



Companies are using increasingly sophisticated methods to boost online sales. Here is a look at some of the latest trends in online technology that may help your website rise above the fray.

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Visible Technologies

► Strong silent types lose

EVEN A COMPANY THAT doesn't have a consumer website can have internet pitfalls. The growth of blogging and product reviews on other sites means that anyone can disparage your company or your products online. These messages can also spread globally within seconds.

"Any company that thinks it has control of its brand is mistaken," says Blake Cahill, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Seattle-based Visible Technologies, which allows clients to track whether company names, products or phrases are appearing on blogs and news sites.

Visible Technologies uses brand-monitoring technology to track the tens of millions of blogs for the mention of a specific product or company. Its subscription service, TruCast, not only lets clients know when anyone is talking about them (as in "this product stinks"), but also provides the means to respond.

Dell Computer discovered the limits of its marketing campaigns. An irate customer, Jeff Jarvis, christened the company's service as "Dell Hell" in 2005 on his blog BuzzMachine. The Dell Hell moniker resonated with others and quickly became part of the computer industry vernacular.

To respond to such problems, Visible Technologies' software allows clients to sift through the automated alerts searching for any phrases they are interested in to determine whether that company or its products has appeared somewhere on the internet as a blog post, a video or a photo.

After Dell Computer engaged Jarvis in a dialogue about its service department, the company was able to improve its process and to demonstrate those advances. The result is that Jarvis has become a Dell supporter.

Companies can benefit substantially by participating in the discussion, Cahill said, "if it's done in a genuine and transparent way."

Instead of responding through a public relations office, Cahill suggests, Visible Technologies' software can help direct technical issues to the software developer or service issues to a customer service executive.

Not all issues are equal, of course. Visible Technologies scores the importance of the posts based on the post's content, whether it's positive or negative and the authority of the source. But, as Cahill points out, no one can fully predict which internet voices will become important next. Blogs that didn't exist two years ago are now among the most widely read on the web.