

# Safeguard and enhance your online reputation

There was a time before digital media when customers' opinions of a business were mostly confined to gossip on the golf course, a natter in the pub or, occasionally a letter to a newspaper or trade magazine. But the internet made it far easier for consumers to make their feelings known in countless, ever evolving ways.

Anthony Gaskell, the UK director of Reputation.com, said: "The big change is technology – the rise of social media and review sites. Percentages of how importantly we as consumers take the views of people that we have never met is so high now, and it has obviously impacted massively on businesses.

"It's so visual, for everyone to see – it's no longer kept to the pub, the golf course, the bingo hall or wherever it may be. I guess back then the control of the reputation would be more in the hands of the business owner.

Since the Silicon Valley-based firm was set

up in 2006, it has grown to support 500,000 businesses across the globe to help manage their various types of online presence.

"In the digital age, a comment left by a consumer is seen by thousands, if not millions, of people if they are searching on a particular prominent search engine like Google, social media platform like Facebook or review site like TripAdvisor," said Gaskell.

Research by Reputation.com in the US automotive sector highlighted a clear correlation between the financial performance of business locations and their online reputation.

Manufacturers want to know their brand is being represented in the right way, while for dealerships the reputation mirrors the standard of service being delivered.

Gaskell said: "Across the thousands of business locations we researched, of course there were pockets of dealerships under a brand that were very much involved in the management of their reputation, and

there were others who weren't really getting involved.

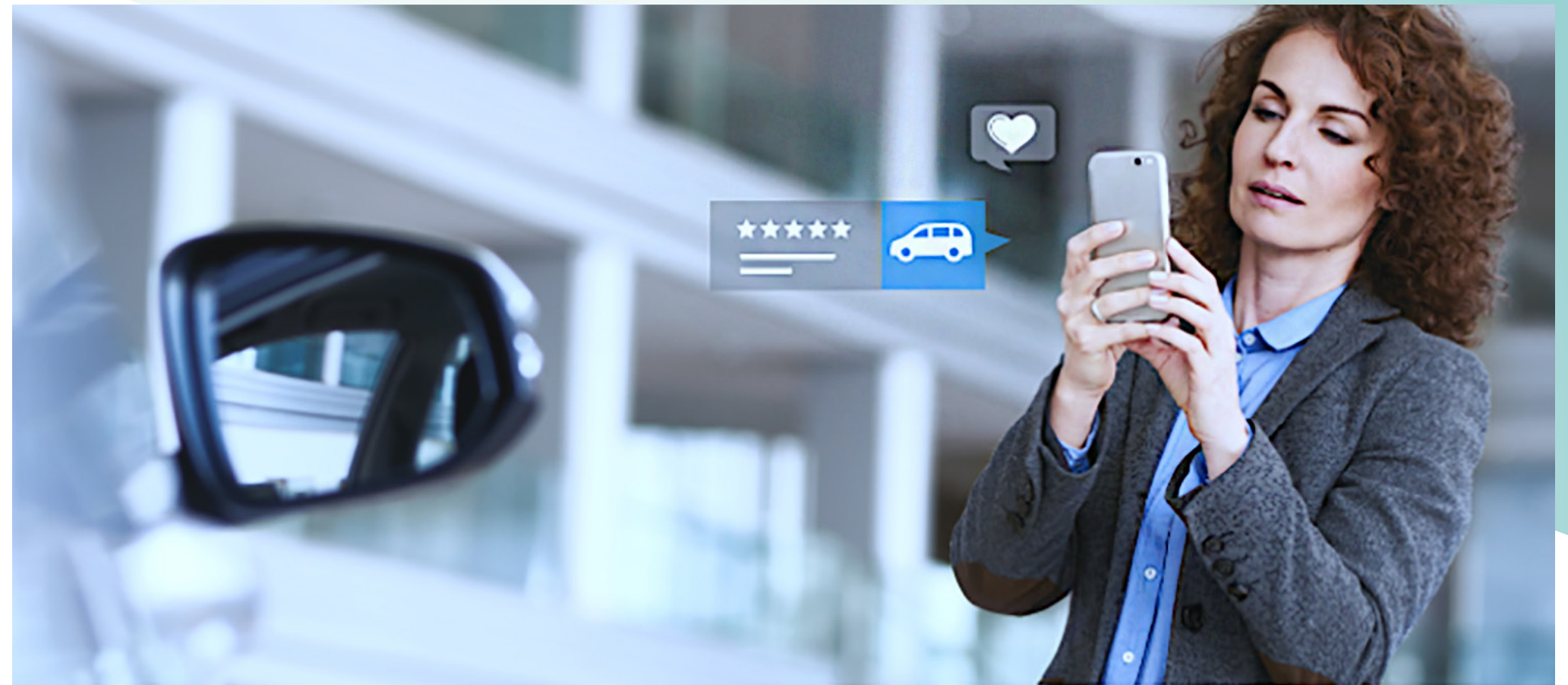
"When it came to do the comparison across all the different reputation metrics, the management of the accuracy of the dealership location information across the likes of Google and Facebook, the star average, the volume of reviews, the percentage of negative sentiment compared to positive, we found those dealerships that were actively involved in managing reputation, by year three they were selling close to two-and-a-half cars more per month.

"There's a lot of science behind it but, put simply, if I search online for a car dealership selling the same brand in a certain city, one has got 4.5 stars, one's got 3.5, one's got 2.5, you go with that. It's especially important in the automotive industry because if you consider that a lot of time it's a big-ticket purchase, which is different from other sectors."

Negative experiences may leave a customer more likely to post online, but this increased enthusiasm of aggrieved consumers can mean a firm's online presence is not a true reflection of its performance.

There are a number of elements, according to Reputation.com, which holds 25 software

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ANTHONY GASKELL, REPUTATION.COM

patents related to its reputation management solution. For example, it said a business may struggle to keep its data accurate across sites such as Google, Facebook and Bing, which are usually the first "shop window" opportunities to entice potential customers.

"Those platforms buy in data, consumers will suggest edits and those environments will change," said Gaskell. "Reputation.com is an official partner with those businesses and one part of our technology is to ensure that the data in those digital environments is correct.

"We have worked hard to create formal partnerships with the likes of Facebook and

Google. In the US, we are constantly meeting with those guys to understand what new developments are being made and what's changing from a technology point of view."

A motorist in the market for a new vehicle will go through layers of research and, at each point, the reputation of dealerships is paramount, as the prospective customer decides on brands and models, then later on specific places to test or purchase.

Higher up the sales chain, Reputation.com works with the likes of Ford, Hyundai, Kia, Lexus, Toyota and BMW. About one in 20 of all its business locations are automotive-related and many have been on board since the start.

A good name is important not only in sales, but also servicing, manufacturing and rental. Better online reputation also leads to increased web traffic. With new technologies such as augmented reality and voice searches have come new challenges in keeping reputations intact.

Gaskell said: "Taking voice as an example, people are going to search like that rather than typing, so the profile of a business location that we hold within our technology needs to be rich, so that you can have a long description, a short description, you can give

a number of different fields as to what the business provides.

"If we are constantly keeping that accurate, it's all working towards ensuring that business is represented online in the right way, and the information appears in results when the customer does a search in whatever way they please."

He added: "There's always limitations in that you're restricted to whatever the native environment allows. Ours is a software solution that's working with sites, so when it comes to requesting reviews, soliciting feedback, pushing data to those places, you're always working within the confines of what those places suggest that you can do. You're pushing your technology to be the best it can be within what those environments allow you to do."

As we move into an era of big data, it becomes harder for businesses to analyse feedback given verbatim on social media websites – but no less important.

"The big USP is the fact that we've got the management of all these different services," said Gaskell. "It's driven by the consumer and their desire to engage with businesses however they please and we will continue to see an uplift in the volume of feedback that goes online."

