

ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

How to prevent a few disgruntled patients from wreaking havoc on your reputation.

BY SHAMA HYDER



It is a lot easier to tear something down than it is to build it up. You can plant a tree and watch it grow for years, but it only takes one strong storm to uproot it. This is not only true for trees; it is also true for your reputation as a physician. You can spend your entire career working to build your reputation, but it only takes a few disgruntled patients on their lap-

tops to begin undoing all of your efforts.

We have known for a long time that a satisfied customer, or in this case patient, might tell one or two people about his or her experience. Someone with a negative review to give, however, will end up telling as many people as hey or she possibly can. In the age of online reviews and social media, the audience these patients have is exponentially bigger than it was 30 or 40 years ago.

Sites like Yelp, Vitals, and Healthgrades give patients a platform for expressing their satisfaction with their doctor—or airing their grievances. You could see 100 patients who left feeling good, but it only takes one patient to leave your office and post a scathing review online, send out a tweet, or write a Facebook post that hundreds of friends will see.

What can you do about this? How can you combat negative reviews and misleading online claims?

GET ACTIVE

The first step in managing your reputation is gaining some control over what people find about you online. Creating your own profiles and keeping them up to date will give you control over your online presence. Think about it like this: would you rather have a Google search of your name turn up your professional profiles or a negative review that someone posted 2 years ago? Simply creating social media accounts and checking your online presence once a week will be beneficial in the long run. You can also set up Google alerts for your own name and personal brand. This task can seem a little daunting to professionals who already put in a full workweek, but it does not take as much time as you might imagine.

RESPOND TO REVIEWS

Even if your profiles come up first during a Google search, you will still probably have reviews on other sites that patients



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check. Patients are not the only ones who can post on these sites, however. Once you have made profiles and begun working on your online presence, you can respond to some of the reviews that have been posted about you.

Remember that you should not only respond to poor reviews, although these obviously seem like the most pressing. You should get your perspective out there as soon as possible. Do not forget about the people who have taken the time to post a sparkling review about you or your office. Respond quickly and thank them for sharing their review.

DO NOT ARGUE

There is something about online messages that gets people in the mood to argue. In real life, we often do not have time to sit and think up a response, and face-to-face confrontations will probably be more civil. You can respond to a negative review in a way that does not antagonize the person. Thank the person for the review, and then explain your point of view or what you think the misunderstanding might be. Some people will always be looking for an online argument. Try to stay away from this kind of interaction; no one comes out the other side looking good.



AT A GLANCE

- A satisfied patient might tell one or two people about his or her experience, but someone with a complaint will tell as many people as possible. The Internet and social media have dramatically increased the audience for these negative reviews.
- To manage your online identity, you need to actively build a positive online presence to help control what information people find about you.
- Negative ratings are going to happen whether you ask for them or not. Positive ratings will most likely need encouragement, so be sure to ask your happy patients to share their experiences, too.

ASK FOR RATINGS

You probably have a lot more positive patient experiences than negative ones. The problem is that most patients who

had a pleasant experience at your office will not go online to talk about it, so ask your patients for their help with ratings. Whether it is through an automatic email or a card that they take with them as they leave, give them something that will remind them to take a moment to review or rate you and your office. Negative ratings are going to happen whether you ask for them or not. Positive ratings will most likely need encouragement.

You cannot control everything that is said about you and your practice online. The physical distance that the Internet provides makes it easier for people to tear into someone because of a poor experience. As much as you try to help your patients and provide them with the best care possible, there will always be those who feel slighted or unhappy. The only way to manage your reputation online is to become proactive about protecting yourself and to react properly when the inevitable bad review does show up. ■

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