



THE AGE OF THE EMPOWERED PATIENT

How to manage your practice reputation today.

BY CRAWFORD IFLAND

Warren Buffett, one of the greatest business minds of the 20th century, is quoted as saying: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

In this day and age, reputation is everything—especially if your professional reputation is directly linked to the trust of those you serve. A recent Gallup study found that doctors are the third most trusted professionals in the United States, with 65% of people assessing the honesty and ethical standards of physicians as high or very high. Only pharmacists and nurses ranked higher. The doctor-patient relationship is built on trust—I don't need to tell you that.

But that trust doesn't stop at patient confidentiality and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) compliance; it extends throughout the entire patient journey, from first contact to surgical followup. Patients place trust in their physicians

at every stage of the patient experience, not just for the brief time they're in the OR. If that chain of trust is broken at any point in their journey, you won't be seeing them again.

I'VE GOT YOUR BACK

Patients don't come to your practice to purchase a commodity, nor are they purely interested in the service itself. Rather, the entire patient journey is an experience, and that experience is increasingly going digital.

Today's consumers are empowered. With the rise of smartphones and the ubiquity of technology, it has never been easier to reach an incredibly large audience. In a fraction of a second, we can voice our thoughts to everyone on the face of the planet. Our messages and stories—both good and bad—have the potential to spread like wildfire.

To be sure, there is a lot of noise online and more than a little derision hidden behind anonymous usernames and blank avatars (life advice 101: never read the comments). But, on some level, we're all in this together. In a way, we're all looking out for each

other, especially when it comes to products, services, and experiences. If you've ever posted an online review of a product or service, you're basically signaling to everyone out there: "I've got your back. I've [done this/bought this/been here] before; here's the real scoop on what you're getting into."

Although you may be a total stranger to other consumers, your reviews are powerful. In fact, 84% of consumers say they trust online reviews as much as they trust personal recommendations from a friend or family member.¹

If the average consumer is empowered, the average patient is both empowered and educated. After all, it's their health on the line. Part of the patient experience (indeed, the first part for many) is reading online reviews. Recent studies have shown that 61% of patients will peruse online reviews before selecting a doctor.^{2,3} So wouldn't you want your review profile to put its best foot forward?

Surprisingly, few doctors regularly review and audit their online reviews. When these reviews are the determining trust factor for



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prospective patients, why don't more physicians pay attention and put in the effort to increase their number of positive online reviews?

IT'S JUST GOOD BUSINESS

Not only are online reviews powerful trust signals to other prospective patients, but having a healthy online review profile is good business, too. A considerable number of positive reviews is a boon to search engine optimization, and reviews encourage better practices throughout your organization, both online and in person.

By encouraging patients to post their feedback online (or by directly collecting it from patients anonymously), surgeons can improve their service and the internal processes in their practices. Feedback in the form of online reviews accomplishes many tasks, as detailed here.

1

REVIEWS HELP DOCTORS GET AUTHENTIC FEEDBACK

Some things are scary to say in person. If a patient has a bad experience during his or her office visit, common courtesy may keep that person from speaking his or her mind. While this may be the polite thing to do, it doesn't help the doctor improve the quality of care or service. By leveraging online reviews, patients can submit feedback and share their opinions while not creating enemies.

2

REVIEWS EDUCATE OTHER PATIENTS

Many potential patients are wary of trying a new doctor,

especially when it comes to something as life-changing as eye surgery. For patients who don't know anyone who has undergone such a surgery and could give them a recommendation, the internet is a useful tool for gathering the opinions of others.

3

REVIEWS REWARD GOOD BEHAVIOR

The physicians who provide the best care will receive the best reviews and will stand apart from the crowd. They, in turn, will be rewarded with more patient visits.

4

REVIEWS ARE HELPFUL IN BOOSTING SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Having good patient reviews as part of an online presence is a strong trust signal not only to prospective patients but to Google as well. Google and other search engines reward local businesses that have good reviews with higher rankings on their results pages. If you're not soliciting reviews, you're missing out.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BAD REVIEWS?

Perhaps the most frequent question we hear when it comes to online reviews is this: What if someone has something negative to say?

Let's face it, negative reviews (and, indeed, negative people) are par for the course when it comes to the internet. It is almost impossible to avoid naysayers. But, when they do come, we suggest that physicians focus on the naysayers rather than ignoring them. By running to people who post negative reviews, physicians show that

they care about their business and the patients they serve and that they are open to receiving feedback and improving the quality of their service.

It's a powerful trust signal for prospective patients to see doctors who engage with their patients even when they have negative things to say. A physician who performs surgery and is then never heard from again isn't personal. That's not a very likely way to garner positive recommendations from past patients.

It's also a pleasant surprise to see patients whose negative reviews turn positive when the physician follows up—and you'd be surprised at how often this happens. The patient wasn't truly upset; he or she just needed some followup and clarification. Don't be afraid to ask! (Editor's note: For more advice on how to handle negative reviews, see *They Said What?*, pg 76.)

REPUTATION IS EVERYTHING

At the end of the day, reputation is incredibly important, especially in an industry that relies on trust and is highly service-oriented. When experience providers such as physicians solicit feedback from their patients, carefully manage relationships by responding to patient reviews, and followup on patient feedback, business improves, and, ultimately, the patient experience improves, too. This beneficial cycle breeds better physicians, better businesses, and more satisfied patients. ■

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