

## Taking Control of Your Online Brand: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

Tina Morton and Tiffany Seward

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**W**hat website were you visiting the last time you experienced *remarkable online customer service*? What made you feel that way? The design and functionality of the site were probably appealing, and you wasted little time finding what you were looking for. Unfortunately, a well-designed and highly functional online site is not enough in today's world. Without feedback and monitoring mechanisms in place, an online presence eventually leads to problems because *what you don't know can hurt you*.

This article focuses on an ever-growing component of customer service in the assessment office—online customer service. All the ideas and tools presented here are intended to improve communication to, for, and with the people served by the assessment office.

All assessment offices have target audiences and use multiple channels to communicate. Using the *online* channel presents unique and challenging questions, such as

- Who is the assessment office trying to attract to the website?
- What does the assessment office want visitors to do online?
- Do online visitors have a voice?

My goal as Chief Operating Officer of the Travis County (Austin, Texas) Tax Office is to make sure that everyone who drives, votes, or pays property taxes in Travis County can readily locate not only the office's online sites but also the

actual services within the sites. What started 15 years ago as a means to disseminate information to the public now serves as a virtual communication hub with social media components supporting daily operations.

### Taxpayer Expectations Determine Online Brand

Even though taxpayers typically do not have a choice when they seek assessment office services, they still frequently expect sophisticated service levels comparable to those in the private sector. For example, a common complaint during tax collection season is about paying taxes with a credit card; many taxpayers want to pay online using a credit card. Texas law precludes collecting any amount above the actual tax due, so the credit card service fee (3 percent in Travis County) must be collected separately by a private vendor. It's a matter of expectations when taxpayers use a credit card but don't realize what merchants must add to their cost to cover service fees. Obviously, the expectation is that there should be no fee and assessment offices should be exempt or figure out how to absorb what the credit card companies charge.

In considering online audience expectations, the ideal is to facilitate a conversation that aligns expectations on both sides of the computer screen. That includes the taxpayers' expectations about what they should find online as well as the assessor's expectations about what to provide and how to facilitate a conversation. Expectations, specifically customer expectations, determine the online brand.

In Travis County there is no budget for research, surveys, consultants, and the like to formally pursue online branding. There are a few (two) creative individuals who take a hands-on approach in keeping online sites up and running every day. This article shares a set of no-cost or low-cost techniques for evaluating an online brand.

For offices that have the luxury of budgeted funds for establishing or re-creating an online brand, there are options. Online companies such as Reputation Changer ([reputation-changer.org](http://reputation-changer.org)) provide a variety of services to address problems or re-create an organization's online brand. According to Reputation Changer,

*...what people read about a business on the Internet can ultimately set the tone for that business' success—or for its failure. Indeed, the Internet is growing increasingly influential in shaping consumer behavior, and whether that's good or bad news depends on where a company's online reputation stands. If nothing else, though, there is a burning need for companies to invest in online reputation monitoring and management—to know where they stand on the Web, and to do everything possible to improve and protect their image. (Reputation Changer 2014)*

Because of the sometimes controversial nature of property appraisal and tax collection, protecting the online image of and preserving a positive brand for the assessment office is a constant challenge.

### What Is a Brand?

Research on online branding finds a number of themes repeated over and over again. One unsettling idea is that the organization has limited control of its online presence. Essentially, it can set certain parameters and make sure that the content of the website and social media sites is well-written and that information and data are easily accessible. However, it's the user and those the user communicates with who decide the quality, the reputation, the brand. This may not sound so different from the formation of public opinion before the Internet when citizen-consumers visited a government agency and talked to one another. The difference is of course the instantaneous communication of social networks. There are several online services, which are discussed later, that customers use to weigh in on their experiences with businesses and agencies.

Some people view *brand* as a trademark, Coca-Cola, Shell, BP, and Apple, for example. Definitions of the word *brand* also include a mark of notoriety or disgrace, like a "branded felon." There is also the branding iron visual that leaves a mark forever.

Marty Neumeier, president of Neutron, LLC, a San Francisco-based brand consultancy, would disagree with all these ideas

about what online brand means. In his online presentation, titled "Brand Gap," he states that brand is not a logo, not an identity, not a trademark, not a product. Neumeier says that brand is a person's *gut feeling* about a product, a service, or an organization. He emphasizes that it is a *person's* gut feeling because brands are defined by individuals, not by companies or markets or segments of the public. In other words, brand is not what the organization says it is; it's what the individual says it is. This reflects the notion about the level of control over online presence, the online brand (Neumeier 2007).

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The elements of an online brand should come as no surprise. They are the agency's website; social media sites; any mentions of the agency on city, state, and national and social media websites; and anyone anywhere else on the web.

Do employees in the organization use social networking sites? This is a huge area of concern. Although not addressed in this article, the issue is certainly a consideration in online brand. To know a little more about the assessment industry's perspective on social networking in the workplace, I reviewed the results of the most recent IAAO Communication Practices Survey (IAAO Communications Committee 2011). A total of 553 people completed the survey in July 2010. The following are some noteworthy (albeit dated) results.

When asked whether their workplaces use online social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube) as part of their public information programs, 84 percent of respondents said they do not use social media. Of the total survey population, only 5.9 percent said they use social media to post links to their office website, and smaller percentages said they use social media to post event notices, event coverage, discussion forums, and blogs. When asked, "Does your workplace have a written policy defining use of social media sites and other online communications for work use?" 68 percent of respondents indicated that they do. Additional survey results showed the following workplace controls on Internet use:

- Internet use monitored, 69 percent
- Social media site access restricted, 68 percent
- Controls on types of sites visited, 66 percent

- Access restricted outside workplace, 60 percent
- Limits on time spent on Internet, 55 percent
- Written policy on use of social media sites, 53 percent.

More than three years have passed since this survey was conducted. How has your office online presence changed, if at all?

Therefore, online brand can be defined as a conversation based on the user's gut feelings in which the brand owner is not really in control. Thus the mission of the brand owner is to *influence* users in a positive, collaborative manner. Another critical point is that brand encompasses any mention of the agency anywhere on the web. Building or re-creating an online strategy under these circumstances seems like a daunting task!

### Building an Online Brand

In his online blog, Christopher Wallace offers these four key strategies for building an online brand:

- Research the audience.
- Give the brand a voice.
- Plan social media integration.
- Monitor for results.

First, *research the audience*. To build a brand online, the organization must first have a clear understanding of its audience, especially when developing content strategies and communication plans. For example, online forms designed for taxpayers who are seniors or who have disabilities should take font size into consideration. Fortunately, there are plenty of tools that can help identify the target audience, including products from com.Score, Nielsen, Google, and Compete.

Second, *give the brand a voice*. For assessment offices, this might be the administrator or elected official. Based on research, determine what the audience wants to hear and what message the organization wants to put forward. This forms the foundation for the brand's voice. But, in doing so, keep the following in mind:

- Have an open mind and consider all ideas (imagine Geico's reaction when its creative team first suggested using a lizard as the brand voice).
- When creating content, speak *with* the audience—not *at* them—because people respond better to a conversation that relates to them and engages them.

Be consistent in messaging, because people look for consistency in a brand. Across all channels of communication, messaging should have the same content quality, look, and feel. By creating consistent messaging, the organization allows customers to continually recognize and recall the brand. One simple way to achieve this is to always include a logo or photo identifying the assessment office.

Third, *plan the integration with social media*. What is the brand supposed to say or do online? What types of interactions with consumers are expected by the assessment office? In Travis County, the goal is to engage customers online and to complete transactions electronically, saving time and precious resources.

Facebook? Twitter? Both are invaluable tools in Travis County's online efforts. A little research should help gain an understanding of where the audience is and how to interact with them. Start by listening and seeing who is talking about the brand. If no one is, consider starting the conversation. But remember, it's a conversation leading to interaction. The brand will be on a positive path if social media are treated as a conversation.

According to Wallace, building a reputation online is similar to a networking breakfast, but it's not as easy and it takes more time. First, it's important to have a clearly defined strategy for reaching the audience. Next, the tactics for the process need to be identified. For instance, any existing offline partnerships should be leveraged to grow the reputation online. Doing so not only helps build links to the website but also enhances the agency's search presence. Overall, the more prevalent the brand becomes in the mind of reputable peers, the stronger the online reputation.

Finally, *monitoring for results* completes the cycle of building brand. This may be the most difficult step because it requires establishing a routine to check, respond, anticipate, and defend the online reputation of the assessment office (Wallace 2010).

Leveraging the online brand depends upon credibility—the extent to which users perceive the site as trustworthy or knowledgeable. B. J. Fogg, an experimental psychologist and researcher at Stanford University, says there are four types of credibility (Fogg 2006):

1. *Presumed credibility*, general assumptions; a known brand is more credible than an unfamiliar one.
2. *Reputed credibility*, third-party reference; a friend says "x" is good.
3. *Surface credibility*, what is found on simple inspection; "this website looks too confusing."
4. *Earned credibility*, personal experience; friendly customer service or text full of typos.

Building and sustaining credibility also involves other common-sense elements. Useful content means frequent updates, avoiding errors and removing outdated material. Investing in a professional design with simple navigation and easy-to-use search capabilities streamlines the user's experience. Being linked to by high-quality websites demonstrates credibility as seen through the eyes of respected industry members.

Finally, and perhaps the most telling in terms of brand as defined here, that is, the individual's experience, the effort to respond quickly to customer inquiries must be high priority.

Organizations have long known the value of having a website and providing information to the public. Traditionally assessment offices rely on a one-way communication process by providing basic information about property taxation, forms, and specific property information such as appraised values and tax bills. Customer feedback becomes a conversation only when the customer takes action in the form of an e-mail or phone call.

### Websites that Influence Brand

The challenge is that use of the Internet by the public has evolved into an asynchronous environment in which the user, rather than the organization, has the power to create content. As a result, the user can provide inaccurate information on social media websites that affects all of an organization's customers. Many organizations avoid diving into Facebook, Twitter, or Google+ because of a lack of time, money, and expertise to run a social media campaign. The problem with this approach, however, is that customers may have already created information for the organization on these websites when, for example, they use a cell phone to locate the office. Users are in control of this information until the organization stakes its claim.

Social media sites like Facebook do not usually need much explanation because they have become an integral part of personal and professional communication. However, from an organization's perspective, the environment is much more complex. For example, Facebook has two components: Facebook Pages and Facebook Places. A Facebook Page is set up in order to communicate and interact with the public. Individuals can *like* the page, as they would a business, and receive updates. Many offices do not have the time or staffing to manage a Facebook Page, or they partner with a larger organization, such as their county or state communications department, to provide updates under a larger umbrella. Even if the office has never set up a Facebook Page, it probably already has a Facebook Place where users can check in at the actual location using a mobile device and leave reviews. The accuracy of this user content can be very problematic, so being aware of Facebook Places is critical.

Google also has multiple components, including Google+ Pages and Google Places Pages (<https://www.google.com/business/placesforbusiness/>). A Google+ Page is similar to a Facebook Page. Organizations can use a Google+ Page like other forms of social media to disseminate information. It is an opportunity to reach different users who may not be on Facebook, although the audience is considerably smaller.

A Google Places Page is similar to Facebook Places. The office may already have a Google Places Page and not know it. As is the case with Facebook Places, users can check in at the actual location using a mobile device and leave reviews. The key factor is that Google Places Page listings are heavily integrated into Google web search results. Thus, incorrect listing information on a Google Places Page created by someone who has visited the office may appear whenever someone uses Google to search for the office or uses an Android phone's GPS system to travel to the office. Google apparently is merging Google+ Pages with Google Places Pages, so they may be referred to interchangeably, or the office may be asked to create a Google+ Page to update its Google Places Page.

Bing Places for Business ([www.bingplaces.com](http://www.bingplaces.com)) and Yahoo Local Listings (<https://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/local-listings/basic-listing/>) also provide information about locations to users who are searching online with their search engines, and again, incorrect data may affect customers' ability to contact or locate the office.

There may be other listing sites, such as Yelp and Foursquare, that are popular in the community. For example, Yelp can be found in many major cities (<https://www.yelp.com/locations>). In February 2013, the Yelp Official Blog announced that it had 100 million unique visitors in January 2013. In March 2014, the Yelp Official Blog announced that Yelp content would now be featured on Yahoo search results pages. The results include all the information from each Yelp listing, such as location and directions, website, phone number, and office hours. The Foursquare About page, updated in January 2014, lists 45 million users and 5 billion "check-ins" worldwide ([www.foursquare.com](http://www.foursquare.com)).

### Preparing to Stake a Claim

Before beginning the process of staking a claim, it is important to determine both the accounts and the people that associated with the brand. Signing up for an organizational account is similar to signing up for a personal account; it requires such information as a user name, e-mail address, and password. Keeping this information as consistent as possible across multiple websites simplifies managing all the different accounts.

Using an e-mail address assigned to a single individual can make it difficult to manage accounts. If the organization already has an e-mail address for general correspondence, consider whether this address could also be used to create accounts on different websites or whether the IT department could develop an address exclusively for this purpose. If the general e-mail address that already exists is accessed by only a few employees, it may be a good choice. However, if many employees have access to that account, creating a new e-mail

address would provide control over the number of people involved in the branding efforts. Having fewer people involved allows for more consistency across the different websites.

Creating a short user name is also necessary when a website does not rely solely on one e-mail address as the user profile. This user name is often displayed prominently at the top of the listing, so it is important to accurately reflect the office's mission and public image. Consider other short monikers already in use to determine whether one can also serve as a user name, such as a portion of the URL or an acronym used by the public to regularly describe the office. Be sure the name selected can be understood without spaces or punctuation, because most websites do not allow these in a user name. The Travis County Tax Office uses "TravisCountyTax" for all its user names, and a combination of upper and lowercase letters was specifically created to make the user name easy to read. However, be prepared for flexibility. The user name may not fit the requirements of every website, so an alternative may be needed.

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Passwords are also critical. While the IT department will probably advise creating a unique password for each account, this may make it difficult to manage a branding campaign effectively. Creating one very strong password that includes upper and lowercase characters, symbols, and numbers for multiple accounts is more practical. Some websites, like Facebook, require users to first sign in with their individual account in order to manage their business account. Therefore, users may be employing their personal e-mail and passwords in some instances. Find a place to list all the different websites, user names, and password hints. If there is no list of accounts, it will be difficult to track what the office has claimed and how to sign in. This is also helpful when the job tasks associated with managing the listings are passed to someone else.

Finally, it is critical to identify individual administrators, especially for websites requiring a connection to an individual account. Having one administrator is risky because information may not be accessible when the individual is unavailable.

At the same time, having too many administrators can create consistency problems. Many websites allow administrators to define the level of access. For example, there could be an administrator who has full power over the listing and a content creator who can only add posts or change descriptions. This setup eliminates the possibility that users will go beyond their scope of authority intentionally or unintentionally.

## Staking a Claim

Staking a claim gives the office the opportunity to provide accurate maps and office hours; add related content; track user additions; and receive change notifications when users or the website administrators modify the information.

The first step is to locate all the sites where the office is listed and claim one listing. The way to claim a listing varies depending on the website. However, the beginning of the process involves locating the claim link on the page. Look for terms such as "Is this your business," "Manage this page," or "Claim here" (see figure 1).

Each website has a different method for verifying the connection with the organization. Often this involves receiving a postcard or a phone call with claim instructions and a code. The problem with this method is that postcards often get lost in the shuffle in organizations that receive a high volume of mail and the main phone number may be part of a telephone system with a menu, so phone confirmation does not work. In these cases, the Help pages are a best friend. It is possible to contact organizations, even large organizations like Google and Yahoo Local, by e-mail or online chat so a representative can help complete the claim process when normal methods do not work.

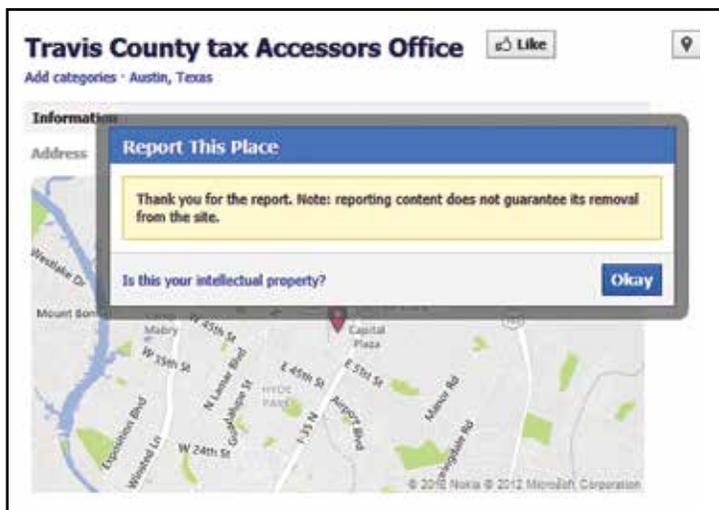
The second step in staking a claim is to locate and remove duplicate listings. For example, this office is typically referred to as "Travis County Tax Office" because it provides a wide range of services in addition to property taxes, including vehicle titles and voter registration. However, users have cre-

**Figure 1.** Claiming business listings on the Internet



ated 10 different Facebook listings using names like “Travis County Tax Collector,” “Travis County Tax Assessor,” and “Travis County tax Accessors Office.” Once these duplicate pages are located, the links provided should be used to report them so they can be removed to avoid confusion. Some websites allow listing owners to merge pages instead of removing them altogether. For example, Facebook has a process that allows owners to merge multiple pages; there are clear directions in the Help section of the website. Google, on the other hand, does not provide the ability to merge pages. Users may continue to add duplicates, so it is a good idea to check for any new pages every six months. See figure 2 for an example of an incorrectly spelled duplicate listing.

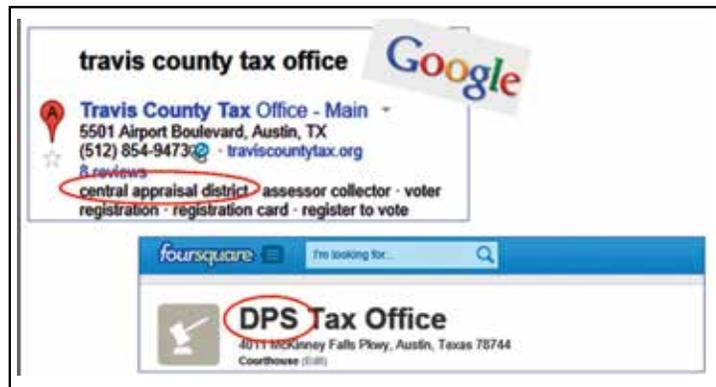
**Figure 2.** Check for duplicates and incorrect content online



After a page has been claimed and duplicate listings have been removed, the content should be carefully reviewed for inaccuracies. The organization name, address, phone number, office hours, and categories can all be edited for accuracy by the owner of a listing. The Travis County Tax Office collects taxes, but it does not appraise, and it registers and titles vehicles, but it does not issue driver’s licenses. However, many of the listings initially included misleading information placed there by well-meaning users attempting to describe the office. Figure 3 shows Travis County Tax Office inaccurately described as the central appraisal district and DPS Tax Office.

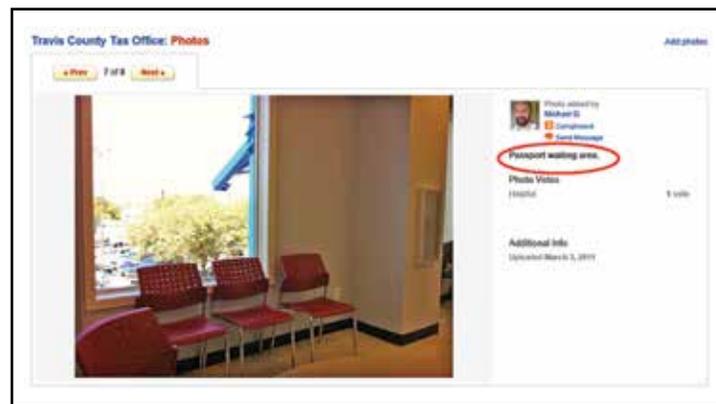
Next, consider the type of content to be added to the listing. Because websites such as Google, Yelp, and Facebook are connected to apps that cell phone users rely on to locate the office, visual information is helpful to the user. Posting a photo of the office allows the customer to easily recognize the building. Claiming the listing also means that the office will be notified when a user uploads a photo or when other changes to the listing are made, giving the office an opportunity to correct errors. For example, if a customer posts a photo of the passport waiting room in a nearby building

**Figure 3.** Misleading labeling on the Internet



instead of the assessment office (see figure 4), the office can easily request the photo be removed by simply clicking on a standard link to report the photo.

**Figure 4.** Check for incorrect visual information



### Maintaining the Brand

Once the listings have been set up, it is not difficult to maintain the brand. First, look for the statistics or reports provided by the website to gain a wide variety of data, such as how many people clicked through to the website, used the listing to dial the office’s number with a smart phone, or checked in at the office location. Other data, such as the different browsers or devices being used, can provide input for designing the website or checking to see how the information is displayed on various tablets, phones, and computers.

Second, one of the main features of most websites today is the ability for customers to add reviews—reviews of products, restaurants, and local businesses. However, assessment offices may not have considered what users are posting online about their organizations. Staking a claim alerts the office to reviews and provides the opportunity to respond privately or publicly. While the office may not always be able to please every customer, responding to both positive and negative reviews is a good opportunity to demonstrate an interest in feedback and a commitment to improving operations. Figure 5 shows the response to a mixed review on Yelp.

## Figure 5. Respond appropriately to online reviews

Krista,  
Thank you for providing this review. If you experienced a rude employee over the phone, I apologize. Our office takes customer service here very seriously. If you have the name of the employee or would like to share the details with me, I will be happy to follow up with our team. I am glad your experience in our office was efficient and you received the type of customer service we strive to achieve.

Tiffany Seward

Online reviews about the office can be monitored by using a variety of services. For example, Google Alerts (<http://www.google.com/alerts>) is a free service that sends an e-mail every time a search term the office entered is mentioned on the Internet. Setting up alerts using the name of the office, the elected or appointed official, or the public information officer helps capture more information about what the media is publishing. It also allows the office to use key words to follow a particular topic, not only in news stories but also in websites, blogs, videos, and books.

Finally, maintaining a brand requires revisiting listings periodically to ensure their accuracy. Websites add new features, so old photos may no longer fit into the provided space, or office hours may have been newly included. Checking listings does not have to be a daily or weekly activity. Quarterly checks of the content to make any necessary changes help busy organizations balance limited time and resources with the need for accuracy.

## Conclusion

The branding process is not easy because of the evolving nature of online communications. This is not an all-or-nothing endeavor. If resources can accommodate a full social media presence, an assessment office can broaden its ability to communicate with key stakeholders. Where an office's resources are limited, however, simply staking a claim can ensure customers have the information they need.

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**Christina Morton** is Chief Operating Officer for the Travis County Tax Office located in Austin, Texas.

Before joining the Travis County Tax Office, she taught high school and managed a contact center team for a financial services corporation. For more than 29 years, Tina has pursued innovation in managing tax office communications, public outreach, and training programs. As acting Tax Assessor-Collector and Voter Registrar in 2012, Tina led the tax office in preparing for new leadership.

Tina holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Michigan and completed advanced studies in Adult Education and Training at the University of Texas–Austin.

**Tiffany Seward** currently serves as the Director of Communications and Training for the Travis County Tax Office in Austin, Texas. Her department handles customer phone calls and e-mails, training, media relations, social media, and the [traviscountytax.org](http://traviscountytax.org) website. As an approved instructor for the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation Property Tax Professionals education program, she is responsible for developing and teaching a wide variety of courses for Travis County, including online programs.



Tiffany is a native Texan who grew up in El Paso and made her way to Austin after a few stops in the Land of Enchantment. She has a Master of Arts in organizational communication from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico, and a Bachelor of Science in communication studies from Eastern New Mexico State University in Portales, New Mexico.