Online Reputation Management for College Admissions

We know that reputation management is an essential step for job seekers. Nearly all, [92%](#), of U.S. employers use social media for candidate screening and recruitment. Colleges are increasingly adopting online screening for potential students as well. That means a strong online reputation isn't just an important tool for college graduates, it's one that students may need to gain admission to top college programs.

All signs point to an increasing trend of online recruitment and research from college admissions departments. Facebook is used as a recruiting tool for [82% of colleges](#). It's not a stretch to believe that colleges are turning the tables to investigate students online as well. In fact, Colin Gruenwald, director of college admissions programs with [Kaplan Test Prep](#) is sure that they are, and in increasing numbers.

"Kaplan was a pioneer in this research as far back as 2008, when we found that about 10% of college admissions officers were taking to the Internet to learn more about applicants," says Gruenwald. "In our 2012 survey of college admissions officers, that number shot up to about 25%. And perhaps of greater concern to students than just the sheer volume of admissions officers who do it is that 35% of admissions officers who said they do do this said that what they found negatively impacted an applicant's chances of getting in."

Though we are seeing a clear trend of college admissions departments that research potential students online, most students will fall under the radar and avoid online scrutiny. "Those who told us they have done it don't do it all the time – in fact it's probably something they do for a small percentage of applicants," says Gruenwald.

Why isn't the practice more widespread? It's simple: there's just not enough time to dig into the online life of every student who applies for college. "Admissions officers see thousands of applications every year," says Gruenwald. "There is no way they can do online research about every applicant."

Still, there is always the potential that you'll be one of the lucky candidates chosen to investigate, and it's better to be safe than sorry, especially if you're a high profile student. Students are likely to be singled out for online research when applying for prestigious programs or if they're part of high stakes decisions like ultra-competitive scholarships. In these situations, a good online reputation can help you stand out among similarly qualified candidates. A bad online reputation can sink your dreams.

Competitive students in particular should be concerned with a strong online reputation, but a good online persona isn't only reserved for those destined for the Ivy League. Every student's online reputation is important. Gruenwald shares that some admissions officers check out applicants online after receiving anonymous tips, so it really is important that students are on top of their game online whether they're expecting a visit or not.

College applicants should develop their online reputation, but the bottom line is that reputation management is just one part of a successful college admissions strategy. In addition to online reputation management, Gruenwald encourages students to continue focusing on what's tried and true. "At the end of the day, it's going to be the traditional factors that determine whether you get in or not: your SAT or ACT sores, GPA, letters of recommendation, personal essays and extracurricular activities" he says. Ideally, your online persona will be a positive reflection of your entire package, allowing admissions officers to see how your academics, experience, and personality come together to make you a strong candidate for their school.

What College Admissions Officers are Searching for Online

For the most part, college admissions officers aren't on a witch hunt when they research applicants

online. Matt Ivester, author of [lol...OMG!: What Every Student Needs to Know About Online Reputation Management, Digital Citizenship and Cyberbullying](#) explains, "When they do these searches online, it's mostly just to make sure that the student has good judgment."

Though your entire online life is under a microscope, admissions officers really don't want to discover anything negative. They are primarily looking for positive affirmation that a student is every bit as good as their application suggests, and perhaps even better. Schools just want to get a better feel for who you are as a potential student. Fortunately, what they're finding is mostly positive. Only [35%](#) of admissions officers report finding information online that adversely impacted an applicant's chances of admission. That means 65% of students pass the online sniff test.

But be warned: the number of negative findings are on the rise. Gruenwald reports that Kaplan research has revealed a spike in offensive materials. "Last year, 12% of admissions officers who had gone to Facebook or Google found material damaging to applicants," he says. "This year, that percentage nearly tripled to 35%. Offenses included underage drinking, vulgarities, essay plagiarism, and illegal activities."

The Nuclear Option

Admissions officers aren't necessarily looking for red flags, but if troubling entries exist, they are likely to be found. In an attempt to hide any potential red flags, some students are taking a drastic approach, deleting social media accounts, or deliberately changing their last name to avoid discovery. But if you can't be found online, colleges are likely to wonder why you're nonexistent. At best, they may assume that you take privacy seriously. But most will wonder if you have something to hide. Though it's a common practice, the nuclear option is a really bad idea. Experts insist that students who delete or hide their accounts will miss out on controlling their online reputation and interacting with colleges, both of which are important to your future.

Ivester identifies the nuclear option as a missed opportunity. "If you don't take control of your online reputation, positing positive things about yourself, it becomes very easy for someone else to control it -- which could be good or bad," he says. And, deleting your account means missing out on all of the fun activities on social media.

Gruenwald agrees, and sees an online blackout as a last resort for most teens. He encourages students to preserve their accounts and connect with colleges and universities directly. "We think social media can play a helpful role in how prospective students interact with colleges and universities," he says. "At this point, nearly every school uses Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram to recruit potential students. You can interact with current students, alumni, professors, administrators, take campus tours, and find out what's going on on campus. Applying to college has really becoming an interactive, social experience."

Even if you don't care about missed opportunities, know this: there is a false security in hiding your online accounts. Even shared behind private walls, your online content may be leaked. College admissions counselor [Kat Cohen](#) has witnessed this strategy backfire: "I've seen cases where students, and even parents, have sent screen shots of social media 'friends' participating in 'bad behavior' to admissions officers, even if their profiles were private," says Cohen. "And when officers get tips like that, they are required to follow up."

Marv Russell, author of [Finding Your Internship: What Employers Want You to Know](#) agrees: "You will never know who is looking at your online posts. You cannot assume that you social media behaviors are confidential."

Maybe you feel that you can trust your friends not share what you post online. But can you trust

yourself? Some students make the mistake of giving colleges the same email they've used to sign up for social media accounts, and are found that way. There are just too many ways to mess this up to make going nuclear a valid option. Plus, using a fake name is a violation of Facebook's terms of use and [can result in a permanent ban](). Other social media services have similar rules, putting your accounts at risk when you choose to hide behind a made-up name.

Scrubbing Your Online Reputation

A strong alternative to the nuclear option is simply cleaning up your online reputation. It allows you to remove trouble spots that might give an admissions counselor pause while still preserving your accounts for positive interactions. It's also a lot of work, but undoubtedly, it's all worth the trouble. "Digital footprints can be easily shared and can last a very long time," says Gruenwald. "Don't let a momentary lapse of judgment leave a lasting online impression."

We know that admissions officers overwhelmingly prefer to see positive online content, but if they do find negative posts or information about you, they will be taken into consideration. A bad impression could have your application sent to the reject pile faster than you can hit delete.

"In the highly competitive college admissions environment facing students today, schools have their pick," says Ivester. "So it's easy enough for a red flag to show up and simply move on to next candidate. Students typically don't get a chance to explain."

What kind of questionable content are college admissions officers finding? It's usually poor word choices or photos that suggest irresponsible behavior. "A surprising number of high school students are still publicly posting swear words, racist or derogatory comments, and references to drugs or alcohol," says Ivester. "These are red flags."

Russell warns students, "Inappropriate language and party atmosphere photos will grab the admission counselor's attention immediately. Having fun is one thing, but being out of control is something different that waves the red flag."

What can you do to make sure your online reputation is squeaky clean? Launch an investigation of yourself and follow the steps that a college admissions officer might. "Get in the habit of searching yourself on Google, Yahoo, and other search engines, and clean up anything that doesn't put you in a positive light," says Gruenwald. "Pay attention to every source, too. Just because you didn't post something yourself, doesn't mean someone didn't post something about you."

Gruenwald suggests that students take advantage of the option to untag photos on Facebook. Or, he says, "ask the person who did it to please take it down and explain why. It could be a good lesson for that individual as well."

But Facebook photos aren't the only thing you should be looking for. Students should carefully remove the following content that could raise suspicion or worry among college admissions officers:

- **Embarrassing photos**: Photos of yourself are normal and expected, but anything along the lines of Miley Cyrus or public drunkenness is a poor choice.
- **Vulgar language**: Cuss words, and insensitive comments, as well as racist, sexist, or politically charged remarks will typically reflect badly on you.
- **Alcohol or drug consumption**: Underage drinking and drug abuse are major red flags. Remove any photos or references to illicit substances, or any that might be mistakenly seen that way. Think twice about that photo of you with a red Solo cup at a party, even if it's just soda.
- **Anything illegal or ethically questionable**: Not just drugs and alcohol, but stealing, and even violent threats or gang activity are sure to set off alarm bells for an admissions officer.
- **Discussions about essay plagiarism**: This seems like a no-brainer, but admissions officers

report seeing references to copied, purchased, or stolen papers. Stick with posts that reflect your academic honesty, or at least don't suggest to them you'll cheat in college.

- **Complaints about your school or job**: Colleges want motivated, positive students to join their ranks. Show that you're taking learning or work opportunities for granted, and they may not be very interested in extending an offer. Avoid venting your frustrations online, call a friend to blow off steam instead. Your online posts should be upbeat, not whiny.
- **Fake information**: Students who embellish their online profiles are welcoming trouble. Admissions officers may be impressed that you volunteered at a soup kitchen, but only if you actually did it. They're likely to follow up and ask about your experience, and if it's revealed that you make it all up, the situation will be worse than if you never offered the information at all.

So how do you remove all of this information? On social media profiles, you're likely to be in control, whether you're the person who posted the item, or you are able to untag or report offending photos and content. But if you've found information that you do not control, be proactive. Get in contact with the blog, webpage, or other source and simply request that it be removed. Your request may be ignored or denied, but asking is the first step.

Once you think you're done, call in another set of eyes to help. Ask a teacher, parent, or trusted mentor to help you assess your current online reputation and weed out information that might reflect negatively. They may be able to find trouble spots you hadn't thought of, or let you know that content you thought was fine is actually a poor reflection on your character. They can also help you edit spelling and grammar.

Improving your Online Reputation

Cleaning your search engine results and online profiles of offensive photos and other content is essential, but there's more to a positive online reputation than just removing what college admissions officers don't want to see. You'll need to add what they want to find as well. Students should add positive content for search engines and colleges to find. Doing so will give you an opportunity to highlight your strengths and convince admissions officers that you're worth it.

But what to add? Russell tells students, "A college admission officer is looking for what your life is about, your interests, your passions, and most importantly, responsible behavior. They are also looking for signs of how you spend your free time and types of friends you keep."

When creating reputation-building content, Russell recommends that students "think about their online personality like a version of their resume. What do you want people to know about you? What are you proud of? Noting your successes and even some challenges you have faced and how you overcame those challenges can be impressive."

Not sure what would be impressive to a college admissions officer? Gruenwald says to just share what you love. "College and universities love talented, passionate students, so showing them your passions may improve your chances of getting in."

Students can build a reputation worth having by making sure that admissions officers can find:

- **Your real name**: Not John Lovestobike Doe. Just John Doe. College admissions officers are looking for you, give them the real thing.
- **An appropriate email address**: Admissions officers want to see your personality, but your email address isn't the best place to share it. A simple combination of your name, like johndoe@gmail.com, works best.
- **Usage of proper grammar**: No one is grading your online posts with a red pen in hand, but

admissions officers will notice if you're really out of line. Writing online can be casual, but be careful to avoid textspeak and major grammar errors.

- **Information that supports what you've shared on your application**: If you claim to have volunteered at an animal shelter, post a few photos of your work there. Even better, ask for a recommendation from the shelter on LinkedIn. Always consider how you can create online evidence that you're really doing all the things you say you are.
- **Content that supports your interests**: Show that you're involved in your interests by posting music, artwork, or events with organizations you support. News stories and articles are great to share as well, and show that you're a well informed individual.
- **Connections with relevant individuals and organizations**: Volunteer organizations, businesses, mentors, and industry leaders are likely to be available on social media. Like, follow, and otherwise connect with them to show admissions officers that you're part of the network.
- **Connections with schools**: Connecting with colleges will allow you to identify school values, finding out what's important to them. It's also a positive sign for admissions officers to see that you're genuinely interested in their school. Once you know what colleges are looking for, you can demonstrate those values online and in your application materials. The same is true for potential mentors and companies you want to work for in the future.
- **Connections with online associations**: Become a part of LinkedIn Groups, Twitter chats, or Facebook groups to be a part of the online conversation and demonstrate your interests.
- **Examples of your talents**: Post a portfolio of your work: writing, photography, music, any talent that can be shared. A personal blog, LinkedIn, Instagram, or Pinterest are good resources for sharing what you've done. Even slideshow presentations or favorite essays you've created for school can be shared on SlideShare or LinkedIn. You may also consider creating a [video application](#) to encourage a school to admit you as a student.

If you're really not sure how to get started sharing your personality online, Gruenwald has some ideas you can try on for size:

- Are you a talented artist? If so, why not create a web site where you can show off your portfolio of work? That's how a site like Pinterest, for example, can be helpful. Be sure to include the link in your college application.
- Are you an athlete? Consider creating a YouTube channel with videos of your winning moments.
- Do you write for your school's newspaper? Create a page where you can post the best articles you've written.
- Do you love to write short stories and poems? Why not create a blog where you can showcase your most inspiring work?
- If you are a passionate photographer, Tumblr's photo blogs might be the perfect venue for your most beautiful, inspiring images.
- Are you a would-be Mozart or pop star? Upload videos and recording to YouTube or your page hosted another site to showcase your talent.

Russell recommends that students share their successes and achievements. "I love it when I see a student say something like, 'Tough biology quiz today, should have done better. Oh well, I'll be better prepared for next week's quiz.' This show normalcy and ability to deal with, accept, and then address the ups and down of high school life." Students can open up with these ideas recommended by Russell:

- Share your successes, accomplishments, awards
- Share work experiences including volunteer work, internship and paid work
- Share stuff about family and friends that is appropriate

- Share your opinions and thoughts about life, but realize you shouldn't be overly opinionated, overly negative or overly political. Remember that everyone doesn't think like you. It's fine to have opinions, but it's important to be responsible in your comments. Example:
    - It would be fine to say, "I'm very worried about the situation in Syria."
    - It wouldn't be fine to say, "I'm worried about the situation in Syria. We should drop a bomb and attack them."

Other great posts Russell recommends emulating:

- Yes! Just made the honor roll!
- Heading to the big game with my friends. Go Knights!
- Did you see Miley Cyrus on the Video Awards? Totally wrong and my parents were sitting in the room with me! OMG!
- My girlfriend Sarah just got accepted to dance school. She's fab!
- Thanks to everyone for making this summer such a fantastically memorable one! It was a great three months of amazing people, fun adventures, and ridiculous faces...lol

Making the Most of Online Reputation Sources

Your digital footprint is everywhere. It's not just social media. Gruenwald reports that in Kaplan's latest research, the percentage of admissions officers who checked Facebook remained consistent at 26%, but the percentage who checked out students on Google jumped from 20% to 27%. And there's more: online comments, dating profiles, even emails and text messages may be published online for admissions officers to find.

Make sure you're hitting all the bases by checking out all of these information sources:

- **Search engines**: Google, Yahoo!, and Bing, too. Fix what you can control, and ask to fix what you can't. If your name is common, make your search more specific, like your name and your town, or your name and the school you attend. Watch out for digital doppelgangers with the same or similar name, and understand that you you may need to differentiate yourself from them.
- **Social media**: Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, and YouTube are all fair game. Even with private profiles, make sure your profile picture is one that can be shared. Also keep in mind that your YouTube profile shows channels you're subscribed to, not just what you posted.
- **Online interaction**: Articles, blogs, websites, forum posts, gamer discussions, product reviews, and comments can be found as well. Look for every post that might have your name or a familiar user name attached to it.
- **Old profiles**: You may have abandoned them, but old profiles, like MySpace, are still around and may show up in a search.

While you're checking out your online reputation sources, take a moment to make sure you're using strong passwords. Hackers can compromise your reputation just as badly as you can, maybe even worse. Don't forget to lock down your laptop and mobile phone, too, as they likely offer open access to your accounts.

Online Reputation Management Tools for High School Students

If you need help remembering every account you have out there, or just can't stay on top of it all at once, there are tools that can help. They offer the ability to analyze your online reputation, plus maintain your good name with regular updates if anything changes.

- **Google Alerts**: Set up alerts for your name and related terms as often as once a day. This tool will allow you to monitor all of the new content online that's associated with your name.
- **Me on the Web**: Similar to Google Alerts is Google's Me on the Web. Google's tool makes it easy to search for yourself, set up alerts, and review your Google profile, all in one place.
- **KnowEm**: KnowEm is a user name search for social media, domains, and more. You can find all of the profiles you've created with your name or user name, and even claim your name on networks to secure your brand.
- **BrandYourself**: Using BrandYourself, you can analyze your personal search results and follow recommended steps to make the profiles you want to be seen rank higher.
- **TrueRep**: Sniff out misleading or incorrect information that shows up in your search results with this online reputation tool.

Networking for High School Students

Though college admissions are important, they're not the only reason high school students should be concerned with building a positive online reputation. In college, career, and beyond, networking is a huge part of getting ahead. Your network can help you get a scholarship, join prestigious college groups, and perhaps most importantly, establish a career, as networking is the number one way people find jobs. So while building your reputation can help get you into college, it can also allow you start developing a network that will help you for a lifetime.

High school students in particular are in a great situation to lay a strong networking foundation early on. Your classmates today are your network of tomorrow. Make them part of your network, and you can stay connected through college and beyond, offering each other support and opportunities that may improve your personal and professional lives.

LinkedIn has recognized that high schoolers can benefit from professional networking, and recently opened up registration to users over the age of 13. This is a huge opportunity for students to establish a network of contacts before they even hit college. And with LinkedIn University, the site has has also made it possible for students to connect with colleges.

Russell recommends following colleges you're interested in on LinkedIn and other social media, and then using what you've observed as a foundation for questions. "For example, when you're making the important visit and have an interview, ask a question like, 'I follow the University of Notre Dame on Twitter and FB. I'm interested in hearing more about how your business school became #1.' Trust me, they will love questions that demonstrate your interest."

But connecting isn't enough. You'll have to build a great LinkedIn profile to let schools and potential connections know what you're all about. Russell likes to see professional LinkedIn profiles that contain:

- Professional/business photo, different from a Facebook "personality" photo
- Current resume
- Professional and or educational objective
- Work, internship and volunteer experience
- School courses relevant to your career goals
- Social and professional interests, affiliations, extracurricular activities and awards
- Skills and personal interests, for example: 4 years of French and enjoys European travel

You should have a comprehensive biographical summary, says Russell, and it should look something like this:

Junior, Ford City High School, Ford City, PA, College Prep Program. Interested in a computer

science major. Beginning college search for a Fall 2015 admission, targeting major universities in the Midwest United States.

Russell also recommends that students connect with as many friends, family, universities, and professional acquaintances as possible, sending short, but professional connection requests, for example:

Hello Mr. or Ms. Jones,

I am a junior at Ford City High School in Ford City, PA. I'm in the College Prep Program with a 3.5 GPA. I'm interested in majoring in computer science when I begin college in the fall of 2015. I'm targeting major universities in the Midwest United States. As I complete my education, I am beginning to develop my professional network. I would appreciate connecting with you to learn and to begin to better understand my options regarding universities and my interest areas. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jane

Not sure who exactly to connect with? Russell advises students to contact and engage with the following people regularly on LinkedIn:

- Alumni and professors from your school and universities of interest
- As many family and friends as possible
- Companies of interest you've researched
- LinkedIn Groups representing alumni from your favorite or preferred colleges and your career interest. Remember: you can join up to 50 groups.
- Members of your LinkedIn Groups that mirror your career interests, skills, personal hobbies and extracurricular activities.

On top of making connections, Russell recommends that students stay up to date on Twitter by reaching out to others and staying updated:

- Request recommendations and endorsements from people who can attest to your skills and your great personality traits.
- Update your biographical summary as often as needed, at least monthly. Remember, these updates are posted to your connections, keeping your face and name in front of potential employers or referrals.
- Again, remember that employers are also online. If there is something on your LinkedIn that you don't want your mom or dad to see, an employer doesn't want to see it either.

Networking, and LinkedIn in particular, continues to grow in importance, and high school students would be wise to adopt early. The website is already working on adding job applications and resumes to its services, and college admissions could very well be next.

Reputation Success Tips for High School Students

There's a lot to consider in online reputation management: what you're sharing, who you're sharing it with, what it says about you personally and professionally. It's nearly impossible to remember every little step you might need to take to build or protect your reputation, and the fact is that the steps you need to take are always changing. New services come out, technology grows, and people find more ways to connect with and talk about each other. But don't get overwhelmed and let a million little details get in the way of your great reputation: just follow a few simple rules:

- **Consider the message you're sending.** Make everything you post, interact with, or share online something you wouldn't be embarrassed to share with your mom or grandma, or better yet, a future employer. Gruenwald says, "If it's not something you are proud of, don't post it. The Internet has a really long memory."
- **Be authentic and transparent.** Admissions officers and online connections want to know you, show them the real deal.
- **Think, then post or like.** Be careful to avoid impulsive responses, especially when discussing hot-button issues. Gruenwald cautions, "The last thing you want to keep you out of your top school or program choices is an inappropriate Facebook status update, Instagram or Pinterest photo or offensive tweet. Even bragging on your profile that a school is your 'safety' school can come back to bite you. (According to Kaplan's research, it has!)"
- **Share positive information about yourself.** Go ahead and toot your own horn, and make sure that if there's great information to share about you, it can be found. If you don't do it, who else will?
- **Maintain your reputation.** Even after you've done the hard work of clearing your online slate and adding flattering information, you'll have to stay on top of it. Monitor your online reputation before, during, and after college, especially when it's time to start your career.