

**FEATURE** Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have a dark – and potentially dangerous – side

# Virtual mugging

JOE DYSART

WESTERN INVESTOR

While many businesses are enraptured with the promotional power of social media, they also need to grasp its perilous dark side – and its ability to damage or destroy a business with a few choice mouse-clicks.

Domino's Pizza learned this lesson the hard way earlier this year when a video depicting its employees smearing mucus on sandwiches was posted – and went viral – on YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)).

The video, a staged joke made by two Domino's employees with nothing better to do, was tossed up on YouTube as a lark.

For Domino's, it was anything but.

Within days, the video was viewed more than a million times, became a hot topic on the micro-blogging service Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) and showed up numerous times in the top 10 Google search returns for keyword "Domino's."

"It sickens me that the actions of two individuals could impact our great system," said Domino's president Patrick Doyle, who made his apology about the incident in a video Domino's posted on, you guessed it, YouTube.

## Going viral

Bruce Arnold, founder of Caslon Analytics, a web marketing firm that counsels clients on managing company reputations online, says no company, and no industry, is safe from social media's dark side.

"Some [posts] are little more than a repository for juvenile humour," Arnold said. "Others feature detailed and sometimes persuasive critiques, including "insider" documentation, and are associated with newsgroups."

Some domains claim up to 50,000 visitors

daily, and site information has been accepted and echoed by the mainstream media, he adds.

For businesses, the takeaway from Domino's rude awakening is to actively develop a reputation-management strategy before the horror occurs and be ready to pounce when a silly joke – or worse – threatens to go viral.

Indeed, according to an April 2009 study – *Brand Reputation Management: Using Online Monitoring to Protect the Company's Crown Jewels* – from the Aberdeen Group, companies that embrace a reputation-management strategy not only guard their brand against attacks, they're also much more likely to increase shareholder value as compared to companies that ignore the social media space.

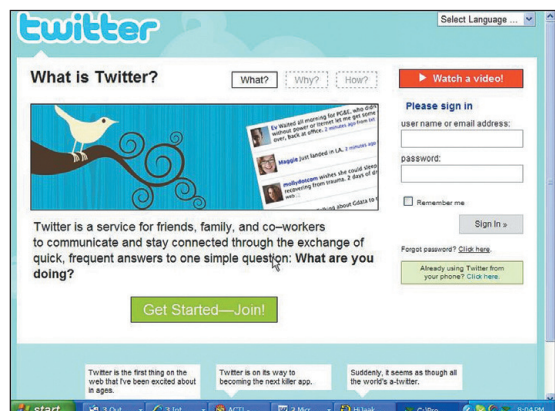
Specifically, the report found that companies with top-notch reputation-management plans are at least 12 times more likely to increase shareholder value year over year than their tone-deaf counterparts.

"The benefits of online monitoring and analysis in the context of brand reputation management are clear and compelling," said Jeff Zabin, the report's author and a research fellow at Aberdeen.

Such a monitoring strategy, web marketing experts say, needs to encompass social media in all its forms, including video sites like YouTube, networking sites like Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) and MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) and blogging sites like Twitter.

## Do it yourself

Fortunately, there are a number of tools and service providers that companies can use to protect brand image.



**ABOVE: Domino's Pizza experienced the "dark side" of social media with an unflattering video posted to YouTube. TOP RIGHT: Signing up for a Twitter account will prevent a "squatter" from grabbing your brand name. BOTTOM: BlogSquirrel will monitor postings about your company in the blogosphere.**

One of the easiest ways to secure a general idea about what's being said about your firm on the web is to monitor the major online communities, mailing lists and blogs – all places where those looking to shape public opinion tend to congregate.

The quickest way to begin the process is to sign up for Google Alerts ([www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)), which enable you to track mentions of your business name, including mentions on YouTube.

You'll also want to sign up for an account on Twitter, which you can use to monitor the posts there.

Signing up for a Twitter account will also prevent someone else – including a dissatisfied customer – from grabbing your brand name and masquerading as a company representative or whistle-blower.

One caution: if a company representative

does begin to post on Twitter for your brand, make sure he or she knows the neighbourhood. Essentially, you need to be transparent, offering correct and verifiable information within the 140 characters. You can't be disingenuous. If you're not transparent, you'll likely be found out, and face a backlash.

## Free tracking

Meanwhile, blog posts can be tracked with the free blogwatch service Technorati ([www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)), which has been around since the blog phenomena went large and which does a great job of monitoring what's being said and keeping track of newly created blogs.

Boardtracker ([www.boardtracker.com](http://www.boardtracker.com)), a free service that monitors buzz on the countless discussion boards on the web, is also an essential do-it-yourself tool.

Please see *Getting help* page A20

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## GETTING HELP from A19

It's also a good idea to keep tabs on anything that may be cropping up about your company on podcasts – or grassroots radio-show type productions that are beginning to pop up on the web. **PodcastAlley** ([www.podcastalley.com](http://www.podcastalley.com)) offers an excellent overview of what's going on in that space.

Other free reputation-management tools to check out include **BlogPulse** ([www.blogpulse.com](http://www.blogpulse.com)), which tracks blog posts; **Keotag** ([www.keotag.com](http://www.keotag.com)), which tracks keywords, including company names, that are being used as intro tags on the web; and **Compete** ([http://searchanalytics.compete.com/site\\_referrals/](http://searchanalytics.compete.com/site_referrals/)), which tracks the top website referrals for any keyword search.

out alerts about copyright or trademark abuses.

**Nielsen Online** ([www.nielsen-online.com](http://www.nielsen-online.com)) combines the auto-monitoring of blogs with human analysis to help companies avoid potential PR nightmares. One especially interesting feature: its software is programmed to include analysis of "natural language," so you'll be able to find positive or negative posts about your company, even if those posts are rendered in poor grammar.

**Factiva Insight: Reputation Intelligence** ([www.factiva.com/factivainsight/reputation/](http://www.factiva.com/factivainsight/reputation/)) offers a more comprehensive look, monitoring what's going on with your brand across virtually all media. It is a joint venture with **Dow Jones** and **Reuters** and will track all media mentions of your company from TV, radio, newspapers and even blogs.

Other reputation-management service providers to check out include **Radian 6** ([www.radian6.com/cms/home](http://www.radian6.com/cms/home)) and **Visible Technologies** ([www.visibletechnologies.com](http://www.visibletechnologies.com)). "If you spend the time and effort to listen and monitor, you'll be able to identify trends in the conversation and understand – before you engage – what your customers might be expecting from you once you get there," said **Amber Naslund**, director of community for Radian 6. ♦

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## Pro support

If do-it-yourself monitoring becomes overwhelming, you may want to try other services, like BlogSquirrel by **CyberAlert** ([www.cyberalert.com/blogmonitoring.html](http://www.cyberalert.com/blogmonitoring.html)). BlogSquirrel will automatically monitor blog postings containing your company's name and/or other keywords and send you daily reports about those postings via e-mail.

The service also offers you tools to ensure you'll receive fewer alerts about posts you consider irrelevant. **Webclipping.com** ([www.webclipping.com](http://www.webclipping.com)), a long-established service, will also track what's being said about your company on the web, keep you apprised of competitors' activities and send

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