ONLINE PATIENT REVIEWS

Focus on the patient experience and actionable patient feedback to optimize your online reputation and stop losing patient referrals.

BY RYAN SCHUMACHER

Today, 90% of patients read online reviews before making their health care decisions.[1,2] Because patient referral sources continue to be greatly affected by online reviews, it's important to understand the role of online reviews in ophthalmology so that you and your practice can thrive.

THE POWER OF GOOGLE

The most popular platform for online reviews is Google. It's no secret that Google controls a little more than 92% of the global mobile search engine market.[3] Patients, including those 65 years of age and older, use smartphones, tablets, and computers to help them research their providers to make informed care decisions.

Internal data at my company, Satisfied Patient, show that 81% of all reviews are on Google. Healthgrades and Facebook reviews are also critical and continue to influence patient decisions.

LOSING REFERRALS

Widespread internet access, smartphone adoption, and online reviews have fundamentally changed the patient referral process, and providers are losing referral partners. When a patient is referred to a practice and later finds negative reviews for the practice online, they request other options. If several patients do the same for a given practice, the referring provider may stop recommending it to patients altogether.

Research shows that a single negative review can drive 22% of patients looking for a provider away.[4] How can you overcome this? The answer is through actionable patient feedback and patient insights.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WAIT TIMES TO PATIENTS

▶ Tell patients how long to plan for their appointment during the scheduling process
▶ Remind patients of the appointment length during the check-in process
▶ Use your website and other patient communication channels to share information on how long patients need for their appointments
▶ If you offer amenities like free Wi-Fi; coffee; and a comfortable, well-spaced (or newly remodeled) waiting area, let your patients know about them in advance

Patient feedback. Feedback is a gift, and it costs five to 25 times more to acquire a new patient than it does to retain an existing patient.[5] Unfortunately, most practices do not know how many patients they lose each month. Your goal is to identify how many patients you lose and reduce that number each month.

Patient insights. Patient insights and retention fuel long-term growth and maximize profitability.

PROVIDE AN AMAZING PATIENT EXPERIENCE

The most important thing you can do to bolster your practice's online reputation is to provide an amazing experience that exceeds patients' expectations. You won't get positive reviews if you don't meet basic patient expectations, and you won't avoid negative reviews if you don't optimize the patient experience. For example, someone undergoing cataract surgery may expect glasses-free vision following surgery. Setting proper expectations before surgery about the different types of IOLs and the potential for requiring readers postoperatively will help avoid situations where a patient feels their expectation has not been met.

Exceeding expectations increases the likelihood of patients posting a positive review online. Think about the intangibles and the patient journey from end to end. How is the experience at your practice different from the experience at other practices?

SETTING EXPECTATIONS ON WAIT TIMES

Patients can become upset when they are not properly informed of how long an appointment will take and how long they should expect to wait for their appointment to begin. Wait times can compound problems when patient expectations are not set correctly. If your patients leave your practice for a competitor, they may also have a long wait there. The practice that best communicates what to expect in terms of time for their appointments will retain more patients.

Best practices for setting patient expectations for wait times are found in the sidebar at the top of the page.

RESPONDING TO PATIENT REVIEWS

It is crucial for your practice to reply to online reviews, including the negative ones. It's a courtesy that also works to your practice's benefit. Reviews with comments carry more weight in search algorithms than those with only a star rating. You can employ search engine optimization tactics within

your responses to further bolster the practice's ranking in the algorithm. Including the name of the practice and doctor, the service(s) offered, and other keywords of this nature is a great approach. The key to responding is not to violate HIPAA.

How to respond to negative online reviews is more nuanced. Before issuing any response to a negative review online, I recommend contacting the patient personally by phone or email to help them and close the patient feedback loop. Working directly with patients to resolve their concerns is the best approach. After completing this path, you can issue a response if a patient has not removed or updated their negative review.

Unfortunately, perception is reality in the online review space, and leaving negative reviews unaddressed may lead potential patients to conclude the practice does not care about their experience. ∎

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