

Cyber maids clean up your online image

August 10, 2012 | By Johnny Diaz, Staff writer

A South Florida doctor wanted to bury a bad online rating of his services.

A Boca Raton jeweler needed positive reviews about his business to rank higher on Internet searches.

And a Miami Beach restaurant looked to downplay negative comments about the lack of decor before it was remodeled.

All were clients of South Florida reputation managers who, like cyber maids, specialize in cleaning up "digital dirt" — or at least sweeping it under the rug to make it harder to find.



Richard Ruddle, co-founder of Profile Defenders, with his team of profile... (Sarah Dussault, Sun Sentinel)

Businesses such as Profile Defenders in Fort Lauderdale and SoVi Digital in West Palm Beach are growing in popularity as people and companies realize the role their online reputation plays in everyday search engine results.

"The bottom line is that reputation matters, and the ever-important first impression is now more than ever likely to be made online," said Anthony Miyazaki, a marketing professor at Florida International University.

Profile Defenders, which launched last year, works to counteract negative comments for clients by creating more flattering content, such as profiles on the social networking sites Facebook or LinkedIn, and by issuing online news releases so they rank higher in Internet searches than negative links.

These Web rep specialists say good placement is key in making people look good.

"About 92 percent of [online] searches do not go past the first page," said Richard Ruddle, a partner in Profile Defenders, explaining how most consumers may not look after the first page of search results. "For X amount of dollars, we guarantee we will get the [negative] search result off the front page."

Fees for this service at Profile Defenders can range from \$2,000 per case to five figures for a monthly retainer. Ruddle said his clients include lawyers, doctors, small business owners and companies who want to respond quickly to bad ratings.

One client was Ryan Blank, owner of Get Gold Cash and Diamonds in Boca Raton. Last year, Blank noticed that online customers were confusing his business with a similarly named one, Get Gold Cash.

"It was becoming a problem," Blank said. "Profile Defenders were able to do whatever they do on Google to fix the problem."

Sometimes, these online reputation firms can get a bad rap themselves. Last month, Park Avenue Funding, a New York mortgage investment firm, filed a suit against Profile Defenders claiming the company was using confidential information to extort money from them and damage their online reputation. Ruddle, of Profile Defenders, said "the lawsuit filed by PAF is frivolous and based on assertions without merit." Park Avenue Funding declined to comment.

Google, Yelp respond

The web reputation management industry is a growing one. An April study by media research firm BIA/Kelsey found that small and mid-sized businesses will spend about \$700 million to monitor consumer online opinions in the next year — double the spending from the past 12 months.

"Tools like this that can automate the process or make the process much easier are becoming not just

more attractive but more necessary," said Jed Williams, a senior analyst with Virginia-based BIA/Kelsey. He noted the proliferation of social networking sites where people have an instant podium to share comments and reviews about services or products they've used.

"You put all these things together and it really is this unbelievable, and in many ways, an overwhelming patchwork quilt you have to attend to as a business," he said.

Chris Miquel, a partner at SoVi Digital in West Palm Beach, agreed. "The search engines and all these social platforms and the way the social media is now, a lot of stuff is review-based," said Miquel, whose Internet marketing firm began offering reputation management services two years ago.

SoVi's clientele includes South Florida jewelry stores, restaurants, insurance agents and lawyers. "If we see a negative review, we can notify the customer right away so we can take care of this as soon as possible," he said.

That means contacting the review's author with requests to remove the commentary. If that doesn't work, the company reaches out to the website to investigate whether the review is fraudulent or inaccurate.

"If the review is a negative review and there is nothing wrong with it, the directories and search engines won't just take it off for you," Miquel said. So his staff will send positive email blasts about the client, have people "like" a Facebook page, or ask consumers to post newer reviews about the client.

"If you have two bad reviews from eight months ago but then you get 10 more new reviews, those bad reviews will get pushed down," Miquel said.

Officials at online search engine giant Google are aware of such tactics by online reputation defenders, and they don't like it.

"Our mission is to help people find relevant information. So, we don't condone reputation management campaigns that attempt to hide relevant information," a Google spokeswoman said in an email. "While there is nothing in our guidelines that explicitly forbids reputation management, if we uncover link schemes or other violations, we reserve the right to take action in response."

Darnell Holloway, manager of local business outreach for Yelp, said in an email that reputation management firms "cannot be successful, however, because there has never been any amount of money one can pay — to Yelp or any third party — to manipulate reviews on our site.

"Some of these companies are charging a lot of money for 'reputation management,' when there are ways to maintain a great online reputation for free, by providing good customer service."

He referred to Yelp's website, which has a section for business owners on how they can respond publicly or privately to bad customer reviews. Google also has a free tool called "Me on the Web" that alerts business owners of negative postings.

Some online analysts say the average person or business owner can monitor their online image but it may take some work

"As search capabilities grow and people do more of their shopping and interaction online, the difficulty in finding and correcting negative information will become more difficult," FIU's Miyazaki said.

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Self-managing your online reputation

Google yourself to see what's been written about you. The search engine can also create "Google Alerts" that email you whenever your name, brand or business is mentioned online.

Think about what you're posting online, with whom you are sharing it, and how it might impact your name or brand now or 10 years from now.

Discuss with friends what you want or don't want shared online.

Post positive information about yourself through social media sites such as LinkedIn.com or create a blog.

Act quickly if you come across information (comments, negative reviews) that doesn't fit your image. Politely ask the person who posted the information to remove it or correct the mistake.

If the person doesn't respond or declines your request, ask the website host about removing the damaging content.

Source: Google, Microsoft, online expert

Reputation management: The costs

For \$99 a month, SoVi Digital offers reputation monitoring, scouring the Internet for online reviews, news outlets and social media that mentions a client's name.

For \$499 a month, the firm will also build positive online testimonials and reviews and reach out to websites to remove or settle negative comments.

For a one-time \$2,000 fee, Profile Defenders has a Positive Internet Identity service that builds websites with positive content to counteract potential negative sites.

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