



USING THE INTERNET IN YOUR PRACTICE

Part 4: Reputation management— how to gather kudos and combat negative online reviews

↘ You have more control than you might think over how you are portrayed in Web reviews

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“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.” —Warren Buffet

CASE Decline in new patients

A well-respected physician—one of the best in his field—notices that the number of new patients in his practice has fallen off drastically over the past year. Baffled, he hires a consultant, who discovers that the doctor’s online reputation has plummeted, thanks to four negative reviews and no positive ones.

What can the physician do to remedy the situation and restore his reputation?

The problem can be fixed, but it takes time—like major surgery. Rather than wait until negative reviews are posted, we recommend that you become proactive and take steps as soon as possible to secure your online reputation. That way, you won’t get caught by surprise when one or two unhappy patients try to smear your good name. In this article, we step you through a number of remedies and proactive strategies for boosting positive online reviews and combatting negative ones.

The Internet: A one-stop source of information

The Internet has become everyone’s go-to source for pretty much any kind of data,

including details on products, services, and people. Anyone can access all kinds of information simply by asking.

Today, people research medical conditions on the Web, often using Google. If you have done your search engine optimization, your Web site will come up in the first page of search results, making it possible for prospective patients to click through to your homepage. (For the scoop on search engine optimization, see Part 3 of this series, “Maximizing your online reach through SEO and pay-per-click,” which appeared in the September 2014 issue of OBG MANAGEMENT.)

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Mr. Romano reports that he is CEO of Instant Marketing Systems, which provides consulting advice, marketing plans, and Internet marketing services for businesses and medical practices. Dr. Baum reports no financial relationships relevant to this article.



FAST TRACK

The online surfer searching for a reputable physician is likely to believe whatever he or she finds on the leading review sites

If visitors like what they see at your site, they may make an appointment. But they are more likely to visit three or four other sites before making a decision. And in all likelihood, they will research each physician to find out what patients have to say about her or him. It's no different than looking at the reviews of hotels or products you are considering.

You are an open book on the Internet. Only a few short years ago, your peers and patients knew your reputation primarily through word of mouth, which traveled at the speed of molasses. For the most part, that information was favorable. Today your exposure is much greater, and negative comments about you can be viewed by thousands of potential patients. The speed of information has increased, as well. What is posted on the Internet can become readily available to hundreds, thousands, and even millions of Web users in a nanosecond.

The Internet provides a forum for people to say whatever they want about their experiences, both positive and negative. Regrettably, positive experiences do not find their way online nearly as often as negative ones!

The bottom line? In today's Internet-savvy world, you need to pay regular attention to your online reputation. You need to take steps to ensure that your name and practice look their best and to negate any complaints that may appear.

What patients share about their experience with you

Many online review sites provide an opportunity for your patients to describe their experience with you and your practice. To name a few: RateMDs.com, Vitals.com, ZocDoc.com, healthgrades.com, UcompareHealth.com, Citysearch.com, yelp.com, and, of course, Google Plus reviews.

And when patients post comments on the Internet, you likely will be rated on:

- the patient's wait time
- how your staff treated the patient
- the diagnosis
- your attitude
- the level of trust in your decisions
- treatment and outcome.

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The good news: Most physicians have a very favorable rating, averaging 9.3 out of 10 on a scale of 1 to 10. In fact, 70% of doctors have perfect scores!¹

The bad news: Someone who is unhappy with her treatment or outcome will go out of her way to find every online review site possible and proclaim your faults to the cyberworld, using the Internet as a forum, whether her facts are straight or not. Patients who are pleased and satisfied rarely bother to place a positive review.

How you can control your online reputation

It is incumbent upon you to keep an eye on your online reputation at all times. Here are some tips for taking charge:

- If someone posts a negative review, respond to them directly in the review site.

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Doing so does not violate privacy laws as long as you do not mention the patient's name or other identifying details. Explain your side of the story without confirming or denying that the reviewer is or was a patient. Do not mention the specifics of any patient's condition.

- If you feel that a negative review is completely unjustified, file a dispute with the review site. Many sites will remove the unfavorable content if you can convince them that the patient is merely ranting.
- To protect your reputation over the long term, use your name or practice name to set up an alert with Google Alerts by visiting the site Google.com/alerts.
- Do a Google search of your name and the name of your practice at least once a month and check out all the review sites that come up. Read the comments!

Develop a proactive system

You have a lot of control when it comes to protecting your online reputation, provided you are willing to take the time to set up a system to regularly request feedback or testimonials from your patients.

Regrettably, this is where most medical practices fall short, by failing to establish a system to solicit positive reviews.

The process need not be complicated. You can set the process in motion by scheduling a quick staff meeting to announce your plans to solicit testimonials from patients. Often there will be a flurry of activity for a couple of weeks before the task is forgotten. To keep your system from falling through the cracks, make a checklist and decide who is responsible for each step in the process. Go over the results in your staff meetings on a regular basis—ie, at least monthly.

You want to solicit positive reviews for use in two places:

- your Web site
- the review sites we mentioned earlier.

Posting testimonials on your Web site

Your site is the place prospective patients visit when they are looking for information

about you and your services. Here are a few tips on gathering and posting testimonials:

- The best time to solicit feedback from the patient is after the follow-up appointment, when her needs have been met and she has had at least two experiences with your practice. If she is happy with her outcome, she is likely to be receptive to the idea of providing a testimonial while the details are fresh in her mind.
- Post testimonials on your homepage and every other page at your site. They should be visible when each page loads without the need to scroll down. A testimonial is worthless if it can't be easily seen.
- Post testimonials in italics, with quotation marks around the comments to distinguish them from other elements on the page.
- Give each testimonial a headline in bold italics. Use key words likely to resonate with the reader. For example, if the patient reports: "I had a surgical procedure and it was a game changer. You turned my life around! Thank you!" the headline might be: "You turned my life around."
- Create a Web page just for testimonials and order the comments and headlines so that they will appeal to a diversity of prospective patients. The visitor may not read every testimonial, but she will at least read and scroll through the headlines.

Gathering feedback: Your options

- One option for automating the gathering of feedback is to include a patient feedback survey on your Web site. It's a convenient way to ask for comments. When the patient is in the office, you or your staff can simply ask her to visit the survey page on your site and answer the questions. The problem with this approach is that many patients will agree to complete the survey but few will actually follow through.
- A far more effective way to get patients to complete a survey while they are still in your office is to have the receptionist hand the patient an iPad after her appointment and ask her to take a couple of minutes to complete the survey. You can then



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FIGURE Patient follow-up satisfaction survey

It is our intention to provide our patients with the absolute best medical care available to produce optimal results. Your feedback about your procedure and patient care is an important measure of our performance. Please take the time to let us know how you feel about your results:

1. What are the reasons you chose to have your procedure done?
2. How did your condition affect you physically and emotionally before your procedure?
3. Are you happy with the results and the care you received?
4. Can you compare how you felt before the procedure with how you feel now?
5. If a friend or business colleague were to ask about your procedure and whether you would recommend our practice, what would you say?

Your name: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for telling us about the results of your procedure. How you feel about your experience helps us better understand the physical and emotional needs of our patients. We would like to share your experience with others who might be struggling with the same issues. By signing this form, you agree to let us share this information on our Web site and informational material to help other patients understand the benefits of having these types of procedures performed.

transcribe her comments and post them on your site.

- Asking patients to post positive comments on review sites such as healthgrades.com is another option—but, again, patients are unlikely to follow through unless you make it as easy and fast as possible. The best way to do this is to provide your patient with a blueprint for how to proceed. We offer a “patient feedback” form that contains four or five questions (FIGURE). The answers to these questions will provide a great testimonial for the doctor and the practice. Providing your patients with the right questions to elicit an emotional response will help them describe their

experiences more fully. If you let the patient create a testimonial on her own, you’ll probably just receive comments such as, “I’m very happy with my results” or “She is a great doctor.”

- Also provide patients with a step-by-step process for entering their feedback on the desired review sites. This can be a daunting task for your patient, so your instructions should be clear and simple. Better yet, have someone on your staff sit with the patient at a computer or iPad to help her through the process.
- Another way to control your online reputation is to capture positive comments at the point of service. In our practice, we have a testimonial poster in every exam room as well as the reception area. It contains a quick response (QR) code that can be scanned to allow the patient to submit a testimonial about her experience with the practice. With this system, we are able to collect three to five positive reviews every day.

CASE Resolved

The physician institutes a process in his practice to gather testimonials and positive feedback, and his staff takes time to help willing patients post their reviews online. He also disputes the negative comments that have already been posted online, offering an objective response to the complaints and asking the Web sites to take down the reviews that are merely ranting. In addition, he posts selected testimonials on the homepage of his Web site and adds a page that is just for testimonials.

Within a few weeks, the number of new patients scheduling appointments with him begins to increase until he once again enjoys a bustling practice. 📍

Reference

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