Protecting Your Online Reputation

Several years ago I heard of a survey of American schoolchildren that found that their number one goal was fame. More recently I found a story out of England to the same effect called “I want to be famous”: “Last year, a survey found that the top three career aspirations for five- to 11-year-olds in Britain were sports star, pop star and actor, compared with teacher, banker and doctor 25 years ago” (by Emma Brockes, April 16, 2010, The Guardian online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/apr/17/i-want-to-be-famous). The Internet has been a boon to glory-seekers everywhere. It is the ultimate mechanism for self-aggrandizement. Facebook is excellent at creating illusory friends, Twitter at creating illusory followers. Sites allowing you to set up or join virtual worlds abound, including MMORPGs (massively multiple online role playing games) such as Halo (at http://halo.xbox.com/en-us) and social virtual worlds such as Second Life (at http://secondlife.com/). Companies, including law firms, cannot exist without an online presence. But, sometimes the Internet bites back. Sometimes the fame you seek turns to infamy. How do you clean up the record and resuscitate your reputation? This column will go into some of the problems that can arise and online services that claim they can help you once anonymous denizens of the web sully your good name.

Reputation Horror Stories

Republican Presidential wannabe Rick Santorum has an Internet problem. Opponents of his views on same-sex marriage have put some unkind comments on a variety of web pages, including giving his name an offensive sexual connotation. Recognizing that free speech can be a pain, especially for public figures, Santorum chose instead to strike out against the Google search engine, since innocent searches of his name shocked his supporters and caused him embarrassment. The response from Google: “Users who want content removed from the Internet should contact the webmaster of the page directly.” Rick Santorum contacted Google, says company spreads ‘filth,’ by Alexander Burns at http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0911/63952.html.

Reputation damage is not limited to public figures. A cheerleader for the Cincinnati Bengals foot-