Clean up your online image

These days, your Internet image is becoming as important as your in-person image. During a recession, some companies cut back by vetting job candidates online before spending resources on an in-person interview. This means it is crucial that your online presence is as impressive as you are.

1. **First step: Google yourself**

   It's important for you to know what people see when they Google your name, in case someone asks you about a particular link where you appear. You may even want to set up a news alert for your own name—including alternate spellings if necessary—to track your online image. If you have a very common name, you might consider using your middle initial to differentiate yourself from your online "twins."

2. **Build your professional online presence**

   If you don't like the results of Googling yourself (or you don't have any online presence), here are some ways to build a professional online image:

   □ write reviews of career-related books on Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com —remember to use your real name and not a nickname
   □ write bylined articles for a school newspaper or magazine and make sure they are posted online
   □ set up a profile on a free professional networking website, such as LinkedIn.com or Plaxo.com—consider including the URL of your LinkedIn profile (e.g., www.linkedin.com/in/MaryStudent) in your email signature line to drive more traffic to your profile

3. **Make sure your Facebook page has a "PG" rating**

   You never know who might see your Facebook page, so make sure there are no "red flags" that would make an employer question your professionalism. Follow these steps to make sure your Facebook page is safe:

   □ enable all available security settings, just in case
   □ remove or un-tag yourself from photos that include alcohol, drugs, too much skin, rude gestures or anything else that might offend someone
   □ delete any wall posts that contain profanity or anything else offensive
   □ leave any questionable groups or fan pages that might raise a red flag

4. **Make the most of LinkedIn.com and other professional social networks**

   LinkedIn is essentially a professional version of Facebook. It allows you to connect with and research other professionals, and it enables you to be visible to people who might have opportunities for you. However, most people join the site and don't use it to their advantage. Here are some steps to ensure you maximize this tool:

   □ set up a complete profile including keywords a recruiter or business owner might use to find someone with your skills and interests
   □ join groups (similar to groups and fan pages on Facebook) to build connections and become part of conversations about industry news
   □ every time you reach out to connect with someone, customize the "I'd like to add you as a connection" messages (also similar to the messages you can send when you friend someone on Facebook)—this is a great, easy way to stand out and show that you are someone who takes the time to personalize your communications

- scour other people's LinkedIn profiles to look for companies you may want to apply to, job titles or professions you didn't know about, professional organizations where you might network and people with similar interests who might be willing to offer some job search advice—if you're trying to build your own personal brand, LinkedIn is incredibly valuable as a massive database of other people's personal brands and career paths to research

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