



## **White Paper**

# **Do you know what are they saying about you?** **The challenge of online monitoring**

James L. Horton and Shade Vaughn  
Robert Marston And Associates, Inc.



**The Internet is an international, round-the-clock bull session.**

CEOs don't like surprises. They don't want to learn about customer gripes after customers have departed. They don't want to find out that employees are bad-mouthing the company after comments have affected the stock price. They definitely do not want rumors about their companies, their employees or themselves spread around the world and be the last to know it is happening. They are irate when inside information about competitors and the industry is bandied about before they hear it. But this is what can happen on the Internet and Web daily.

The Internet is an international, round-the-clock bull session splintered into tens of thousands of newsgroups and Web site bulletin boards. Some people actively participate in discussions and some observe without posting comments but are influenced just the same. Some discussions are influential. Some are gripe fests. Some wither while others emerge with new topics and participants. Company executives who think they know what is being said online because they have customer service systems, such as an 800- dial-in number, mislead themselves. Service systems can be the problem. We are aware of one company that learned from online monitoring that its 800- dial-in service system was the largest source of complaints. Customers were often enraged by what happened to them when they called the company. They vented their rage on bulletin boards. CEOs concerned about what customers, competitors and others say need to know if their companies, products and services are discussed online and what is said.

Unfortunately, this is difficult to do. It is hard to monitor online discussions because bulletin boards are moving from well-known and well-documented Internet Usenet newsgroups to tens of thousands of undocumented Web-based bulletin boards. Secondly, Web-based bulletin boards use a variety of software systems. The different systems confuse software filters and spiders and, as a result, they fail.

This paper discusses what our agency has learned about Internet and Web bulletin board monitoring from many months of doing it. Our conclusion is that monitoring requires good judgment and strong control to get results that CEOs and other executives can use.

**Even if a company is not talked about today, there is no guarantee it will not be talked about tomorrow.**

### **To monitor or not?**

Some companies are talked about constantly on the Internet and Web. Some are not. One cannot tell whether an industry and/or company is a topic of conversation without going online and looking. We know from experience that certain industries are more likely to be discussed than others –e.g., consumer electronics companies, healthcare providers/issues (diabetes, cancer, etc.), public companies on investor bulletin boards and entertainment companies. But, this does not mean a company in a different industry is unlikely to be talked about. There is an equal chance that it might be because the Internet and the Web gather interests and enthusiasms from around the earth and from different socioeconomic levels and cultures.

Even if a company is not talked about today, there is no guarantee it will not be talked about tomorrow. Bulletin board topics change as quickly as human attention. We recommend even to companies that do not need to monitor online bulletin boards today to do an annual checkup to see what is being said about their industries, competitors and themselves. Public companies, especially, need to know what has been said about them on investor bulletin boards.

### **Leading or lagging?**

Some assume that bulletin board discussions lead opinion and perception, but this is not true. Bulletin board discussions are anachronistic. They exist outside of or alongside of time and events in their own peculiar way. Urgent topics that show in a company's service system may not find their way to a bulletin board. Other topics that never show in the company's service system may be the subject of raging arguments on bulletin boards. Some topics lead a company's service system and some lag. For example, a company apprised us of a product defect it was handling through its service system well before discussion of the defect showed in bulletin boards. When the topic did show, the writers seemed to accept that everyone on the board already knew about the defect.

We have examined this baffling lack of chronology, but we have no definitive answer for why it occurs. We have hunches:

- **Online bulletin boards** do not exist apart from other

**Finding discussion groups can be as difficult as finding one title in a library without an index.**

media. Reports elsewhere may or may not spill into a bulletin board depending on a writer's interest or need. For example, a product recall might be sufficiently discussed in general news media that no one discusses it on a bulletin board.

- **Bulletin board participants** do not reflect a statistical cross-section of a company's key audiences. They are a subset of company customers, investors, employees, competitors and others who are comfortable engaging in discussions on bulletin boards. Sometimes this subset is large and sometimes not.
- **Bulletin board writers** discuss what is important to them and that may not be what is important to a company. It is not uncommon for a company and its audiences to have divergent interests. What a CEO needs to know is whether the interest gap is harming the company in some way or an opportunity the company should seize.
- **Bulletin boards are** to some degree a parallel universe in which a company can find unusual views about its industry and itself, some of which are enlightening and some of which are crackpot.

## Where Do I Find It?

The question of where to look on the Web for what might be discussed about an industry, company or company executives is huge. Finding discussion groups can be as difficult as finding one title in a library without an index. Imagine entering the Library of Congress with its millions of books thrown into a vast heap on the main floor. The one book you need is in the heap somewhere. Online, there is no compelling reason, structure or trend for why a topic is discussed at this site rather than that one or why it is discussed at all.

However, we recommend a disciplined approach to find out what might be on the Internet or Web because without it one can waste time with no result. We have learned to always work from the easiest to hardest search method. Our first step is to look at Usenet newsgroups. These bulletin boards exist on the Internet and not the Web. They pre-date the Web, and they all use the same methodology. That means they can be tracked in databases easily – and fortunately, they are. The best-known database of Usenet newsgroup bulletin boards is Google Groups (formerly, [deja.com](http://deja.com)) ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)). Using Google Groups, one can enter company or product

names and see what, if anything, comes out of its Usenet search engine. Google Groups, however, is insufficient to determine whether one should monitor or not because of the large number of Web-based bulletin boards today.

One can “google” a company’s name or products in the Web search section of Google’s search engine, but for many reasons this works poorly. Much of what surfaces will have no relationship to bulletin board conversations. In the second search step, we favor searching Web sites in the industry, such as sites operated by industry publications. Often, publications will have bulletin boards, but just as often, the bulletin boards are fallow. If one is lucky, an industry trade publication will have an active board that can lead to other findings. For example, it is not uncommon that a bulletin board member will cite a comment on another bulletin board. Following the comment can lead one to boards that are otherwise invisible. During the second search phase, we also recommend surveying company employees to see if they are aware of bulletin boards that apply to the industry or company. This is usually productive. Finally, for investor comments, we look at well-known boards run by Yahoo!, for example.

**At some point in the search for boards, it is no longer economic or efficient to continue.**

If all this fails, brute force searching using engines like Google or FAST may be the only avenue. Such searches are tedious and often fruitless, but sometimes, they can crack the riddle of whether and where people are discussing an industry and companies in it. We recommend phrase searching. Rather than having a search engine look on one word, we have search engine look for a two- or three-word phrase. Phrases cut down on the number of returns and increase the likelihood of finding useful information. The trick is to know the phrase to use. One needs sufficient knowledge of an industry and company to choose phrases with the highest probability of return. We can attest, however, that we have wasted hours on searching phrases and variations on phrases without success. However, here too, we have been lucky and found new approaches. For example, an unproductive phrase sometimes surfaces on a Web page that contains a new phrase, which scores dozens of hits.

At some point in the search for boards, it is no longer economic or efficient to continue. One should stop and evaluate what has been found and decide whether it is worth monitoring or not. We recommend setting a time and budget

limit in advance to prevent uncontrolled surfing. There is something about the Internet and the Web that leads one on and on.

### **How often should one monitor?**

There is no answer to this question. Monitoring frequency varies by the importance of the issues discussed. Some companies monitor daily, some weekly, some bi-weekly, some monthly and some at longer intervals. Obviously, in a crisis, a company should track discussions in real-time, if bulletin board discussions relate to the crisis. Sometimes, frequent monitoring is called for during new product introductions to see how the product/service is being treated. On the other hand, our experience has been that bulletin boards have already surmised and discussed many features, functions and benefits of pending new products before they are introduced. Bulletin boards are notorious for scooping company marketing plans, particularly if a company stages product introductions. For example, a company might introduce a product in one country then plan to roll it out later to another country. In the consumer electronics industry, we have learned, this hardly ever works. Bulletin board writers from the country where the product was launched busily describe the product and its features, functions and benefits to board participants worldwide.

Two other times require frequent bulletin board monitoring – when hot issues are discussed and when harmful rumors plague a company. Hot issues can be as varied as discussion of evolving industry standards to emerging competitive threats. Some industries, such as networking and computing, maintain constant bulletin board monitoring because there are always hot issues. Other industries rarely face volatile discussions. Rumors are dangerous, especially when they can cause direct harm. This is a lesson that CEOs learned during the dot-com era when stock hucksters and shorts would get on a board and bash a company's stock in order to watch it climb or fall.

### **Who should monitor and be monitored?**

These are critical questions for the success of an online monitoring program. The person(s) who perform online monitoring need an ability to understand what is being discussed, to judge its usefulness and to collect data. These are different skills. Understanding and judgment require an

**Monitoring frequency varies by the importance of the issues discussed.**

individual who grasps enough of a business to know what executives need to know. Data collection requires an individual with the physical dexterity to do the boring task of data collection and entry.

**No monitoring service can afford to collect everything and if it did, raw data is not useful to executives.**

The reason that intelligent data collection is necessary is to avoid the masses of junk that online discussion boards carry. No monitoring service can afford to collect everything and if it did, raw data is not useful to executives. Monitoring must present the right data in the right way. Even though one can train an individual to recognize and collect categories of information, there is still need for editing to pare data to insights that executives need. Monitoring can be split between the collection and editing function, but not completely. Finding individuals with the right combination of intellect and physical ability often requires modification of the monitoring process to keep a system effective.

Monitoring may not focus on any one individual, but there are times when it should. For example, well-known and influential critics of a company, its products and services should be watched closely. These are individuals who may be named or who write under a “screen handle” and have a significant audience that follows their lead. These individuals usually dominate a particular discussion board, and they may even run it. Particularly if the media pay attention to what the individuals write, one should monitor their opinions regularly.

A second group that should be watched are “High-frequency responders.” These are individuals who do not dominate a bulletin board but respond often enough that they have a disproportionate share of opinions. Sometimes these opinions can bias monitoring. It looks like more people are angry than are, for example. The way to understand whether one is dealing with a high-frequency responder is to perform a statistical analysis of responses. This was the approach we used, for example, to determine who was behind a customer revolt fomented on bulletin board. A statistical sample of the fulminations revealed four individuals behind most of the comments. These individuals also were actively soliciting the media to come to their aid. We were able to recommend specific steps to the client when we discovered this, even though these individuals were hiding behind “screen handles.”

**Monitoring is about dollars and cents. It should not cost more to monitor than the value received from doing it.**

## How do I monitor?

Monitoring is custom-tailored to need. There is not one way to do it. In situations where there are only a few dozen comments a month, one can sample opinion and write a summary report. In cases where there are hundreds or thousands of comments monthly, a database is essential. Where issues diverge from one division to the next in a company, decentralized monitoring might be best. In other cases, centralized monitoring is more efficient. Where the department responsible for monitoring does not have or cannot easily organize the resources, outsourcing is more efficient. Otherwise, an internal monitoring department is highly effective.

In most cases, monitoring is “lurking” – that is, the monitoring department records and reports comments. Sometimes, monitoring is interactive: Monitors respond to comments with pre-approved comments. In a few cases, monitors go undercover and do not reveal their identity while participating on bulletin boards. This is a risky approach, however, that can be unethical, and it requires great care. We could not recommend it to any but the most skilled practitioners. If bulletin board participants discover a company representative undercover, it can touch off flame wars, bad feelings and a loss of company reputation.

Monitoring is about dollars and cents. It should not cost more to monitor than the value received from doing it. This is not an easy calculation for perception is a large part of valuation. If executives ignore data retrieved, monitoring has little value, even if the information provides critical clues to what the company should do. If executives consider monitoring critical, they might well spend more than it is worth to conduct it. Manager(s) in charge of monitoring bear the responsibility for ensuring that the right data is presented in the right way to the right persons and that these persons understand its implications. When this is done effectively, the value of monitoring (or lack of it) surfaces quickly.

## Databases

Because we handle large volumes in monitoring, we use a custom-configured relational database as our core tool. We have learned through using it that it is not always clear how

**The more one collects, the greater time and cost it takes to monitor. The less one collects, the less time and money it takes, but the chances of missing critical information rise.**

one should build and operate a database, and there are many considerations that enter into a final configuration. Here are just a few:

- **What to database and what not.** There is a lot of information in any bulletin board message. There is the name of the newsgroup or Web bulletin board; the header that reveals where the message came from, its date and who sent it and the subject line that indicates the topic of the message. There is the message itself, which may discuss more than one topic. There are categories of products and services that might be discussed. There are opinions that might need rating. Finally, there is the verbatim of the message that one may or may not collect. One may need to database all of these things or none. The tradeoff is in time and data entry cost. The more one collects, the greater time and cost it takes to monitor. The less one collects, the less time and money it takes, but the chances of missing critical information rise. Learning what to collect and how is a matter of experience and close attention to a client's need. As a rule of thumb, it is better to start by collecting too much than too little. One can pare data later on when it is clear that it is no longer relevant. On the other hand, it is hard to add data that was left out because it is difficult to relocate messages and database structures must be reconfigured.
- **Building a database.** If one is not familiar with building a relational database, the task can intimidate. It is a job best left to professionals. On the other hand, there are databases that make the job of building fields, queries, data entry screens and reports easier than it used to be. For small to medium-scale monitoring, these might be sufficient for the job at hand. Whether one builds a database personally or has it built, it is essential that the person in charge of monitoring be intimately involved with the development process. Databases are only as good as the reports they generate. A database that cannot produce the report that users want is useless to them and ultimately, to the monitoring process. The irony of database development is that it takes familiarity with report generation to understand what can be derived. This only emphasizes the need to have professional help when building one.
- **Usability.** Usability is critical in database development. Monitoring stays within budget only on

**For every bulletin board to scan, for every box to fill in, for every keystroke the operator makes, there is a time cost that translates to dollars.**

the basis of how one monitors. For every bulletin board to scan, for every box to fill in, for every keystroke the operator makes, there is a time cost that translates to dollars. We recommend that monitoring be reduced as far as possible to a point-and-click exercise. Operators should be able to fill a screen in about 20 seconds through clicking boxes and copying and pasting appropriate items. This also reduces operator burnout when dozens of comments are collected daily. The greatest amount of time in monitoring should be reserved for newsgroup and bulletin board scanning. This is plowing through the screens looking for what people are writing about. Web-based bulletin boards resist efficiency in how they are structured and operate even if they have good search engines. Hence, operators must be given the time to get through them without coming under pressure from data entry.

- **Operator training.** Operator training is critical to effective monitoring. The operator must know what to look for and how to enter it quickly. There is an experience curve in monitoring. Operators start slowly and accelerate over time as they learn the bulletin boards they are monitoring, the topics likely to be discussed and ways to enter data more quickly. Any monitoring process needs to factor the experience curve into budgeting, especially if the exercise is new. For that reason, we recommend that monitoring supervisors perform entry at least at the beginning of the process to understand problems that operators are likely to confront. This can quickly surface hidden mistakes such as the sequence of data entry. Data should be entered as the operator sees it on the bulletin board, or entry dramatically slows and increases burnout. We have found that operators will not necessarily tell you that sequencing is out of order because they assume the monitoring supervisor wants it that way.
- **Statistics and metrics.** Monitoring is about measurement. Comments help little unless packaged in ways that executives can quickly grasp if there is an increase or decrease in concern about specific topics and issues. Hence, monitoring reports should include graphs of numbers of comments and scale ratings about the comments themselves. Reports also should include where the most comments are coming from and what

issues are most frequently brought up. The hidden advantage of such metrics is they reveal to the monitoring supervisor when monitoring might be going off track. For example, 50 comments on a specific topic in one period that suddenly drops to 20 the next period is a red flag to the supervisor that the operator has missed comments or something has happened within the bulletin boards. The supervisor can then check quickly for the source of the drop before it is questioned elsewhere. In fact, metrics have proven more useful to us in conducting monitoring than even to clients who use them.

**Many CEOs  
continue to fly  
blind.**

### Summary

Many CEOs continue to fly blind when it comes to monitoring online newsgroups and Web-based bulletin boards. They seem to be of the opinion that what they don't know won't hurt them and that whatever is said on a bulletin board has little relevance unless it affects their stock price. This is a dangerous dismissal of opinion that can undermine a company's reputation and ability to operate. Certainly, some bulletin board writers are crackpots, but some are perceptive. They are concerned about industries, companies, products, services, pricing and a host of other issues that determine a company's competitive stance in the marketplace. It is foolhardy to ignore them. The challenge to monitoring, however, is to exercise judgment and control to get useful results efficiently, quickly and within budget.

---

*Jim Horton developed the online monitoring business and technologies for Robert Marston And Associates, Inc. Horton is the founder, developer and owner of [www.online-pr.com](http://www.online-pr.com), a resource site for PR practitioners. Shade Vaughn manages the online monitoring business for Robert Marston And Associates.*