

Publications

How to Stop (and Remove) Online Impersonations on Social Media, Other Websites

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Colleen M. Devanney

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Professionals and companies are being harmed online and on social media in a number of ways. One increasingly common form of online harassment is impersonation of the person (or company) that the harasser is intending to harm through the creation of fake public personas on social media platforms or websites. Major online and social media players like Google, Twitter and Facebook generally prohibit impersonations, or impostor accounts as they are known on Facebook

Unlike with standard internet defamation, professionals and companies can generally remove online impersonations without a court order.

Google+

Despite its relative lack of success, impersonations are fairly common on Google+. This includes people creating impersonating accounts in order to publish false Google reviews. Similarly, others might create a blog (through Google's blog-publishing service, Blogger) about or in the name of the targeted person.

Google+'s [User Conduct and Content Policy](#) prohibits impersonations, specifically the use of Google+ "to mislead or confuse users by pretending to be someone else or pretending to represent an organization you do not represent." Thus, in response to a legitimate impersonation report about a Google+ account that is deceiving other users as to the user's true identity, Google is typically willing to suspend the offending Google+ account.

Affected persons can report an impersonation—effectively a removal request—through Google+'s [online form](#). In addition to providing basic information and the URL of the offending Google+ profile, the reporting party must also provide a copy of his or her valid government-issued photo ID (e.g. a driver's license) and also any information describing the impersonation.

This last section is key, as it represents the person's chance to explain how someone else is impersonating him or her and why the impersonation is in violation of Google's policies. In other words, this is the person's opportunity to make a case for removal of the profile about them.

YouTube

Impersonated persons can also [report an impersonation](#) on YouTube.

The reporting process is, unsurprisingly, akin to that of the one for Google+. Specifically, YouTube asks the reporting party to provide similar information, including an explanation of how the YouTube channel is deceiving the public as to the YouTube channel owner's identity.

A successful impersonation request can result in the suspension of the offending channel. In taking this action, YouTube effectively deletes the channel's posted videos.

Twitter

Twitter is arguably the most common forum for impersonation, given the ease with which someone can create an account in another's name, coupled with the public nature of most accounts.

While Twitter does allow for parody and other similar accounts—which are fairly common—Twitter [prohibits accounts](#) that portray “another person in a confusing or deceptive manner.” Such accounts are subject to a permanent suspension of the account.

A person can report an impersonation in violation of Twitter's impersonation policy through its [online form](#). Alternative, he or she can report the impersonation directly through the offending accounts in question.

The latter involves clicking the “gear” icon on the account's profile, selecting “Report” and then indicating “They're being abusive or harmful” and choosing “Pretending to be me or someone else.”

Shortly after, Twitter will email the person submitting the report about next steps. For example, if someone were to submit a report on another's behalf (such as an attorney), Twitter will ask for proof that the submitting party is authorized to represent the impersonated individual (e.g. a document showing authorization, plus the submitting party's ID and business card).

Facebook

Finally, Facebook similarly prohibits “impostor accounts,” as we touched on [a couple years ago](#) on our blog.

Facebook offers an [online form](#) for people without a Facebook account, but otherwise asks Facebook users to report imposter accounts [through the specific offending profile](#) itself (and Facebook will ask for similar information as the other sites).

Company-Specific Impersonations

Each of the described online forms and other processes for reporting impersonation violations is intended to put a stop to legitimate deceiving/misleading online impersonations.

Companies seeking to put an end to similar behavior can sometimes use the same reporting mechanisms described above. Of course, companies have even better arguments for removal if they can demonstrate trademark violations, as we have discussed previously regarding [Facebook](#) and others.

For more information, contact Colleen Devanney at 855.542.9192 or cmdevanney@vorys.com. Read more about the practice at <http://www.defamationremovalattorneys.com/>.