

The Importance of Online Reputation for UK Universities

'The rapidly changing world' has become something of a cliché in recent years. It remains true, nonetheless, and few areas have become quite so susceptible to change than the academic world. New universities, student loans and fees, numbers of graduates, sources of funding, the devaluing of traditional academic courses, falls in science graduates, the list is almost endless.

These changes themselves are dramatic enough but they happen to have coincided with what is possibly the greatest change to have taken place in society since the industrial revolution – the birth of the Internet. While some might disagree with such a claim, what is undisputable is the impact of the Internet on the communication of information and ideas; and, crucially, the perception of companies, government – and academic institutions – to an extraordinarily wide audience.

The Internet Revolution

The Internet is revolutionising the way people air their views. Increasingly sceptical about the claims made by marketers, politicians and others with a vested interest, people are resorting in huge numbers to sharing their opinions in online media such as blogs, social networking sites, reviews and chat rooms.

The result is a vast repository of comment and opinion, which research has revealed plays a far more powerful influence on people than traditional editorial media coverage and even word-of-mouth.

By monitoring and evaluating the sentiment of online media, including 'consumer-generated'



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comments, organisations can gain a significant advantage. At the same time, failing to do so can place them at a dangerous disadvantage, which given the speed and ubiquity of the Internet can lead to reputations that have taken generations to build to be destroyed in minutes.

Such problems are further exacerbated by the highly connected world of the web, where even minor problems in an insignificant back-water can rapidly turn into a full-blown crisis in the full gaze of the world; and, unlike traditional media, coverage on the Internet can hang around for years to be dredged up every time somebody carries out a search.

In this new type of media world, new rules apply. For companies this means messages that were once crafted in the carefully controlled environment of the marketing department can be replaced by anyone with access to the Internet. For universities it means that a carefully cultivated reputation, possibly developed over centuries, can be pulled apart in seconds on a student blog. Of course, some will dismiss this, but they do so at their peril. This white paper examines why.

Under the Spotlight

Nowadays, media coverage is not so much a question of being *in* the spotlight as being *under* the spotlight. As organisations, including universities and other educational establishments, are held more accountable by the public and the authorities for their actions and performance so it follows that those who manage their reputations are under increasing pressure to create and defend a positive image.

Heads of Marketing are similarly under the spotlight. With the continual headache of demonstrating ROI, it is crucial to be able to show how successfully a communications strategy has been executed. Marketing budgets must be justified – tangible proof of changes in perception and reputation is required. In a world where corporate behaviour, social responsibility, sustainability, ethics and accountability are increasingly scrutinised, measuring sentiment among audiences is higher on the agenda than ever before.

For many universities, managing reputation traditionally involved media relations, conferences and symposia, the prospectus, student and alumni newsletters and some 'tactical' advertising for new staff, research posts, etc. More recently this has grown to include web sites, many of which are highly sophisticated.

Social media, however, have been largely neglected. This is not to say that university marketing departments do not 'keep an eye' on online news media and key blogs, but today that is simply not enough. In today's world, sentiment can change and be

transmitted to millions at the click of a mouse.

Sharpening the Focus

Media coverage can only tell a university so much about changes in perception and reputation, providing a very limited story about the attitudes that really govern the success or failure of a university: the views of the academic community, students, businesses and other stakeholders whose support and enthusiasm are the lifeblood of the university and its revenue and investment.

Up to now, therefore, measuring the effect of outbound messaging on opinion has called for additional investment in market research, for example surveys and focus groups.

The Internet now offers an alternative, highly cost-effective approach. It has become an open forum for students, lecturers, teachers, businesses and other university 'stakeholders' to share their views in an unsolicited and – just as crucially – uninhibited manner. Blogs and other social media provide a rich vein of research information as well as being extremely influential and credible.

Indeed, the Web has been called "the world's largest focus group" and is now a tremendously valuable source of information about the way universities are perceived. People share their positive and negative experiences online and those opinions are propagated and debated very quickly in what is an inherently highly connected environment spanning the globe.



The Role of Online Reviews

Just how important this has become was highlighted in research commissioned by Spectrum Consulting in December, 2008. This revealed that 82% of the UK population are now likely to consult an online review before choosing a high-level product or service, compared to just over 50% who would be influenced by newspaper or magazine editorial.

What is true when looking for a car or holiday is just as true when looking for a university: social media, especially online reviews, play a critical role in the decision-making process.

Complacency could easily be the precursor of disaster. Here are just a few examples from millions of pieces of recent online coverage, that demonstrate how comment over the Internet is providing perspectives that are currently invisible to the organisations concerned:

- Users of a new mobile communication device gave frank feedback on the product, problems with the supplier and their purchase intentions
- Employees of a company that went into administration were giving their version of events,

including comments about poor management practices

- Customers of a well-known brand wrote scathing reviews of its contact centre service
- Football supporters shared their sceptical opinions of the club's commercial sponsors
- A car manufacturer's new advertising campaign was heavily criticised
- Numerous blogs devoted solely to one new technology product have built up a significant fan-base, which has allowed users to troubleshoot among themselves

However you choose to look at it, the conclusion that social media must be taken very seriously cannot be ignored. Granted, some organisations now monitor volume of online coverage, including blogs; but volume in itself is no indicator of perception. Tone as well as volume is critical to in-depth understanding.

Automation Comes of Age

The technology revolution that gave us the Internet has thankfully also given us the necessary tools to understand and manage it.

Consequently, the evaluation process needs to adapt, moving away from human analysis and a focus on traditional media to embrace new and consistently accurate automated systems for capturing, measuring and evaluating information across the plethora of modern-day sources of news and commentary, including online word-of-mouth.

Portfolio Communications, which produces the *Universities Online Reputation Audit*, uses technology developed by its sister company, Spectrum, to do this. Spectrum has developed expertise in sophisticated search engine tools, which allow it to conduct and aggregate complex searches of online news, blogs, online reviews and other social media. The resulting URLs are then 'scraped' to extract data for automated analysis.

Automation versus the Brain

Most automated systems have tried to replicate the brain. Spectrum believes this is a mistake. The brain is a hugely complex human organ and no two brains are ever the same. The brain has evolved over millions of years, of which 'modern man' represents just a tiny fraction. What is a superb piece of 'machinery' for coping with the complexity of human survival is actually remarkably poor – and surprisingly slow – at the cognitive demands of data coding.

But while computers are poor at replicating the brain, they are superb at handling and analysing large volumes of data, incredibly quickly and with 100% consistent accuracy; and, in this respect, automated systems are *far better* than the human brain.

Advanced text mining systems developed by Spectrum use sentiment 'dictionaries', which like the highly effective Spam filters now coming into use take advantage of conditional probability based on Bayesian statistics and neural networks to continuously improve their analysis.



They achieve this through building an increasingly detailed understanding, based on 'learning' from an accumulation of data over time. In this way, computers are able to 'remember' what human analysts forget the minute they move on to the next project; and they subsequently apply that experience to future data.

The automated analysis of online data allows universities to gain deeper insight into the world around them, offering a highly cost-effective understanding of what is happening across the areas they operate in.

The price tag associated with a university determining its 'share of voice' versus competitors has been largely prohibitive for many because this has always required a lot of additional – and expensive – data. Now, using automated analysis, universities can gain in-depth information on their competitors and how they compare with them without the need for expensive and time-consuming human analysis of media coverage or the commissioning of expensive market research.

Universities are now facing the challenges of an economic downturn, the likes of which have not been seen for generations. This will create both challenges

and opportunities. National newspapers are printing front page stories on 'British jobs for British graduates', which is just one issue generating vast amounts of online discussion.

Universities work for the common good, but it is inevitable that those which communicate success will be much better placed to weather the downturn than those that fail to do so.

Understanding that discussion – and where a university sits within it – is crucial.

The Universities Online Reputation Audit is published quarterly by Portfolio Communications. For more information visit:

www.portfolio-web.net/universitiesora

T: 020 7240 6959
E: basil.kelly@portfoliocomms.com

Portfolio Communications
Russell Chambers
The Piazza
Covent Garden
London
WC2E 8AA