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AN ONLINE REPUTATION THAT COUNTS

Linda McCarthy

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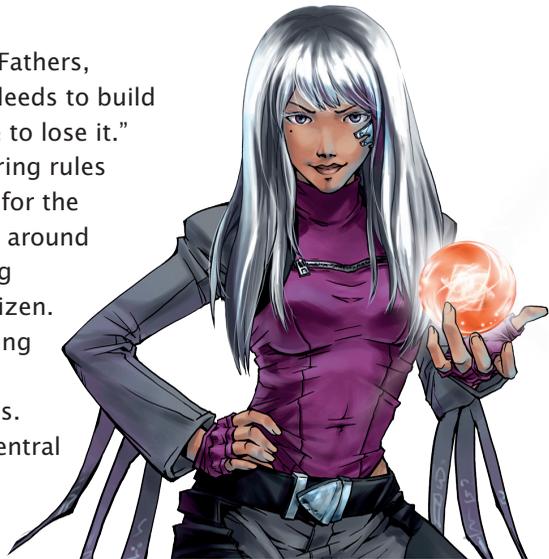
An Online Reputation That Counts

Linda McCarthy

An Online Reputation That Counts

According to one of America's Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, "It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it." Franklin was greatly concerned with sharing rules and guidelines to produce good citizens for the new American nation. If Mr. Franklin was around today, he would most likely be promoting similar rules for being a good **digital** citizen. What is good digital citizenship? Displaying appropriate, responsible behavior when using all forms of technology and devices. Building a positive online reputation is central to being a good digital citizen.

Sadly, the Internet provides ample opportunities for a single bad decision to affect your reputation for decades to come. This guide provides advice on how to help protect your online reputation from known threats—identity thieves, scammers, and self-inflicted damage. It also explains *why* it's so important to protect your online reputation and what to do if it's already been damaged.



Understanding the Stakes

When you walk on the beach, you leave footprints that recall a small part of your adventure to the travelers who follow. Later guests could retrace your steps, tenderly stepping across hot sand, stopping to collect shells; leisurely strolling to the tide's edge to wade in the receding surf. CSI fans could examine those prints more closely, deducing your weight by their depth, your height by their distance, and even the speed of your gait. When you interact online, you leave a similar trail that others may be able to follow. However, your digital footprint imparts a great deal more information about you and what you do online. And, unlike those fleeting/temporary marks in the sand, it won't fade away or disappear with the morning tide.

The profile of you, created by your digital footprint, forms the base of your online reputation. Do you spend your time online looking at colleges and exploring career sites, or do you frequent inappropriate or “trashy” sites? Do your social networking status posts share important news and issues? Or, are they filled with snide comments, insults, and complaints? In the last photos you posted, were you serving others or partying hard? When friends speak of you online, are their comments something you'd share with your mother? All these aspects, and more, combine to form your online reputation.

If you haven't thought about your online reputation, you should. College admissions officers are. As college board vice president James Montoya points out, the people who evaluate applications at most schools are “often under 30 years old and often Facebook users themselves.” *Of course* they'll check out your online reputation. So will employers—70% of employers have *turned down* job applicants because they didn't like what they found online (www.microsoft.com/security/resources/reserach.aspx).

Teens aren't the only ones making mistakes with their online reputations. A number of working adults have recently found themselves unemployed as a direct result of their online activities and reputations. This is especially true of fields in which a wholesome reputation is expected—teachers, police officers, etc. A negative online reputation could haunt you for years to come. Want to land the job of your dreams or run for public office someday? Then you really need to consider your behavior and monitor your reputation today.

If you're like most kids, you have 24x7 access to more bandwidth than you know what to do with. Smart phones, laptops, gaming consoles with video broadcast capability—the amount of technology in the average 13-year-old's room is amazing. Hopefully, your parents have had open discussions with you about usage guidelines and family safety settings. If they haven't, they just might not be as knowledgeable about technology. Teens routinely check and post status updates from mobile phones as well as laptops, intuitively tapping through the selections to post photos directly to Facebook walls. At the same time, a full third of adults admit to feeling totally overwhelmed by social networking media. And there's the rub. While social media is certainly not the **ONLY** source of online reputation disasters, it is certainly the most frequent. That's especially true for Millennials.

Your parents aren't Digital Natives, but you are. For example, you grew up with round-the-clock access to the Internet and they did not. That means you need to be really smart about what you do with that smart phone—and other pieces of technology. You need to understand that **ALL** posts, messages, videos, and pictures become part of your online reputation the moment you click Enter.

Knowing the Villains

Online reputations don't simply tarnish themselves. They have help, such as:

- Things you **really** shouldn't have posted.
- “Friends” you don't actually know
- Friends you do know who aren't using common sense
- Cyberbullies
- Scammers and identity thieves

Things you really shouldn't have posted

Over a billion pieces of content are shared every day on social networking sites. That doesn't include emails, text messages, or YouTube videos. While it's incredibly easy to share everything, that doesn't mean that you should. Some things—like your full name, birth date, social security number, telephone number, home address, or even school—simply shouldn't be shared for security reasons. Other

things shouldn't be shared because they can make you look bad or may get you into trouble. Is it likely that your blog or Tweet will go viral? You never know. But you don't want to be seeing online pictures of you and your friends doing inappropriate things when you are interviewing for the job of your life.

Things you really shouldn't have posted generally fit into four categories:

- Posts or photos that make you look senseless or ignorant

This includes posts filled with profanity and insults. Reality TV ratings aside, in real life, nobody likes "mean." If it's directed at your school teachers or other students, it might even get you suspended. That's what happened in 2011 to Donny a California 10th-grader. He was suspended for making rude comments about a teacher on his Facebook wall. Many schools are now keeping tabs on social media. Old Saybrook High School in Connecticut recently held a freshman assembly that featured actual Facebook photos, updates, and Tweets from current students. While the students weren't happy about the invasion of privacy, administrators say they got their point across that online simply isn't that private.

One of the best pieces of advice I was ever given was to walk away from the keyboard when upset. We've all said things when we were angry that we later regretted. Flame offline at the people closest to you and the odds are pretty good that your mom, boyfriend/girlfriend, or best friend will forgive you. Flame online and people you don't even know could be offended long after you've gotten over what set you off in the first place.



- Posts or photos that feature you doing something illegal or immoral

It's really amazing how many people document their own stupidity. "Five years ago, after a night out I'd get on the phone with my girlfriends the next day to debrief on the night's events," says Nina Funnell, a researcher at the University of New South Wales in Australia. "What's happening now is that debrief has gone public and comes fully uncensored and illustrated. For some,

the photos on Facebook are even more important than enjoying the night itself—often because they were so drunk they couldn't remember anything they did.” If you're underage drinking with friends, don't pull out a camera phone and post the photos online! Instead, start looking for new friends.

Cyberbullying also falls into this category because the hurtful or mean ongoing harassment can be damaging, immoral, have legal consequences, and even lethal. Don't do it—ever!

- Polarizing or potentially offensive posts

The Internet provides endless opportunities to share your thoughts, tell your friends what you like, and participate in thoughtful discussions and forums on issues that pique your interest. But keep in mind that some issues are controversial and might offend potential employers. We're not saying that you should hide who you are, but you might want to think before you publicly “Like” information that could get you into trouble later on.

Or, sometimes right away. Caitlin Davis was swiftly booted off the New England Patriots cheerleading squad when Facebook pictures began to circulate showing the 18-year-old using a Sharpie to draw swastikas on an unconscious pal.

In theory, online forums allow for intelligent, thoughtful discussion of important social and economic policy issues. In practice, a lot of flaming, angry, attack-style political posts are made, guaranteed to offend at least half the people reading them. Unless you plan to never work, study, play, or socialize with anyone who has political convictions different from yours, you might want to air your politics among friends and not the general public. You might not be thinking about a political career today, but 20 years from now you could be. Abraham Lincoln cemented his political presence with the 256 words that form the Gettysburg Address. You could kill your political future with a single 140-character Tweet.

- Skanky photos and videos

Suggestive photos run the gamut from inappropriate to just plain disgusting. The worst photos are those distributed via phone as photo messages called Sexts. Sexting doesn't simply tarnish your online reputation; it can destroy it. Sexts can be forwarded from phone to phone to Wall to an amateur porn site in seconds. Once those photos are online, the damage is permanent. Ask Paris Hilton whose boyfriend shared their amateur sex tape with the world. Think your boyfriend or girlfriend wouldn't share? In March 2011, *Glamour* magazine polled men about sexting: 80% reported that a friend *had* shared a sext with them. And that was men. Imagine what the percentage might be for teenage boys.... In addition to embarrassment, those inappropriate photos can have serious

effects on your career—just ask Charlotte Campbell. In 2010, the 23-year-old aspiring British

Wouldn't wear it? Dont share it!

This striking short video asks the question, "What if you had to wear everything you posted on a T-shirt?"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoPydiQwvUE&NR=1>

model won the Miss York City contest, becoming the first single mother to qualify for the Miss Great Britain finals. Almost immediately, Charlotte was stripped of her title over allegations she posted nude photos of herself on Facebook. One careless decision can see a life's dreams go up in smoke.

Charlotte was not underage. If you're under 18, sexting isn't just disgusting—it's child pornography. Teenagers have actually been charged with distributing child pornography. Those kids ended up with massively trashed online reputations, plus actual criminal records. Some even had to register as sex offenders.

Sexting is hands down the dumbest thing you can do with your smart phone. Don't.

Friends you don't actually know

When Eric from Novato, California, was 13, he had a MySpace page with over a thousand “friends.” Did he even know a thousand people? Of course not. Now,

Eric's 19 and he only “friends” people he knows. He realized it was a waste of time letting friends that he did not know into his world. It also pulled him into some strange conversations with obvious creeps. Reduce the reading on your creep meter and only “friend” your real friends. Accepting requests from people you don't know also increases your risks of being scammed or having your social networking account hacked.



Friends you do know who aren't using common sense

In the real world, you are judged by the company you keep. Online, you are judged by the content you post and the content posted by your online friends. That means you need to keep track of what your online friends are saying about themselves—especially what they say on your profile. Friends who engage in stupid or illegal behavior will leave a bad impression on everyone who reads *your* profile.

Most people, at some time in life, find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The trick is to have a plan in advance. If you're under 20, at some point your friends will most likely do something stupid (like underage drinking, vandalism, etc.). Then they'll compound that stupidity by whipping out a cell phone and recording it. Your goal should be to make it to age 30 without starring in one of those videos. Your plan today? Walk away. It's not easy to do, but if your friends begin documenting their mistakes, you *need* to remove yourself from the situation.

Webcams, cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter can record moments you never want to forget as well as moments you truly wish you could forget.

Once you walk away, you also need to decide whether you should talk to a responsible adult.

Also think about the long term. Your Friends today might not be your friends tomorrow. But today's images will remain regardless.



Friends recording their
stupidity to post online?
Walk away!

Cyberbullies

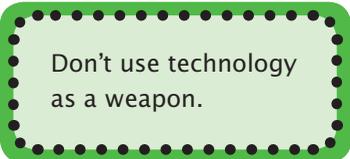
Unfortunately, digital drama is most likely something you have already witnessed or been part of. You may even have been on the receiving end. If you were on the bullying end, you probably didn't set out to be a bully. You may have been pulled into what seemed like harmless teasing but then turned into full-blown bullying. The problem is you are part of the bullying net that has been cast. You may have emails of the bullying, text messages, and maybe even posted messages on Facebook. What starts out as simple teasing can backfire and, if you are involved, you could be facing some big-time trouble.

Cyberbullies can be incredibly aggressive. One Illinois mother claims her son was targeted by a group of cyberbullies who impersonated her son on Facebook by using the site to tarnish his reputation. Collecting hundreds of friends, the bullies used the site to make the boy appear racist, and questioned his sexuality (a common theme among cyberbullies and, sadly, linked to several widely publicized suicides). The Illinois mother—and her son—have filed a lawsuit asking for over \$50,000 in damages. An interesting fact highlighted by this case is that when subpoenaed or contacted by law enforcement, Facebook can and does disclose IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. Those addresses allow law enforcement to track a cyberbully hiding behind a fake name to the person actually responsible.

After a series of highly publicized suicides, prosecutors are also taking cyberbullying very seriously. In Issaquah, Washington, two girls aged 11 and 12 have been charged with cyberstalking and first-degree computer trespassing after hacking into a classmate's Facebook page and posting lewd messages. Dan Satterberg, the prosecutor in King County, Washington, comments that, "Many kids think that, on a social media site, their actions will be anonymous and they are free to bully, harass and intimidate another person." If convicted, the girls could each face up to 30 days in juvenile detention.

Bullying online hurts, can cause deaths, and result in jail time for the bullies. We have seen too many senseless suicides over bullying. Don't use technology as a weapon. If your friends are doing the bullying, maybe it's time to find some new friends. Remember that bullies like company. Don't get pulled into their posse. Report. Block. Stop bullies. We know that sounds a lot easier than it is.

Also, do what you can to help cyberbullying victims. If you know about someone being bullied online, you need to report it at several levels. Social networking sites like Facebook allow you to report and block cyberbullies and imposters. So, be



Don't use technology
as a weapon.

responsible by reporting the bullying to the social networking site. Then, follow up by reporting the problem to a responsible adult. Maybe even get creative to help the person being bullied. That's what two girls from Mill Valley, CA did when they heard about a girl named Olivia who was being bullied. Rather than

position themselves as bystanders, they started a campaign called "Olivia's Letters." They received over 14,000 letters from around the country to help boost her spirits. Those letters have turned into a book and a lesson plan. Those girls did not just stand by.

Adults often miss online problems like cyberbullying, because they are not asked for help. Don't wait for a teacher or parent to intervene. Reaching out could save a life.

Scammers and identity thieves

Unlike cyberbullies, scammers and identity thieves don't really care about trashing your online reputation. The problem is they don't really care about you at all. Their goal is to take over your system, steal your personal information, or steal your account.

You are the first line of defense when it comes to protecting yourself from scammers. You need to make sure that you have good security installed, keep your applications up to date, and use strong passwords. Don't share passwords with friends; don't use the same password for every account, and change your computer's main log-in password regularly.

Make sure you understand the privacy and security settings on every social networking site you use. You can make too much information available if you are not careful. Facebook, for example, allows you to customize your privacy settings and add additional security controls to protect your account. Take time to get to know your privacy and security settings to lock down your account.

Security Tips

- Leave firewall on at all times
- Install antimalware software
- Keep all software and apps up to date
- Use strong passwords; keep them secret

Cleaning Up a Damaged Online Reputation

An integral part of protecting your online reputation is knowing what it is. What are people saying about you? What have you said about yourself that's still hanging out there for everyone to read? While it's still on your radar, you should stop now and immediately use a search engine to search for yourself. Each search engine uses a different algorithm to find results, so you should really search yourself using several of them. Their results are updated constantly, so this isn't something you can do once and forget. Be sure to Bing, Google, Yahoo! or GoodSearch yourself on a regular basis. Also, search using different devices (PCs, mobile, etc.).

Once you've searched yourself well, you need to deal with the results. If you're very careful, or if you simply don't say much online, your digital footprint may confirm that you're ready for sainthood. Consider yourself lucky, and put a note on your calendar to check again next month. Most people aren't in that category. A digital footprint is like a report card. You want it to make you look good. Don't fail yourself with potential employers or college admissions staff by cultivating an online reputation as a partier. Being mean, rude, foul-mouthed, or bullying doesn't help either. In the digital world, you ARE your reputation. If you didn't know yourself, would you want to spend time with the person you saw in those search results, or would you want to run in the opposite direction? Remember that your reaction is being replicated by dozens, maybe hundreds, of other people who may have a serious impact on the way the rest of your life plays out.

If you do find negative or inaccurate results, you need to decide what to do about it. Cleaning up your online reputation is like trying to get rid of a bad tattoo. The

What would you think of you—as depicted by your online reputation—if you didn't know yourself?

removal can be painful, and if you don't have it done properly, you could end up with an ugly scar instead of a tacky tattoo. Basically, you can end up with more of a mess than you started with. This is especially true when it comes to removing negative online information. Sometimes, websites will remove negative posts.

But that depends on the nature of the posts and the website. So save yourself the trouble and be proactive about creating a positive reputation about yourself.

Removing incorrect data

Some incorrect information can be fixed by contacting the company or website posting it. For example, say you registered with a forum for teenage volunteers. But for some reason, your age was given as 11 and not 17. Because you don't want college admissions staff to think you're in middle school, you'd like the site to display the correct information. Contact the site displaying the incorrect data. You'll probably be asked to verify the correction. You can also expect it to take a day or two before the correct information is reflected online. How long it takes depends on the company you're dealing with. Follow up to verify that the changes are made correctly and promptly. If they're not, politely ask again. Rude language definitely won't help. If it does not get removed, you might have to escalate it to someone higher up in the chain of command.

Removing negative posts

If the information is negative, it gets trickier. If you've been the victim of cyberbullying, harassment, or stalking, you have a better chance at getting those comments removed. Social networking sites have very well-defined procedures for both removing attack posts and reporting the attacker. They even allow you to remove posts you made yourself that you later realize don't show you in a flattering light. Those party photos and side comments fall into that category. Some negative posts can turn into full-blown reputation assaults. ABC network's *20/20* recently featured a site that allows users to anonymously post photographs along

with comments about those photos. We'd name the site, but to be honest, it was so gross it really doesn't deserve the free publicity. The photos we saw on the site were followed by comments labeling the subjects as promiscuous, adulterous, substance-abusing, and dishonest, but in language that wouldn't have made a PG-13 rating. Is that really free speech? Or libel? Eventually the courts will answer those questions.

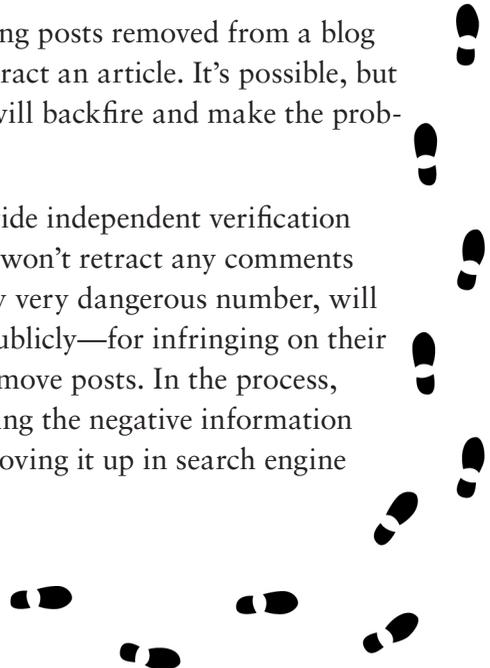
In the meantime, if you're victimized on such a site, suing won't undo the damage to your reputation. As with any negative posts, begin by politely asking the site to remove the post(s). Also, follow any defined procedures for reporting harassment or cyberbullying—and be persistent. Even well-defined procedures can sometimes break down. Last year, we reported a case of cyberbullying we found on a major social network. Six months later, the posts were still there. We had to keep going up the chain of command to get to the right person to fix the problem. Once we did, the content was removed within 24 hours.

Knowing when NOT to try to remove negative posts

A decade ago, there was serious debate about whether online blogs were valid media like newspapers, television, and radio. No more. Well-known bloggers are now routinely granted press passes to major public and political events. CNN even includes bloggers in its standard lineup of social commentators and political pundits.

This means that having negative or unflattering posts removed from a blog is akin to getting *The New York Times* to retract an article. It's possible, but there's also a substantial chance your effort will backfire and make the problem worse by calling attention to it.

Some blogs will remove items if you can provide independent verification that the information is false. But many blogs won't retract any comments simply on principle. A smaller, but potentially very dangerous number, will respond to your request by attacking you—publicly—for infringing on their freedom of speech for even asking them to remove posts. In the process, they'll repeat the original negative post, making the negative information both more accessible and more recent, and moving it up in search engine results.



Calling in a professional

If you find the prospect of cleaning up your online reputation intimidating, you can always hire a professional cleanup firm to do it for you. There are a number of reputable firms that do just that. Reputation.com and DefendMyName are among the larger ones. For the most part, they will do exactly what we just told you to do, but probably more eloquently and certainly with more experience. It's not cheap. Some companies charge \$120 a year just for monitoring. Having negative posts removed is usually \$30 per post and up.

Is it worth it? Janel Lee thinks so. The mortgage specialist from Wisconsin hired Reputation.com after her ex-boyfriend posted her work and cell phone numbers all over Yahoo!. Receiving 15 to 20 calls a day, Ms. Lee was happy to pay \$390 in membership and cleanup fees to essentially get her life back.

Creating a Positive Online Reputation

In some cases, there are going to be negative aspects to your online reputation that you really can't do much about. But if the negative posts are outweighed by more recent positive postings, they're going to drop out of the top search results. That's important because most searchers stop after the first three or four screens of search results. If you can push any negative results to the fifth page or farther, odds are that anyone searching you won't bother clicking through.



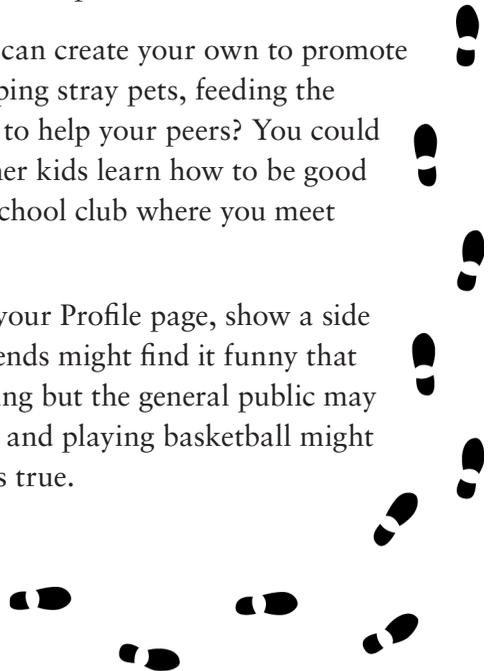
When you set out to improve your online rep, remember that discretion is the better part of valor. If you forge full steam ahead, spewing post after post about how great you are and how wonderful your life is, even casual browsers are going to think that you're pretty full of yourself. The trick is to showcase your better side without making it all about you. Instead, you want to highlight your accomplishments indirectly.

Begin by saying nice things about others. For example, write an online letter to your local newspaper describing what a positive impact others made by donating papers to your current events class and how much you learned as a result; perhaps post a comment on the Habitat for Humanity website, thanking your local chapter for teaching you how to hang drywall. Email the company that makes your favorite shampoo, praising their product. (Companies often post “fan mail” from satisfied customers.) Look for opportunities to pay compliments online. Saying nice things about others adds a positive sheen to your online reputation.

Also, look for ways to demonstrate that you’re articulate, intelligent, and thoughtful. Participate in online forums and discussions by asking well-considered questions and posting well-reasoned responses that don’t insult or belittle others. Biting, sarcastic flames might be satisfying for a minute or two after you hit Enter, but ask yourself what you really think about people who make those types of posts. Would you want to hang out with them? Or, work with them? Present yourself as a person that people would actually want to spend time with.

In addition to joining groups and forums, you can create your own to promote causes you believe in. Your cause might be helping stray pets, feeding the hungry, or tutoring disadvantaged kids. Prefer to help your peers? You could create a website or Facebook group to help other kids learn how to be good digital citizens. You might even form an afterschool club where you meet friends in person instead of online.

And, when it *should* be all about you, like on your Profile page, show a side of you that enhances your online rep. Your friends might find it funny that your interests are Midnight raves, or Drag racing but the general public may not be amused. Reading Manga, volunteering, and playing basketball might be safer. As long as the information you post is true.



Tips for Keeping Your Online Reputation Positive

Social media expert Peter Shankman sums it up when he gives his number one tip for online reputation management: *Don't be stupid!* Easier said than done, but still the first thing you should aim for. In addition to that, the following tips should prove helpful:

- Remember the Ad Council's slogan: "Wouldn't wear it? Don't share it!"
- Be proactive. Show the online world your better side.
- Know what the Internet is telling people about you. Regularly search yourself online.
- Check out your Friends' photos. Un-tag yourself in any compromising photos.
- Don't use technology as a weapon.
- Really angry? Walk away from the keyboard.
- See cyberbullying? Stand up for victims and report it to a responsible adult.
- Protect your system and information by using trusted security software.
- Create strong passwords, change them often, and don't share them with friends.
- Steer clear of locker room language and sexting.
- Don't post compromising photos or videos of yourself or your friends.
- Don't say negative things about anyone. That includes your school, teachers, or family.
- Always remember to STOP. THINK. CONNECT.
See <http://www.stopthinkconnect.org>.



OWN YOUR SPACE

AN ONLINE REPUTATION THAT COUNTS

A REPUTATION GUIDE

THAT EVERY TEEN,

PARENT, AND TEACHER

SHOULD READ!

Building a good online reputation is central to being a digital citizen. Sadly, the Internet presents ample opportunities for a single bad decision to affect your reputation for decades to come. If you have not thought about your online reputation, you should. College admissions officers do. So do employers—70% of employers have turned down job applicants because they didn't like what they found online.

This guide explains how to protect your online reputation from:

- Scammers
- Identity thieves
- Self inflicted damage

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