



## Your Online First Impression Matters!

By: Matt O'Neill and April Baker

When people talk about first impressions, they immediately think face-to-face contact. However, times have changed, and first impressions matter significantly online ...especially when it comes to finding new clients. Your digital footprint shows prospects a lot about you -- both good and bad. Like it or not — agree with the intrusion or not — you are being Googled, judged, and analyzed by the content you've posted online. As with a physical first encounter, you only get one shot at your online impression. For that reason, it must be a good one.

Research confirms that today's business leaders and heads of household are using web searches and social media to decide whether to do business with you within the first 3-to-5 seconds of viewing your profile! This includes, but is not limited to, your social profile, your images, and every comment you make on a blog post. These factors play an important role in determining your online reputation and brand. For that reason, it is imperative that your profile is current, positive, and upbeat. If your prospect skims over your public online presence for the first time and finds you judgmental, offensive, inconsistent, or even just sloppy in your punctuation, that impression is going to impact your ability to establish credibility and trust.

Before you lock down all your social accounts, be aware: The *lack* of a social profile online can also *cost you*. Recent surveys show that business leaders and heads of households are *less*

*likely* to form relationships or transact business with those they are unable to find information about online.

So, the new best practice is first to clean up any questionable content from all social media profiles. Second, design your social content in a way that reflects your best professional self.

### How do you make a good first online impression?

Start by thinking of yourself as a brand, and market that brand accordingly. Realize that online, your name and image impact your current and future earning potential. Consider perceptions, qualities, and characteristics that you want people to associate with you. Think about traits and accomplishments that you want to highlight. Consider asking yourself questions, such as:

- What makes me unique in the marketplace? (your "WHY, value proposition, process")
- Who am I offering it to? (your "target market")
- How am I going to reach them (your "channels")
- How will I sustain interest/stay in touch?

Your answers to these questions will enhance your ability to see the image or expression you wish to create in the minds of others... your sense of purpose, vision, and value that embody the real you.

### Six Steps to Improve Your Online First Impression

**1. Get your social life out of the public eye!** The Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. channels that you use to communicate with longtime friends and family should be separate from the ones that you use to communicate with strangers on the Internet. Create an account name like "Firstname Lastname Social" for your private life, and make sure the privacy settings are limited across all platforms. Use your real name or business name for a larger, more publicly shared profile where you're watching what you say closely.

**2. Google yourself and your image.** Review the information online about yourself in different search engines. Sounds simple, but this is where prospective clients will start. If you find negative content, such as your name or image on controversial blogs or blog comments; negative Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, or Twitter posts; or if you are tagged in any risky video content, address the issue immediately. If you can delete it, then delete. If the content is on a third-party site, request the site administrator or owner to remove it. Lastly, ask yourself if there is anything obsolete or unflattering on your public profiles. If so, take it down.

**3. Remove anything unprofessional or controversial.** Choose the content you make public carefully so that a decision-maker will be able to see only what you want them to see. Be sure to edit your About Page or profile accordingly. Remove any movies, books, or affiliated groups that might reflect poorly on you. You may have items in your profile you "liked" or "followed" four years ago that don't reflect you today. Never post any confrontational, political, or religious

attitudes on your public profiles. Most likely, you do not share the same attitudes as 100% of your clients and prospects. And you do not want to limit your ability to engage with them from the outset.

Today, one must be extra-cautious about making comments, even about mundane issues, such as, “McDonald’s uses frozen patties. Go to Wendy’s!” or “Jane lied about her background. Vote for Gloria instead.” Remember that your posts never “die” and they can be viewed for years by consumers. How would you feel if you lost an account because your potential client was the brother-in-law of the local McDonald’s franchise owner?

A good rule to live by digitally is what Warren Buffett said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”

**On your public sites, consider deleting:**

- Inappropriate or unprofessional photos, videos, or posts
- Provocative selfies or too many selfies
- Posts or photos that include drinking or using drugs, including legalized marijuana
- Discriminatory comments related to race, religion, gender, political affiliation, etc.
- Content that complains about a previous employer or colleague
- Posts that are overly cynical, grumpy, or mean

**Consider keeping or adding content that:**

- Reflects your values, integrity, and responsibilities
- Exudes class and professionalism
- Shows a friendly, positive personality and life outlook
- Communicates that you are well-rounded with wide range of goals and interests
- Showcases your great communication skills

**4. Demonstrate Your Core Values Online.** Create a list of the “core values” (i.e., perceptions, qualities, characteristics, traits, accomplishments) you want people to associate with you. Then go through all your social media and web platforms and add content that reflects these values. Anything that does not reflect your core values is noise that drowns out your signal. Get rid of it!

Your mission is to establish a simple, clear-cut image of yourself that represents your authentic brand. Consider highlighting two to five things about yourself that validate your unique abilities, and make this impression as consistent as you can across all platforms.

Implement the following strategies that relate to demonstrating your core values online:

**Start with the basics:** any websites or public profiles under your control should look clean and neat. They should also include a good, up-to-date, professional photo of yourself. Your photo should convey passion, energy, charisma, and empathy.

**Give a clear definition of the services and solutions you offer.** This should ideally be front and center. Keep it short, to the point, and up-to-date. Shoot for the prospect's heart!

**Include authority endorsements.** If a noteworthy person likes your work, have that quote somewhere visible. If someone famous uses your services or solutions, make that fact known. People trust outside “experts,” even if it's just a household name with no real expertise, so don't be shy with any associated with you.

**5. Make a point of developing sufficient followers and traffic** to all your public, professional social media sites. Set a goal of inviting a predetermined number of people each week. You'll be pleasantly surprised how quickly your connections will grow.

Fortunately, most social networks automatically show your number of followers. If you have a lot, that's good — there's a “social proof” effect. The more people who engage with you, the more prospects will assume you have something worth listening to.

**6. Community connections.** If you are seen talking to other people in online communities associated with insurance and risk management, it is assumed that you are an accepted part of these communities. Appearing as an established expert elevates your reputation and brand — and, as a practical side benefit, it keeps you in touch with useful contacts, too.

Bottom line, make your *professional* activities and successes as public as you're making your personal ones private.

Your online first impression sets the stage for how your credibility and trustworthiness is perceived by your prospects and existing clients. This includes how you look, what you say, and what you do. A good rule for digital editing: When in doubt, take it out.

#### About the Authors

April Baker, Chief Learning Officer for Beyond Insurance, provides leadership, strategy and direction in the design, development and delivery of the Beyond Insurance coaching, training and e-learning programs.

Matt O'Neill, Chief Experience Officer for Beyond Insurance, strategizes with organizations on the implementation of the Beyond Insurance tools and resources and serves as a master coach and speaker on differentiation, social media, and developing a competitive advantage.

Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their organization to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.

To learn more about Beyond Insurance, contact Scott Addis at [saddis@beyondinsurance.com](mailto:saddis@beyondinsurance.com).