

# Executive Reputation Management: *How's Your Digital Profile?*

When's the last time you Googled yourself? While it may seem vain, it's also smart, because that's exactly what other people do before or after they meet you for the first time. If managed well, your digital profile therefore can play an important role in defining your personal brand, promoting corporate agendas, and helping you stand out in a crowded field.

The especially good news about your digital brand - or online reputation - is that you have a lot of control over which information is served up by Google and Bing about you.

It seems that executives are becoming more aware of this, because the number of reputation management engagements we worked on over the past year tripled. Some of the assignments were funded to combat negative press coverage, but most were geared towards gaining a competitive advantage: for new business development, personal brand building, and executives-in-transition.

This article summarizes what executives need to know about digital profile optimization and online reputation management, and the core steps to making it happen.

## Step One: Establish Your Benchmark

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First, you need to figure out what your digital profile looks like, and an audit can get you there.

Using a clean browser (i.e., incognito in Chrome or private browsing in Firefox), do a search of your name and its likely variations in both Google and Bing. So, for me, that would be "tim bourgeois", "tim bourgeois east coast catalyst", and "tim bourgeois boston". (Note: you may or may not need to use quotation marks, depending on the uniqueness of your name.) Take screenshots of the first five pages of results.

1. Do an image search using the same keywords. Take a screenshot of one page of results.
2. Create an inventory of your owned media assets. This includes your company website and blog, press releases, advertorials, and the like; as well as digital platforms that you manage for yourself, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, a personal blog, profiles on the NY Times or Wall Street Journal, etc.

3. Create an inventory of your earned media assets. This is anything that's not directly managed by you or your company: article quotes, bylined articles, photos in articles, and the like. You can do this by conducting the search described in step #1 above, and sifting through the initial 100 results. Unless your name is Mark Zuckerberg or Richard Branson, many of your press mentions or bylines will likely be dated or in industry-specific publications, so you'll have to dig a bit to find them.
4. In LinkedIn, click on "Who's Viewed Your Profile", and then "How You Rank For Profile Views". This will give you an idea of how you compare against your peer group, as defined by LinkedIn. (Note: Expect these results to be wonky - LinkedIn needs to do more work on this feature, but it's still a valuable benchmark.)
5. Create a Klout account. This service provides you with a score that measures your aggregate digital influence - across social networks and digital properties (such as websites and blogs, in addition to Twitter and Facebook).

The output of these six tactics will provide you with a solid assessment of the current "state of your digital profile," and will also allow you to measure progress moving forward. In the aggregate, it will serve as your digital profile benchmark.

## Step Two: Get Your Digital House In Order

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The steps described provide you with an understanding of the state of your digital profile today, and also help you identify both problems and opportunities. Depending on the strength of your profile, the following tactics will vary in importance, but they are all relevant to executives of every stripe.

- **Build a wall between your professional and personal life.** 80% of the executives I work with prefer to keep these worlds separate, and this is a philosophy that I share. Some overlap is unavoidable, but it usually makes sense to privatize Facebook and Instagram, so personal information doesn't show up in the search engines. (Twitter is a unique platform, which is addressed later.)
- **Get religious about LinkedIn.** Optimizing your LinkedIn account addresses two issues related to reputation management: 1) A well-managed account will quickly bubble to the top of search engine results, and 2) It will force you to digitally document your resume and every conceivable job-related asset that you want to promote (volunteering, awards, certifications, etc.), which can be re-purposed across other online networks and platforms. Once you have the account in good shape, upgrade to the paid version, which is about \$500/year for the basic premium plan; if you're in aggressive job hunting or sales mode, the annual fee will roughly double.

- **If you don't have them already, create Twitter and Google+ accounts;** if you do have them, make sure they reflect your personal brand accurately. Even if you don't want to actively Tweet, make sure to set up an account and follow ~100 accounts (people and companies) relevant to your industry, and re-Tweet occasionally. If you already have a personal Twitter account and use it primarily for personal interests, create a professional account with a unique, corporate-centric profile. Google+ doesn't get a whole lot of attention in the U.S. (yet) or outside of search engine optimization circles, but Google thinks highly of it, and so you should, too, if you're looking to optimize your digital profile.

## Step Three: Optimization

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Getting the most from your digital profile requires attention to three key areas:

1. **Being active on the critical platforms.** Being present and active on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Google+ is critical, as is understanding how these platforms work at a basic level, because it isn't advisable to outsource these activities in a wholesale manner - authenticity matters.
2. **Perfecting messaging.** Designing and delivering a messaging strategy that is both compelling and consistent across platforms is just as important as being there. So you'll want your Twitter profile to be an obvious summary of your LinkedIn profile, for example. A steady drumbeat of integrated storytelling across channels will pay dividends over time, by way of new, unexpected opportunities.
3. **Expanding reach.** After you have the fundamentals in place, it's time to transition to promotion. Specific promotional tactics will depend on your personal preferences and skills. Some executives loathe Twitter but are addicted to LinkedIn, so their strategies are LinkedIn-centric. Others bristle at the idea of compiling a 700-word blog post but are exceptional at 140-character commentary, so their strategies are built around Twitter. With the vast quantity of digital outlets available today - dozens around the world with more than 10 million users - not to mention traditional offline communities with powerful online presences (Forbes, Fast Company, Fortune, etc.), it's not difficult to devise a plan that plays to an executive's strengths.

## Think Like a Marathoner

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The good news about online reputation management is that for 99% of senior executives, it is largely controllable; that is to say, you can determine the results that Google or Bing serve up when your name is searched. The bad news is that it's difficult and usually inadvisable to try to make this happen quickly. The search engines don't like abrupt movements in their results pages, and taking shortcuts often leads to short-lived improvements that fade quickly.

With that in mind, I tell clients that a 90-day time period is usually required for meaningful changes to be apparent, and it can take much longer with a crisis management-style assignment. The ideal duration is 24-52 weeks to define a strategy and put the core pieces in place to build upon, and then ~2 hours/week thereafter to maintain.

For executives who rely on their personal brands to get their employers a competitive advantage in new business, partnership, or recruiting scenarios, investment in digital profile management - either through the company or using personal resources - is a no-brainer (and, indeed, often incorporated into their job descriptions). For those who are new to online reputation management - the vast majority, since most of these techniques are new - there is a learning curve, but one that seems to be making it to the crosshairs of more and more executives every day.

## About Tim Bourgeois & East Coast Catalyst

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