9th International Conference Marketing Trends

Venice, January 21st – 23rd 2010

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Consumer Empowerment and Corporate Reputation Management: Internet Marketing Implications

Paper type: conceptual paper

Purpose

The recent advances and development of the Internet toward a web 2.0/social web configuration - that fosters and facilitates collaboration between consumers - are beginning to have a major impact on corporate reputation. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to study some of the issues involved in consumer empowerment in the current digital environments that affect online reputation.

Design/methodology/approach

Starting from a review of the literature on these topics, the study first presents the crucial factors that affect corporate reputation then verify the presence and role of these elements in digital environments. In addition, it is analysed how these determinants change according to the specific features of online communication.

Findings

It comes out that, in digital environments, consumers could increase confidence in their purchasing choices when they build a relationship with firms endorsed with favourable reputations. On the other hand, consumers' comments, opinions, reviews posted in web 2.0 communities/sites affect corporate reputation. Starting from these statements, the paper proposes a set of principal indicators to build a framework that can link each exogenous determinants of the online reputation to specific web elements.

Theoretical/practical implications

From a theoretical point of view, the paper has an exploratory value in order to bridge the noted gap in literature. This explorative analysis has different limits, which could become interesting subjects for future research, summarized in the research agenda to deepen studies on online corporate reputation. From a practical standpoint, the proper identification of the decisive factors of corporate reputation in the digital contexts give some indications on the future development of online reputation management and illustrates how proactive firms could take advantage of consumer empowerment, without becoming enmeshed in it.

Originality/value

The paper highlights that the general recognition of a progressive loss of effectiveness of marketing initiatives seeking “to command and control” consumers, it is not enough to give an explanation about the current changes in Internet Marketing. The proposal of the online corporate reputation management as a key factor of the new online marketing concept is an original and complex challenge in an under-researched field of study.

Keywords: online corporate reputation, consumer empowerment, web 2.0, social web.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the principal changes in online marketing seem to be mainly determined by the progressive consumer empowerment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Sheth and Sharma, 2005; Pires *et al.*, 2006; Cova and Pace, 2006). This process of empowerment is closely linked to the development of the ICTs and above all of web applications known as web 2.0 and/or social web.

To fully understand the increased consumer power, an analysis needs to be made of new technologies and applications by means of which new dynamics of social interaction are created (de Bussy *et al.*, 2000). As a matter of fact, they allow consumers to create and exchange contents online (O’Reilly, 2005). As said, a new generation of web based communities and of websites/applications with “social contents”, like personal and corporate blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds, etc., have progressively modified how users surf the Net. In fact, the “Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users’ networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informational content" (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). The most evident effect of such change is the growth of contents produced by consumers (user-generated content, UGC or user-created content, UCC), that determines the evolution of the web in terms of collaboration.

According to a recent study of the OECD (2007) [1], in EU around 1/3 of Internet users (aged 16-74) produce some online contents and a similar or greater percentage of consumers did the same both in USA and in Asian Countries (Japan, Korea, China). In fact, especially young population (the 60% of surfers has from 15 to 24 years old) participates actively in online discussions. Moreover, young people say to use the Internet to find information before buying online or offline, so they judge very useful the main features of web 2.0 (Harris Interactive/Novatris, 2006).

Starting from this consideration, it emerges that web 2.0 is a "system of reference" for consumers interested in finding information rapidly before making their own evaluations and then buy a product. Thanks to social web, consumers can have a chat in special spaces (forum, blog, social network sites, etc.), while the firm could not have a direct influence on their interactions (Shankar and Malthouse, 2007).

However, the increasing importance of web 2.0 in "influencing" customers' expectations and behaviours requires a careful consideration. Although scholars highlight that "the use of the Internet by consumers for marketing related activities" is a concept deeply studied (Schibrowsky *et al.*, 2007), the effects of "participative/collaborative web" are under-researched considering marketing perspectives.

One of the consequences that empowerment gives to consumers is an increasing control of the Net. The effects of this "switching of control" reach also consumers that do not actively take part in the creation of contents. In actual fact, reading contents like notes on the review sites, comments published on personal blogs or messages on social networks has an effect on the relationship consumer-firm, even without a direct contact between them.

In a wider perspective, the main impact of customer empowerment is on the perception of the firm and its products. In other words, the corporate image and reputation, created in the mind of consumers, changes also due to the fact they take part in conversations about brands/companies. For example, the well-known cases of Kryptonite Locks (Bikebiz, 2004) and Ipod Nano (Oswald, 2005) show that negative comments of consumers in the typical web 2.0 spaces quickly spread and can damage the image and the reputation of the organizations involved.

Starting from a review of the literature on web 2.0 and reputation management, the study first presents the crucial factors that affect corporate reputation then verify the presence and role of these elements in digital environments. In addition, it is analysed how these determinants change according to the specific features of online communication.

2. Literature review: online corporate reputation

The online social dynamics seem to affect online corporate image and corporate reputation management. In order to understand these processes it is presented an overview about reputation, which recently has aroused considerable interest, both from practitioners and scholars (Bennett and Kottasz, 2000).

The study of the influence of the Internet on reputation is part of a wide debate about reputation in general. Even if it has been studied by several scholars and researchers in different strands of research, it is difficult to give a shared definition (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001; Wartick, 2002). Actually, it is possible to identify two points of view about reputation (Rindova *et al.*, 2005). The first one, it is influenced by macro-economical and social investigations developed within the game theory (Kreps and Wilson, 1982). Following this analysis, the reputation is seen as a particular feature of an organization, which becomes worthy while there is a situation of uncertainty. The same considerations are shared by authors adopting the *Resource-Based View* (o *Theory*). In that field of study, it is generally believed that the reputation, as an intangible and firm-specific resource, plays a relevant role in firm’s competitiveness (Dierick and Cool, 1989; Hall, 1992). The second approach to the reputation starts from the institutionalist field of study. Thus, it is focused on the social dimension and expectations about corporate behaviours, shifting the attention to stakeholder perceptions. In this way, corporate reputation is the global impression of an organisation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Rao, 1994).

Briefly, from the Eighties onward, several studies have made a significant contribution to define the concept of corporate reputation, highlighting several key features:

- time. The reputation reflects the past actions of a firm (Weigelt and Camerer, 1988);
- judgments. The reputation involves several judgements and estimation about the behaviour of an organization (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990);
- perception. The reputation is based on public perception of the behaviour of a firm (Fombrun, 1996);

- expectations. The reputation is based on a foresight of the capabilities of a firm to behave in the same way it did in the past. Consequently, it could be said that the concept of reputation is linked to commitment (Herbig and Milewicz, 1995).
- admiration and credibility. It is generally held that corporate reputation could depend on the level of public respect and credibility (Weiss *et al.*, 1999).

Thus, corporate reputation is the result of a public judgment that increases (or decreases) over the time and it is socially shared by different stakeholders (customers, shareholders, employees, suppliers, etc.). Consequently, the reputation is based not only on past performances but also on firm capabilities of satisfying expectations and creating value for stakeholders in the future (Mahon and Wartick, 2003).

The first phase of the consumer-firm relationship usually starts from the customer perception of the image of a firm and then proceeds to trust in the firm, in the event of positive perception, or alternatively, mistrust. However, because of the limited available time, this perception is not based on appreciation and credibility of the firm and, therefore, it does not last for a long time. During the time, stakeholders are able to gather several perceptions (corporate images) about firm, its commitment, its values, etc. and, therefore, build a reputation about it (Fillis, 2003). Afterwards, stakeholders can have a "consolidated" positive opinion of the firm (in case of positive perception) or not. Consequently, unlike corporate image, reputation can have a long-lasting value (Rindova *et al.*, 2005).

Therefore, corporate reputation helps the development of trust in the organization, creating a cognitive pattern useful for stakeholders to assess the firm under conditions of uncertainty.

The role of reputation is even more important in online contexts mainly because some factors that generate trust are missing (Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, it is easy to understand the need to study the role played by corporate reputation in digital environments. The lack of items like face-to-face interactions with suppliers/clients, security concerns in online buying, the reduced credibility generally attributed to online information, the lack of nonverbal cues, the ambiguity about the real identity of the counterpart, etc., play as drawbacks to the process of reputation building and make consumers choices of purchasing more uncertain and risky. On the contrary, among the online features that bolster the development of a favourable reputation there are, for instance, the low costs to find information and the increased chance to exchange information among stakeholders.

As a result, in digital environments, the reputation can play a dual role in social interactions based on trust. The first role involves to act as "substitute for information", when the intentions of the other party are unknown. In other words, reputation can be considered as “an insurance” of the behaviour of the firm. Besides, reputation acts as a deterrent too, because a bad reputation constitutes a major obstacle to maintain relations with customers (Kollock, 1999; Keser, 2002). Accordingly, to avoid a negative reputation and its consequent disadvantages, corporate conduct should preferably be non-opportunistic (Kreps and Wilson, 1982).

Like the brand, the reputation is an important mechanism of reduction of the uncertainty in digital contexts (Kotha *et al.*, 2001). Because of the lack of direct contact, consumers are likely to build online relationships with firms that have a favourable reputation. In this way, consumers can understand, elaborate and preserve several information about the firm that they will use in the moment of the decision of buying in order to reduce perceived risks. Confirming the fiduciary link that is created thanks to online reputation, consumers may decide not to read the *privacy notices* (Milne and Culnan, 2004) or they become available to voluntarily give accurate personal information about themselves (Xie, *et al*., 2006) when the (corporate) website has a favourable reputation.

Moreover, to invest in online reputation seems to be particularly useful for the reason that in the Internet there are many partnerships between organizations. For example, a firm involved in the electronic commerce often needs to develop suitable partnerships with suppliers and dealers. In addition, the value of reputation in developing trust in online transactions is linked to virtual communities, where contacts and social interactions between people rise (Rao, 1994).

Generally, in the whole web, different mechanisms of evaluation (more or less automatic) of the reputation are available. For instance, the same Page Rank, the algorithm of Google is based on a mechanism that shows the reputation of a website (Toms and Taves, 2004). Online reputation mechanisms are linked to the fact that consumers seem to be more and more interested in writing reviews on products, so that customers feedbacks are spreading online (Dellarocas, 2003).

These feedback mechanisms bring about the development of different kinds of “reputation systems”, which have a great influence in determining the success of a firm online (Bolton *et al.*, 2004). The concept of reputation system refers to those online systems that collect, distribute and compare feedback on past behaviours of participants (Resnick *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, participants, who were positively judged for their behaviours, are then trusted by future customers. A well-known example of reputation systems is available on E-bay. Here, there is a synthetic index of reputation made of positive, neutral or negative opinions expressed by members. This kind of reputation systems is available on several websites where consumers can communicate their judgements creating a reputation system of their experiences (Xie, *et al.* 2006). On the other hand, these reputation systems have different disadvantages. Actually, the main problems are due to the difficulty both to verify the sincerity of the expressed opinions, the identity of the reviewers (Friedman and Resnick, 2001) and to compare the different feedbacks on the same product/firm published on different websites. Despite these problems of reliability, such reputation systems play a decisive role in increasing the empowerment of consumers, which influences the building of corporate reputation.

As shown, several studies confirm the importance of reputational assets in new online contexts, but almost none of them has tried to investigate what aspects of reputation building change with the progressive consumer empowerment. To bridge this gap, the next section proposes an exploratory identification of the online determinants of corporate reputation, linking them to specific indicators of social web environments.

3. Main determinants of corporate reputation: toward a framework of online factors

How does consumer empowerment influence reputation building in online contexts?

The first effect of this evolution is that the corporate reputation primarily is influenced "[…] not by what companies do or say, but by how others perceive and respond to their actions and words" (Bunting and Lipski, 2000). According to this perspective, the opportunity to reach customers directly and in a planned way decreases while the influence of external players and of online word-of-mouth processes increases. In other words, the evolution of the Internet toward the web 2.0 configuration switches the power of "voice" from firms to individuals and/or groups taking part in areas of discussion/virtual communities.

Different reasons can explain the progressive loss of control of firms on information in the Internet (Bunting and Lipski, 2000):

- the use of online media has limited costs and it creates free chance to express oneself;
- the Internet overturns the hierarchical power structure. "Alternative authorities" (individuals or groups) born and they could have the same space and the same influence that the traditional mass media have;
- the messages of firms are less credible than those of their opponents.

Actually, the distinctive features of the Internet create more opportunities for "critical players" to express their comments against firms. These circumstances determine the chance for people to damage corporate image and reputation (Melewar and Smith, 2003). For instance, spoof sites (websites that have a similar name, domain or graphic features to those of the "original" firm) have to be taken into consideration. The same happens with humorous sites that can have negative effects on corporate and brand reputation.

Nevertheless, such situation does not determine a "defeat" for the firm due to its impossibility to control external factors that affect the online processes of reputation. On the other hand, the need to understand these factors (online w-o-m, coverage by online media, actions of players external to firm, etc.) emerges and then it becomes necessary to plan strategies and tactics to "affect" online customer behaviours.

Deriving from perceptual processes, reputation is formed by a multiplicity of factors, more or less firm-driven (Fombrun *et al.*, 2000). To this regard, it is useful to distinguish between endogenous (corporate) factors and exogenous (environmental) factors (see table 1).

Table 1 – Main endogenous and exogenous factors determining the corporate reputation

Endogenous factors	Exogenous factors
– Relations with media, investors and other stakeholders groups – Media (advertising, promotion, etc.) – Workplace environment – Market and financial performance – Behaviour of the firm and of their members (e.g. CSR initiatives)	– Word of mouth – Media coverage – Actions of subjects external to the firm (e.g. opinion leader, regulatory/certification authorities) – Actions of competitors

Adapted from: Siano *et al.*, 2007

The endogenous factors are all the elements that directly characterize the organization in relation with its relevant stakeholders. In other terms, they are the set of communication actions, behaviours, performances, which over time have a direct impact on the perception of the firm. Exogenous factors, instead, are those whose control by the firm is limited. These factors consist of the determinants of reputation - like w-o-m, media coverage, the actions of parties outside the organization, etc. - that depend on processes in which the company generally does not play a central role in handling.

Thus, it is useful to analise how the Internet modifies these factors that determine the creation of corporate reputation. In actual fact, on the Internet the progressive empowerment of consumers and other stakeholders seems to switch the equilibrium of reputation determinants to external factors.

In addition, the paper proposes a set of principal indicators to build a framework that can link each exogenous determinants to specific web elements (see table 2). This proposal is a first step in this field of study as it will be necessary to deepen the importance of each indicators on determining online corporate reputation.

The definition of principal indicators of online reputation determinants can help both to assess the communication results on the Internet and to act accordingly to bridge eventual gaps. However, it should be clear that each firm keeps its main features in communicating with its stakeholders on the Internet. For example, Toyota has decided to monitor the websites where consumers discuss its products intervening from time to time; on the other hand, Dell has opened a section of its corporate website where users express themselves without censorship. In addition, this is true also for SMEs. In fact, Project Group Srl, a small consulting firm in Brescia (north of Italy), using a "wiki", is able to conversate with their employees and customers as well as to offer services with a high level of customization.

Table 2 – Main exogenous determinants of online corporate reputation, principal indicators and social web applications

<table>
<tr><th>Main exogenous determinants</th><th>Principal indicators</th><th>Social web applications</th></tr>
<tr><td>Word of mouth</td><td>- Link popularity
- Number of subscribers/fans/contacts/views/etc. on the most popular web 2.0 apps</td><td rowspan="4">- Corporate website/blog
- RSS Feed
- Blogs
- (Social) News websites
- Social networks
- File, Photo and Video sharing
- Partners websites
- Other websites</td></tr>
<tr><td>Media coverage</td><td>Frequency and favourability of mentions</td></tr>
<tr><td>Actions of subjects external to the firm</td><td>Partnerships and certifications/awards</td></tr>
<tr><td>Actions of competitors</td><td>Frequency and favourability of mentions about main competitors</td></tr>
</table>

To describe the main exogenous determinants of online corporate reputation and their principal indicators, it will be also presented some examples of Italian SMEs (Lago, Valcucine, Molino Quaglia), proactive in using social web. This choice serves also to demonstrate that not only large companies use these tools/applications.

Word of mouth

Starting from the first and foremost exogenous factors, it emerges that, unlike other techniques of communication, word of mouth is largely spontaneous and it is expressed in the conveying information from person to person, which can positively or negatively influence the perception they have about a firm and/or its products. Although it is not easy to determine what are the motivations that stimulate w-o-m, it can be argued that if expectations about the product/service are totally confirmed, it may be a phenomenon of positive word of mouth. Conversely, the dissatisfaction may be a major cause in spreading negative opinions about a product/service (Anderson, 1998; Sundaram *et al,* 1998). The link with the mechanisms of corporate reputation building is evident, as signals of product quality are easily transferred through w-o-m processes (Allen, 1984). In fact, for several scholars corporate reputation is just the opinion of stakeholders in relation to the organization's ability to offer quality products (Shapiro, 1983; Milgrom and Roberts, 1986).

Among the principal indicators of w-o-m factor, the two that should better reflect the ability of the firm to be an "influential" are:

- the *link popularity*, i.e. the quantity and quality of websites that have linked to the analised webpage (these links are often referred to as inbound links or backlinks)[2];
- the number of subscribers/fans/contacts/views/etc. on the most popular web 2.0 applications (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, etc.).

Valcucine and its high link popularity is illustrated below.

Valcucine builds low-maintenance, high-design kitchen accessories and hardware, complete with recycled, non-polluting components and energy efficient technologies. The corporate blog (ecovalcucine.blogspot.com) is one of the green sites (www.kode-green.org) and it gives information about events on eco-compatibility, sustainability and bio-architecture. With its ability to generate interest on these topics, Valcucine is able to have excellent results in terms of presence on social network (1729 friends in its MySpace page). In addition, Valcucine shares files through Issuu and Slideshare, while editorials and pictures of new kitchens and events are published using Flickr. Lastly, videos are available on You Tube channel (4 videos) and Vimeo (2 videos). Due to the use of this variety of social web applications, the total link popularity is at a very high level (6821) for an SME.

Media coverage

With regard to media coverage, as a determinant for the web reputation, Macleod (2000) uses two main dimensions for analysis: the *frequency* of mentions about the firm and the *favourability* of mentions that is “the degree to which the item is supportive or critical of the client organisation”. Currently, some services (free or paid) are available online and allow to determine both the quantity of comments on social media and the tone of voice of those citations. One of the most interesting examples is probably represented by Socialmention.com that aggregates user generated content from different web 2.0 sites, indicating unique authors and keywords for each mention. The data are also presented using synthetic indexes such as the “strength”, which indicates the probability that the brand/company is discussed on social media, the “sentiment” that is the ratio of the mentions that are generally positive to those negative, the “reach” useful to measure the range of influence, etc. Moreover, other services (Trendpedia, BlogPulse, etc.) show the articles in a trend chart that point outs the popularity of specific topics over time.

The main initiatives promoting coverage of (social) media is a corporate blog (with RSS feeds), combined with the presence of the firm on social networks (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Ning, etc.) and on sites for sharing resources (Flickr, YouTube, Vimeo, Issuu, Slideshare, etc.). This is described in the Lago example.

> Lago, an Italian firm (Padova), involved in furniture and interior design sector, communicates with its stakeholders primarily thanks to its corporate blog (designconversation, blog.lago.it). In this way, it shows its perspective on interior design to its customers presenting art, contemporary design, events and new topics with video and interviews. The blog of Lago is a place where designers and artists share their considerations and ideas and, for this reason, its contents are mentioned on several professional online magazines and websites such as Core 77 and the Cool Hunter. In order to reach this goal, Lago also communicates using Facebook (with 289 friends), Twitter and Ning (Lago Sales Community). Furtermore, it shares files with stakeholders thanks to Issuu and Slideshare, it presents new collections and stores with Flickr and distributes videos through its You Tube channel (20 videos available).

Actions of subjects external to the firm

With reference to the actions of external actors, the issues to be assessed are the certificates acquired by the company and validated by third-party institutions (e.g. regulatory/certification agencies), the formalization of online and offline partnerships, the attainment of awards, etc.. An important role is also acted by opinion leaders and professionals, who are key players both in developing w-o-m processes and in influencing the perceptions of other stakeholders. This is illustrated by the Molino Quaglia example that dedicate to opinion leaders and professionals several sections and online contents.

> Molino Quaglia, a firm involved in the food sector, created its website as a hub for professionals - bakers, pizza makers, etc. The most interesting aspect concerns the ability to arouse interest among the various stakeholders towards products - such as flours for making bread, pasta and cakes - usually regarded as “commodities goods”. This web site includes a set of activities aimed at involving both cooking “lovers” and the professionals (bakers, pizza makers, pastry chefs). Some of them are partners (i.e. “Greci Industria Alimentare” and “Sabelli Distribuzione”) in organizing the initiatives – “food culture” events, courses on baking, etc. - carried on by Molino Quaglia. In addition, the firm creates a virtual workroom, corresponding to the training center created by the firm. The purpose is twofold: the involvement of different stakeholders in a series of corporate coordinated events (quickly communicated on its Facebook page) and the creation of a professional network to share the food experience and “artisan bread” culture with informed consumers and creative cooks.

Actions of competitors

Finally, online reputation derives from the corporate entity’s relationship with all stakeholders, including competitors (Srivastava *et al*., 2001; Argyriou *et al*., 2006). For example, through comparative advertising, a competitor that points out the qualities of its products, together with the limits and weaknesses of the products of another organization, can involve a worsening of competitor’s reputation. Furthermore, it is necessary to note that consumers can easily compare online prices and features of different products/brands thanks to several shopping comparison sites (i.e. Kelkoo, mySimon, etc.).

The most effective and efficient tools for evaluating the actions of online competitors could be the same described above for media coverage, by means of queries that link the firm with its competitor.

Ultimately, however, it must be noted that the development of online corporate reputation does not depend exclusively on web-based factors. Any use of indicators for online reputation shall not exclude to monitor corporate reputation in the mainstream media. Actually, it is important to clarify that determinants which have an influence on online corporate reputation involve offline features and processes (relations with traditional media, investors and other stakeholders groups; workplace environment; market and financial performance; behaviour of the firm and of their members, etc.). For the reason that this paper mainly refers to characteristics of the online reputation, the lack of analysis of interactions between online and offline determinants of the reputation could be considered one of the main limit of this conceptual paper.

5. Summary and conclusions

Consumer empowerment is certainly changing the scenario of Internet Marketing. Even if there are new ways to coordinate traditional tactics of communication and innovative technologies, it is too early to speak about a new way for firms to communicate, especially if SMEs are analysed. In fact, the current use of web by proactive firms could be seen either as single examples of managing stakeholders thanks to web 2.0 or as a first step toward a radically new paradigm of online marketing.

An interesting aspect is the creation of innovative spaces of communication that allow to reinforce relationships with stakeholders and to strengthen the online reputation. In this perspective, the present study could give some preliminary indications on the future development of online reputation management and it could help to illustrate how firms could take advantage of consumer empowerment, without becoming submerged by it.

It is clear that this explorative analysis has different limits, which could become interesting subjects for future research. In particular, it is important to present a research agenda to deepen studies on online corporate reputation, focusing on the following items:

- empirical evaluation of selected determinants, identifying appropriate methodologies (qualitative/quantitative) and techniques and then comparing them with “traditional” web metrics (i.e. unique visitors, page views, time spent, etc.);
- extension of the analysis, taking into consideration different firms and different Countries, where the use of social web applications is differently developed;
- identification of possible similarities, in terms of influence, and interactions between online and offline determinants.

Theoretically, the study of this topic can help to understand the different determinants and their role in influencing online corporate reputation. Managing online reputation, due to the increasing weight of reputational external factors, it emerges that online corporate reputation refers not only to what stakeholders say about firms but to also what firms could do to make stakeholders speak about them. In this way, the considered indicators could be a first step to analyse and choice the most suitable online marketing/communication actions to bolster the corporate reputation as well as to defend the extant reputation capital. A proactive use of the recent online tools and social networks should include the development of relationships with empowered customers/stakeholders and not only to face criticism.

Finally, the analysis of online determinants of reputation may also have significant practical implications. First, an integrated approach to online reputation management allows firms to take advantage of growing investment in the search engine marketing activities. The expenditure in SEM/SEO needs to be combined, therefore, with initiatives of content creation (blogs, pages on social networks, audio and video sharing, etc.) that actively reduce the amount of harm of potential negative or embarrassing contents from firm's opponents.

On the other hand, the analysis of the determinants of corporate reputation online shows that it is necessary but not sufficient monitoring of firm's detractors. Currently, most web communication agencies seem intent on proposing initiatives for the online reputation management that focus primarily on the monitoring of "buzz" around the organization and its products (e.g. to control specific keywords through Google Alerts, to check SERP, to verify the blog coverage, etc.), but frequently they seem fail to give proper indications that can actively improve client's online corporate reputation. This approach embroils the firm in a mere defense of its position and may affect the possibility of building a favourable reputation that keeps step with consumer empowerment.

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[1] OECD (2007) defines UCC as a content: i) made publicly available over the internet, ii) which reflects a "certain amount of creative effort", and iii) which is "created outside of professional routines and practices".

[2] Indeed, each search engine calculates link popularity in a different way. For istance, Google uses a special link analysis system to rank web pages in which the basic assumption is that not all inbound links are equal but they have a different weight according to their relevance. Other search engines only calculate the total number of incoming links. In Valcucine example, the paper considers a total value that sums the different values resulted in Google, Yahoo, Live, All The Web and AltaVista.

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