

Understanding the Impact of Online Reviews of Physicians

More and more consumers are turning to online review sites for peer information on where to eat and shop—and obtain their health care.

BY CARY M. SILVERMAN, MD, MBA, AND SHAMA KABANI

What would you do if you were going out to dinner and saw that the restaurant where you had reservations had the following written about it on online review sites?

- “I was given something that I told them I was allergic to.”
- “The staff is just plain awful.”
- “I will not be going here again.”

You might eat there anyway. None of the reviews said the food was bad. Now read the three statements again but imagine that they refer to a medical practice. These remarks are slightly more serious in the context of health care.

People could be talking about you, a surgeon, on review websites. Unlike many traditional businesses, however, you cannot exactly respond and defend yourself for fear of breaking one or more medical regulations.

KNOW WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT YOU

To stay informed, you should know what people have to say about you on online review sites. Some sites to check for reviews of your practice include

- Google Places (www.google.com/places). These are the star ratings that show up for businesses at the top of Google search results. A low rating on



pissed off - Mar 8, 2012
★★★★★ **I was given an attitude as soon** as I walked in the front door. Waited a month to be treated like the woman couldn't be bothered. My family and friends won't be back.

Was this review helpful? [Yes](#) - [No](#) - [Flag as inappropriate](#)

Response from the owner
Hello, I'm terribly sorry that we didn't spot this sooner! We consider all feedback very valuable, and hope that in the future you will come directly to us so that we may help you solve any problems. Please give me a call at 973-664-7794 so that we can resolve your problem. Thank you! -EyeCare 20/20 Staff

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EyeCare 20/20 - 04/04/2012
Verified owner

How Dr. Silverman responded to a negative comment that was posted on Google Places.

Google Places could severely affect your reputation, because this score is so visible to potential patients.

- Yelp (www.yelp.com). Yelp users review everything from restaurants to hair salons to physicians. Potential patients might head to a more specialized review site to check you out (read on), but your rating here is still very important.
- Angie's list (www.angieslist.com). Angie's list is a review site specifically for professional services and health care providers.
- RateMDs (www.ratemds.com). If you could not tell from the name, RateMDs is a site specifically for rating health care professionals. This site does not require users to register to post reviews, so the reviews are slightly less reliable than sites that require user registration.
- HealthGrades (www.healthgrades.com). HealthGrades allows reviews of physicians on a 1- to 5-star scale, without a written comment portion.

PATIENTS' EXPERIENCES EXTEND BEYOND YOUR COMPETENCE AS A PHYSICIAN

Even if you are the most talented professional in your field, your reputation may suffer because of other factors. For example, a patient may post a negative review after encountering a surly receptionist or sitting in an overcrowded waiting room for 45 minutes prior to being seen. Online reviews do not only reflect on you. A patient's experience includes your employees, the office's atmosphere, and waiting times. Sure, most patients are willing to wait longer to see a more highly skilled physician, but every other aspect of his or her experience should be overwhelmingly positive.

YOU COULD PROHIBIT REVIEWS, BUT SHOULD YOU?

Various doctors have started including "anti-review" contracts with the paperwork that patients are required to complete before treatment. Some prohibit patients from posting online, and others state that patients may write reviews but that the doctor can request their removal for any reason at any time.

There is no legal precedent for these types of contracts, which means there is no telling if you would win or lose if an antireview contract landed in court. Some sites are exposing physicians who enforce these types of contracts. RateMDs has compiled a "wall of shame" of physicians with these so-called gag orders, and Angie's list posts a notification on specific doctors' profiles.

"Because the doctor-patient relationship is confidential in nature, it is best to urge unhappy patients who have written reviews to contact you directly."

The negative hit to your reputation from a complete lack of reviews is potentially worse than the effect of positive reviews with some negative ones sprinkled in. Plus, review sites will remove libelous and false claims from their archives (check individual sites' terms of service for more information on specific policies), which offers you a fair amount of protection from abuse.

HOW TO MANAGE NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Although you may be under the impression that doctors cannot respond to online reviews, the truth is that you can—as long as you do not reveal any confidential information or note whether or not the reviewer is a patient. An effective structure for responding to reviews includes:

- stating your practice's dedication to 100% positive patient outcomes (or similar wording)
- saying that you would like to know more about any problems so that you can fix them
- writing that your office is ready and willing to handle any concerns and providing the phone number, e-mail address, or other preferred methods of contact

CONCLUSION

Because the doctor-patient relationship is confidential in nature, it is best to urge unhappy patients who have written reviews to contact you directly. A simple conversation about their expectations and needs may be all it takes to fix the problem. ■

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