# Managing your online image

What happens online *stays* online. Every comment, post, share and tweet adds to our digital reputation -- or what marketers refer to as our brand. That brand can both positively or negatively affect our future job prospects, professional contacts, and personal relationships.

Branding tells customers what they can expect from a product, service – or person -- and what differentiates them from competitors. Companies work tirelessly to promote and protect the integrity of their brands, knowing that one misstep can have dire consequences to how they are perceived by the public.

It's also becoming standard for employers, educational institutions and political parties to vet candidates' social media activity before granting an interview or accepting an application. As a result, protecting our own online image or brand is of greater importance than ever before.

**Assessing your brand**

Social media was once a way to connect with friends and people who share our interests and views around the world. They "liked" our silly vacation photos, "shared" our cute cat videos and retweeted our angry political comments. Is that how we want prospective employers, indeed the world, to perceive us? In fact, how exactly *are* we being perceived online?

There are many free monitoring tools available but the simplest way to assess your digital presence is by Googling yourself. If you use Facebook, search your name. Both are quick, easy ways to find out if your online image is in alignment with your goals for the future.

**Building your brand**

Once you've assessed your existing online footprint you need to begin building your brand. Here are some steps to get your started:

- **Adjust your privacy settings.** If you don't want co-workers, customers or prospective employees to see pictures of you clubbing or those adorable videos of babies or kittens, make them private – just between selected individuals. Do the same with who can tag you to better control what appears on your public timeline.

- **Change your name.** You can always use your real name for professional purposes and another for your personal social media usage. If you have a common name or your name is similar to a well-known figure consider adding your middle initial to differentiate yourself.
- **Use a good quality picture of yourself on your profile**. Don't use a selfie or an overly serious shot. You want to appear professional yet friendly and approachable.
- **Watch what you share**. You want your brand to be interesting, engaging, and representative of your best characteristics. Don't dilute your message with irrelevant posts. While you want to promote yourself, be careful not to come across as conceited or pompous.

**Do's and don'ts of social media**

Protecting your digital reputation doesn't have to be difficult. It simply means following a few do's and don'ts. These include:

- **Do watch your language.** Don't use profanities and be aware of your grammar.
- **Do be careful with humour.** Not everyone will share your sense of humour. It's okay to be funny – just make sure it's appropriate for a diverse audience.
- **Don't debate online**. A good rule of thumb is to not say anything online that you wouldn't say face-to-face. Besides, any heated argument, virtual or otherwise, is rarely constructive.
- **Don't friend or follow everyone**. Use Facebook to connect with like-minded people and Twitter and Linkedin to follow industry leaders and influencers.
- **Do be careful with game requests**. Facebook games can be fun but your contacts may not be amused receiving constant requests to play Farmville or that you've reached a new level in Candy Crush.
- **Do not post, tweet, share or comment when angry.** Think before you click.

Today, first impressions are often made online. As a result, it's important to manage and monitor your online image to ensure you always put your best digital footprint forward.