Online PR: Reinventing Online Reputation Management

By Stephen Sandmann

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The title of this article may sound over the top, but current South African online reputation management (ORM) practices are out of date.

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Brands currently make use of a fragmented approach to ORM. Also, search engine optimisation (SEO) and digital paid media are not adequately utilised, if at all. Below I will share with you leading global research as well as my practical, successful findings.

An integrated approach to ORM

A holistic approach to ORM is needed, which makes use of 'reputational' SEO with carefully selected and executed digital paid media types, as well as social media content. Naturally, we also make use of ORM software and other online tools. We coined the name 'Integrated Online Reputation Management' for this service or 'iORM' for short. iORM is an 'always-on service', with real-time effectiveness.

The results are maximum positive consumer sentiment and improved website engagement for brands. These results are made possible by a methodology developed by myself, as head of search strategy and innovation at Quirk digital agency, together with the support of my bright colleagues.

It works

I'll give you an example. An iORM client of ours, in a competitive consumer service industry, has benefited significantly from our service. A recent PR issue emerged for this client, centered on one of its products. We not only improved positive brand sentiment, but we also increased the number of business leads (via the website) for this product.

iORM has allowed this client to maximise its positive influence on its relevant piece of the South African digital landscape.

The search engine manipulation effect

Properly executed SEO is critical to successful ORM. High-ranking organic search engine listings can sway public opinion.

Leading research from the American Institute of Behavioral Research and Technology sums up the *Search Engine Manipulation Effect* as, "Internet search rankings have a significant impact on consumer choices, mainly because users trust and use higher ranking results more than lower ranking results." I couldn't agree more with their research.

The Streisand effect

It is essential to be mindful of the *Streisand effect* when it comes to ORM. I'm not referring to the effect that Barbra Streisand has on her fans. Instead, I'm referring to a PR-related phenomenon, which Wikipedia summed up as, "A phenomenon whereby an attempt to hide, remove, or censor a piece of information has the unintended consequence of publicising the information more widely, usually facilitated by the Internet." iORM is carefully executed across the Internet with the Streisand effect in mind in order to achieve maximum ROI for our clients, without any unintended consumer backlash.

Why is iORM an independent service?

iORM should run parallel to clients' other digital marketing campaigns. iORM and the other brands' campaigns act as a two-prong approach to digital marketing, each with clear objectives. A brand's iORM and other campaigns would compromise their individual focus if they were not independent of each other.

International validation of iORM

We are 'preaching' the latest methodology in communication performance, while this new philosophy is still fresh from a global perspective. I'm referring to Barcelona Principles 2.0., the first international framework for measuring communications performance. This framework was devised by AMEC (International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication, the largest of its kind in the world), PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) as well as many other leading global PR-related organisations.

Current online PR and ORM efforts are obsolete – AVEs (Advertising Value Equivalency metric) are no longer the value of communication. There is a need to be holistic, integrated and aligned – across traditional PR, digital: paid, earned, shared and owned digital marketing channels. There should be a focus on the measurement of engagement, 'conversation' and 'communities'.

iORM utilises data in a smart, 'creative' way

What distinguishes our unique iORM product from other ORM efforts? The answer is simple: iORM allows for the intelligent acquisition and use of data, together with the single purpose of improving a brand's communication performance, across multiple digital channels in a cost-effective way.

South African brands need to take full control of their reputations and iORM is the answer.

ABOUT STEPHEN SANDMANN

I have a keen interest in innovative, digital marketing-lead advertising and search marketing (SEO and paid search), which I've developed through my award-winning agency and corporate career at Ogilvy, Quirk (now Mrum), Vodacom and now a specialist digital marketing consultant at Sandmann Digital.

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