

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Abstract

The digital era has extended marketing channels and provided a variety of new ways to communicate with consumers. Web 2.0 technologies, such as user generated content and social networking, have improved interaction between organisations and consumers, but also facilitated multi-way interaction between consumers (Barker & Roberts, 2010). Known as eWOM, this chatter has the ability to affect a company's reputation both positively and negatively, giving rise to the need for Online Reputation Management (ORM) (Chaffey, 2011). This study sought to identify current ORM practice from a marketing/management perspective, exploring the level understanding and implementation of ORM strategies. The results indicate that organisations understand the principles of reputation management (Greysier, 2009) but show little consistency in the language used to describe ORM or who to consult for assistance. Organisations demonstrated a range of strategies. A minority of organisations employed highly sophisticated social media guidelines, but around a third still had no strategies at all. The majority acknowledged a need but demonstrated only ad hoc processes to deal with issues. The research recommends a simple model to start the ORM process and identifies further areas of research to aid the construct of best practice guidelines.

Keywords:

Online reputation management, marketing communications, Internet, social media, e-WOM, reputation management.

Introduction

The digital era created an extension of organisations' channels to market and provided marketers with a variety of new technologies to communicate with consumers. The emergence of user generated content (UGC), social networking, mashups, content rating, blogging, video sharing, widgets, tagging and other web 2.0 technologies (Chaffey *et al.*, 2008, p12) has improved interaction between brands and consumers. It has facilitated a transition from the traditional monologue or 'organisation-to-consumer relationship' to a dialogue between organisations and consumers (Farquhar and Rowley, 2006). It has also provided a new arena for multi-way interaction between consumers. This is commonly termed e-WOM (electronic word of mouth), and consumers can now voluntarily discuss, recommend or vilify brands, products and services on a scale that was not previously possible (Barker & Roberts, 2010, Ferguson 2008, Gruen, *et al* 2006, Hennig-Thurau, *et al*, 2004). It has been noted that e-WOM can threaten the fortunes of brands discussed online, particularly in cases where criticism is articulated simultaneously by many online consumers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006, Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004, Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006, Sweeney, *et al*, 2008). Organisations should therefore have strategies in place to optimise the positive effects of UGC and minimise any negative issues. Chaffey (2011) identifies these strategies as online reputation management (ORM); defined as the act of controlling the reputation of an organisation through monitoring and controlling messages placed about an organisation. However, Online Reputation Management is not the only term used for this process. It is also known as Crisis Management (Fill, 2011), Crisis Communications (González-Herrero & Smith 2008, Mei, Bansal & Pang, 2010), Issues Management (Brown, 2007, 2009) and PR 2.0 (Phillip & Young, 2009) and, as Chaffey (2011) points out, there is a blurring of the lines between PR and digital marketing here.

Reputation management, or crisis management (Greyser, 2009) is well recognised offline but it appears that many organisations remain cautious when implementing Web 2.0 strategies in relation to reputation management (Howell, 2011). Measurement of online reputation is more uncertain and recognised as being challenging. Wertime & Fenwick (2010, p245) highlight that online interactions have very few of the informal behavioural cues used to assess reputation offline

This study seeks therefore to expand the literature in relation to ORM by investigating the levels of understanding and adoption, or not, amongst industry practitioners and exploring the different strategies that may be employed by organisations. In addition, it explored consumer e-WOM practice to identify their perceptions of ORM.

Methodology

The researchers took an interpretivist stance in undertaking this study using an inductive approach to identify how ORM is understood and used by marketing practitioners. The study used multiple methods and explored academic opinion, practitioner practice and consumer expectations in relation to reputation management, in order to provide a richer understanding of the drivers and barriers relating to ORM. The research addressed the following objectives:

- Study 1: To identify current ORM practice from a marketers / management perspective
- Study 2: To investigate whether consumers receive a response to negative reviews or feedback provided online and if any improvements are required

The initial study undertaken for this research was to observe the broad marketing environment in general and online reputation management practice in particular. Secondary data, from sources such as Mintel, Econsultancy, SmartInsights, WARC and Admap, along with 'social media' case studies, including Jarvis's Dell Hell (Rogers, Madsen & Howell, 2005) provided background to customer and practitioner experience in this area. For the primary study both

qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Qualitative research, in the form of semi-structured interviews, preceded a consumer survey distributed both online and in-person as detailed below.

Study 1: Evaluation of current online reputation marketers/management practice

The first study was designed to identify current online reputation marketing practice. The research firstly explored secondary sources which were considered together with the subjective experiences of individuals, collected through qualitative analysis (Burns, 2000) in the form of semi-structured individual interviews. The data was categorised and analysed using theme matching techniques (Cooper & Schindler, 2005) with the key similarities and differences triangulated against the current literature and secondary data. The study considered the differences in understanding and usage between three cohorts; a) B2B managers, b) B2C managers and c) industry experts/suppliers in the field of ORM. These groups were chosen to reflect key differences in roles and responsibility and gain a breadth of knowledge across the industry. The sample frame included Brand Managers, Marketing Managers, Digital Marketing Managers and Managing Directors with '*responsibility for managing their company's online presence*', across a range of organisations including Insurance, Online retailing, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and Information Technology (IT). The industry experts were identified via 'Reputation Online Top 100' (reputationonline.co.uk). In total fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. An initial pilot study was undertaken via a focus group discussion within one of the IT companies to discuss secondary findings and inform the interview structure.

Study 2: To investigate consumer perceptions of corporate reputations management, particularly in relation to negative comments

The second study was undertaken to investigate the consumer perspective of whether organisations appear to have any proactive strategies in place to deal with negative comments. Quantitative survey methods were used for this in the form of a structured questionnaire with questions graded via a seven point Likert scale. To ensure that the results would be generalisable, the respondent sample was designed to be demographically representative of the major age and gender segments of the UK population based on current ONS (2011) data. The survey was hosted online at SurveyMonkey.com and distributed via email using a non-probability snowball sampling technique (Saunders *et al.* 2009, p601). The survey link was seeded into friends, family, colleagues and contacts on social network groups, such as LinkedIn. The survey was also deployed in-person to maximise representativeness (Cohen *et al.* 2007) especially amongst the 65+ age group. In total, 257 usable surveys were received, with UK location being validated via IP2Location™ for the online responses.

Findings

This research set out to evaluate current online reputation management (ORM) practice from a marketer's perspective compared to consumer perception of corporate reputation practice.

Observations of current online reputation management practice

Case studies and secondary research identified that ORM strategies have been incorporated into the marketing policy of a number of organisations. Chaffey (2011) highlights that ORM should be one of the top objectives for organisations, who should use brand monitoring tools to review customer conversations and the sentiment expressed. However, there is evidence that many organisations do not have any form of monitoring or response process in place.

In Jarvis's Dell Hell, Rogers, Madsen & Howell (2005) note that one of the exacerbating factors for the negative e-WOM spiralling out of control was '*Dell's persistence to not get involved*'. More recently large IT companies such as Dell (Smart Insights, 2011), along with Intel (Intel, 2011) and IBM (IBM, 2011), have established detailed guidelines for staff response

and interaction (See Appendix 2). Intel trains employees on the use of social media for corporate purposes via its 'Social Media Centre of Excellence'. IBM's social media usage policy includes ethical guidelines and publishing policies for the business but also addresses employee use in a private setting and IBM offers a consultancy service on how to draft such company policies (IBM, 2011).

However, the secondary research indicated many companies still avoid engaging with social media. According to KeyNotes (2010) by mid 2010 only 33% of organisations had implemented online reputation auditing and monitoring tactics. More recently an eConsultancy survey identified that 39% of respondents (n = 414) were still not using any form of reputation monitoring technology, although this was an improvement on the 46% they recorded the previous year. (eConsultancy, 2010, 2011). Similarly, Avira (2011) highlighted that 36% of their respondents said they "*have no clue whether any negative information exists about them on the Internet as they have not taken the time to look*". O'Sullivan (2011) highlighted that organisations should listen to the social spaces ... '*as they'll be talking about you anyway*', citing South West Train problems trying to manage online comments when commuters used #swt to create their own customer information service.

Primary interviews identified a number of themes amongst the practitioners

Awareness of ORM appears to be high 'in principle', but, as per the literature, it is called many things including *Online Brand Management, Online PR, Social Media Monitoring and Online Crisis Management*.

Levels of operationalisation were found to vary too. All interviewees said that they had some form of social media or online feedback process in place. Some of these were via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or other general blogs, whereas others took the form of comment boxes or email request forms on their own websites to '*encourage online feedback*'. However, although they did not agree with '*incentivising reviews*' nearly all '*rewarded*' their most valuable/vocal online advocates by providing exclusive access to new products or services and offering '*freebees*'. Beyond that, the majority had no formal online monitoring in place. Only one employed an online monitoring agency, measuring OR separately from customer satisfaction and one had a PR '*listening agency*'. The majority used manual ad hoc staff systems or free tools such as Google Alerts, dealing with issues '*as and when*'. For evaluation the majority used the same systems on and offline, including Net Promoter Scores (NPS) and ad hoc surveys.

All but one had experienced negative online comments, one experiencing comments that '*spiralled out of control*', stating '*how personal & frustrating*' it felt. Others spoke more cheerfully of experiences where they had been able to deal with comments to create *positive perceptions*, as per Palmer (2010), but as one noted '*it's difficult to have an honest and open dialogue online in full view of the public*'. Although the majority had offline customer service level agreements (SLAs) in place none had the same procedures set up for online. All identified that a key area for improvement was the complexity of their online response process '*to make it easy to provide feedback and gather reviews*' and acknowledged the need to respond to customers '*preferably within hours*' and of having a '*maximum 24 hour window*'. When thinking about who was responsible for ORM, there was consensus that on a day to day basis it fell to '*everyone within the business*' but there were contradictions as to who should establish the strategy cited as to whether it should be PR, Social Media agencies or Marketing Directors/Head of Marketing. Only one participant felt that it should be a '*joint collaboration between the Marketing and Customer Services teams*'.

All identified that this was a serious future need that they would look to invest in or improve within next 12 months, ranking ORM as important (8.7 on a scale of 1-10) and definitely understood the benefit: '*The world has changed for good, reputation is no longer a nice to have, it's often a rule of the game based on consumer expectations*' (brand manager, FMCG).

Key issues and barriers identified include: *Investment required in skilled resources, Investment required in monitoring tools, Inadequate monitoring tools, Insufficient internal communications of guidelines & best practices, Inhibition of the unknown, Inertia, it's seen to be easier to ignore until crisis occurs.* One participant emphasised that in order to gain budget and board level investment in ORM, *“the ability to equate ORM to revenue, risk or increase brand awareness is required”*.

Experts' views on the awareness of ORM

All of the experts used the term ORM but thought it was not universally understood, *‘ORM is typically understood by the Communications Manager, but Marketing Managers/Directors tend to ask for support with risk management, issues management, crisis management or ‘how can I get these gremlins off my Facebook page’.* Other cited clients saying ‘Online PR’ and ‘PR Online Crisis Management’. Their perception is that few organisations are adopting ORM, *‘definitely a rarity’*, with two strategies appearing *‘reactive and proactive’*. One concluded *‘people are familiar with the concept of reputation management in traditional media but they really haven’t got a clue of how to go about it in the online world’*.

Experts recommend the proactive route, with a documented strategy for ORM incorporating a crisis strategy, the level of detail, time and investment dependent on the type of organisation. One expert explained *‘FMCG just don’t invite the passion for a large number of comments. By comparison mobile phone companies experience a diversity of consumer trust, reaction and connection to the brand’*. Experts recommend undertaking an ‘online audit’ - not to identify whether or not they are being talked about but, *‘whether the topics that matter most to them are being talked about’*. However, they also advocated not spending vast amounts of time - *‘try and research in the way a consumer would, but take a snap shot of recent & visible posts’* then follow that with continuous activity including 1) getting a voice online in key editorial websites and blogs, 2) managing relevant online communities [Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etc] and 3) looking out for ad hoc issues when there has been a negative reaction. Finally, *‘prepare guidelines’* that should A) form part of your employment contracts... *‘so you can fire someone without being taken to a tribunal’* advised one expert, and B) that should be shared throughout the organisation, because *‘employees are your best voices’* and *‘you must get their buy in’*. The experts emphasised the need for investment, reminding us that social media is not free but needs serious consideration and a serious head count.

In terms of technology, experts identified many tools and software solutions, but none had found one that was sufficient, all resorting to using a mix of tools, manual searches and traditional research such as surveys, focus groups and panels. Most measured sentiment, but one dissenter pointed out that *‘it’s about 45%-60% accurate’*. Some had adapted the NPS system, one tagging comments/reviews as **deduct**, **passive** or **promoter** to come up with the *recommendability score*. They highly recommend measuring and looking for correlations to traditional brand, acquisition or retention metrics, *‘e.g., do additional Twitter followers and mentions increase brand awareness, sales, web visits, basket size, bounce rates, repeat buys, etc.’* In line with practitioners, they highlighted issues of *Limited skilled resources, Integration of touch points, Equating ORM and online to corporate objectives, Recognition of ROI, Inertia – simpler to continue current business methodology, Ability to measurement & identify correlations with business rhythms and past purchasing figures, Inadequate monitoring tools, Costly manual web searching, Internal communications of guidelines & strategy, Anxiety of the speed of response, Leadership team recognising that it is a conversation, Underestimating the power of online, Inability to manage “citizen journalism” or employees comments.*

Results from consumers

Mintel (2010) identified that 46% of consumers comment on and review retailers’ products and services online, echoing Lord (2009) who estimated 43% of consumers sought anonymous online reviews. Within the primary research, 56% of respondents had made a comment or

review online within last 12 months (n=257), of which 62% were classified as ‘a negative comment about a product, service or brand’. The respondents typically made comments on multiple sites, including social media, company websites, intermediaries and review sites. However, 56% had not received a response, but interestingly 54% had not anticipated one. Of the 44% that did receive a response, 41% of them had to wait more than 48 hours (see Appendix 3 to 6). 63% of respondents provided recommendations on how organisations could improve their ORM. Interestingly one respondent commented. The tops 10 recommendations are listed below. It can be seen that the majority themes were around wanting a response/quick response; wanting their comments to be listened to/auctioned; wanting to deal with people not computers and wanting the response to be trustworthy as outlined in Figure 1. Other respondents used phrases such as ‘link with customer service’, ‘involve more staff’, ‘be polite & efficient’ and ‘don’t use fake reviews’.

Figure 1: Top 10 Recommendations for ORM (n=257)

18%	Respond
14%	Respond Quickly
9%	Listen
9%	Take Onboard Reviews & Make Changes
6%	Less Automated Responses/More "Human"
5%	Be Honest
4%	Advertise Reviews
4%	Monitor What is Being Mentioned Online
4%	Make It Easy To Provide Comments & Reviews
4%	Employ Dedicated Staff to Manage Feedback

Conclusion

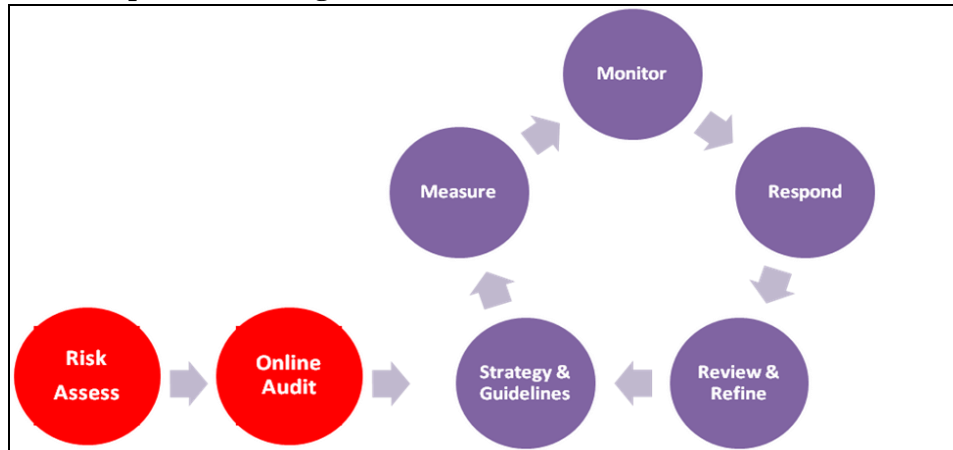
The definition of ORM is clear but its use as an industry standard term is in its infancy, with organisations using a raft of corporate terms to express the challenges around ORM rather than specifically mentioning ORM. This highlights a limited awareness and lack of knowledge in the subject. Organisations are aware that reputation is paramount, both on and offline, but online reputation strategies are not as robust as offline strategies. In order for employees or agencies to respond positively, ORM strategies, including crisis strategies, are required with guidelines to outline the approach, processes and language that serve the best interests of the company. The contradiction between ‘not incentivising reviews’ but offering rewards for positive comments demonstrates the current confusion.

In order to assist with ORM a host of different technologies such as semantic analysis, natural language processing and machine learning have emerged, but it has been seen that software cannot manage reputation alone. Reputation management requires skilled resources to respond and make decisions around individual comments. There remains a need for more effective ORM software to help monitor and manage the online environment.

The research identified a number of barriers, which include: investment, inadequate monitoring tools, insufficient internal communications of guidelines and best practices, inhibition of the unknown and inertia. Nonetheless, the trend is towards improving ORM within the next 12 months, with experts seeing an increase in demand for their services.

A process is recommended that begins with a risk assessment and review of business and marketing objectives. This should be followed by the online audit. This will enable managers to develop their ORM strategy and establish processes for on-going monitoring, management and benchmarking. This leads us to an initial model of the core elements of this process as outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Online Reputation Management Model



Feeding into this, both literature and the consumer study highlighted that consumers feel they are not being listened to nor provided with a response from organisations, when providing feedback and making comments online. The five top recommendations for improvement consist of *Listen => Respond => Respond quickly => Don't just use automated email responses => Make reviews visible*. This reflects Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) who noted ‘*People want companies to take part in a conversation as human beings with names, points of views, and an ability to listen*’.

It is clear that some organisations are making the process of providing feedback and reviews too complicated and failing to respond or interact with comments that are made. This causes frustration and customer dissatisfaction, as corroborated by Kimmel (2010, p177) who explains that “opening channels of communication goes a long way towards building trust in consumer and company relationships by reducing the two psychological factors; uncertainty and anxiety”.

The initial model described above indicates an opportunity that exists for an all-encompassing ORM monitoring process to assist organisations. It is clear that organisations are in need of such guidance and advice for managing their online relationships and the simple ORM model is the first stage of attempting to assist them in managing their online reputations.

Further research is recommended in relation to identifying the priority points for ORM. This would help to identify the effects of newer web 3.0 media such as mobile messaging/‘BBM’ (BlackBerry Messenger) and to explore how new search personalisation software such as Google+ might exacerbate the spread of positive or negative eWOM and develop the model described above.

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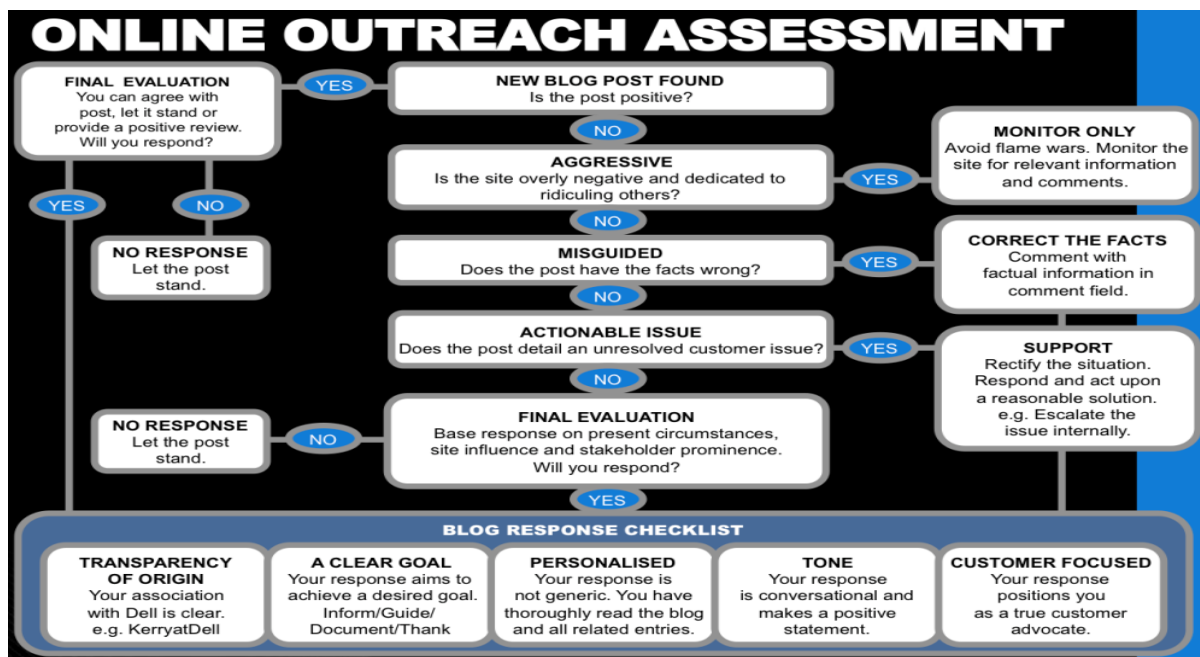
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Appendix

Appendix 1: Summary of research methods

	Organisations	UK Online Population
Who	33% B2B organisations, 33% B2C and 33% industry experts, contacts responsible for managing company reputation, with budget responsibility	A selection of UK online population, 55% male and 45% female
Where	In-person at convenient location for interviewee or by telephone	Online Survey sent via eMail In-person
When	Research period, before designing the questionnaires	Research period continuous until quota is met
How	In-person & telephone in-depth semi structured interviews	Survey Monkey & In-person

Appendix 2: Dell online outreach assessment guidelines (smart insights, 2011)



Appendix 3: Anticipation of Response

Anticipation of Response		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	40%	37
No	54%	50
Undecided	6%	5
Total		92
Skipped		165

Appendix 4: Receipt of Response

Receipt of Response		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	45%	41
No	55%	51
Total		92
Skipped		165

Appendix 5: Consumer survey results

Satisfaction With Response		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Extremely satisfied	13%	5
Moderately satisfied	28%	11
Slightly satisfied	31%	12
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	8%	3
Slightly dissatisfied	3%	1
Moderately dissatisfied	5%	2
Extremely dissatisfied	13%	5
Total		39
Skipped		218

Appendix 6: Timeframe of Responses

Timeframe of Response		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
0-4 hours	13%	5
5-8 hours	8%	3
9-12 hours	5%	2
13-48 hours	33%	13
48+ hours	41%	16
Total		39
Skipped		218