

Pearls for Improving Your Online Reputation

An ophthalmologist who was a target of negative reviews takes steps to polish his Web presence.

BY ANDREW DOAN, MD, PhD

The Internet has leveled the information playing field, allowing all members of society access to information about their doctors and their health care. Data reported by Credential Protection indicate that specific doctor names are searched dozens of times to over 50 times daily by patients. Often, patients book surgery with a surgeon and then research the doctor after the appointment.

For medicine, the impact of the telecommunication revolution has been profound. What patients find through Google searches and on social media and online review sites can influence the doctor-patient relationship.

Maintaining a successful online reputation requires three basic components: patient capture, patient engagement, and patient retainment. If all of these components are not strong, doctors will lose patients. If patients cannot find you on the Internet, then from their point of view you do not exist, and you fail to capture those patients. If patients do not feel engaged on social media, then you may not be interesting enough for those patients to seek your care. If patients see bad online reviews, then a tarnished online reputation will drive those patients away. In the digital age, doctors must develop a strong online reputation through these three online components.

Because of the ongoing telecommunications evolution, marketing through the Internet, social media, and doctor-review websites is becoming more cost-effective than traditional advertising modalities such as phonebooks, newspapers, magazine, radio, and television. Online review sites such as Yelp! and Angie's List have become well-known and serve as a new type of word-of-mouth marketing in the digital age. These sites allow users to leave comments about their customer service experiences, products they have purchased, and other information for other people who may be looking for such advice.

Physicians and their practices are not exempt from these online reviews. Sites that allow patients to talk

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about their experiences at the doctor's office and recommend (or not recommend) the practice can be helpful or harmful. Glowing reviews can attract new patients. However, negative or unjust reviews posted by competing doctors or disgruntled patients can affect a doctor's business and professional reputation, potentially leading to lost patients.

Most current online review sites are unsatisfactory because anyone with a valid e-mail account can leave reviews anonymously. Online review websites that depend mainly on advertising dollars often look unprofessional and may even place competitors' ads alongside doctors' profiles. Dealing with slanderous or false reviews can be frustrating and time-consuming.

Unfortunately, I have been a victim of slanderous online reviews. After graduating high school, I devoted 17 years of my life studying to become a physician and surgeon, attaining medical and doctoral degrees at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. I have a distinguished curriculum vitae and have dedicated much of my adult life to serving patients in a professional and ethical manner. One day after the grand opening of my private practice, I was attacked online by an anonymous poster who called me a "money grubber" on a third-party online review site. Most likely I was the victim of a competing doctor or disgruntled associate, although I may never know. This insult was applied to me even though I have spent considerable

time seeing patients at the Temecula-Murrieta Rescue Mission at no charge, not billing the patients, and giving glasses away at no cost for those who cannot afford them.

You see, therefore, why I say most current online review sites are unregulated and severely unjust, and they can have horrible consequences for doctors. Online review websites are natural magnets for negative reviews. An outstanding doctor who never has angered one patient may receive no positive reviews, but angry patients can be quick to slander their doctors.

The current state of online reviews may make doctors feel helpless, angry, and frustrated. However, there are seven high-impact things you can do to be proactive and fight against defamation of your name, your reputation, and your credentials.

No. 1: Perform reconnaissance. The first step in fighting the war against slanderous reviews is to be educated on what people find when searching your name. Search your name on Google and see what others will see when searching your name. Monitor the websites that appear on the first page of Google. Use Google Alerts to receive automated emails from Google when there is new information about your name on the Internet. Monitor your online presence often.

No. 2: Erect a brick wall. In search engine management, the term *brick wall* is applied to a technique used to control the presentation of websites people find when searching your name. When patients search "Andrew Doan" on Google, of the more than 17 million search results, I control and monitor the 9 or 10 websites that appear on the first page of the search. Controlling what people find in this way can draw attention away from less-credible doctor-review sites.

No. 3: Use search engine optimization and management. The use of search engine optimization and management can help raise the websites you want to appear higher in search results. One effective way to accomplish this is to add your practice website address to all social media profiles, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+.

In addition, using social media websites such as Facebook can be an effective way to guide patients to your practice and to engage them in a controlled environment. Patients who "like" or comment on your page are helping you broadcast your practice to their personal connections. This is one form of word-of-mouth marketing in the digital age.

No. 4: Be a good, ethical medical professional. This sounds like common sense, but medical professionals may come to feel entitled and forget that being a good doctor means serving other people. Try to serve others

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with a caring heart, but without expecting anything in return. Remember that it is a privilege to work in the medical profession and to be employed during these difficult economic times. Learn to love what you do. Unhappy medical professionals will foster unhappy patients, leading to bad online reviews.

No. 5: Encourage patients to post feedback online. Receiving positive reviews is as easy as asking patients to review your services online. The problem is that there are dozens of review websites, and only a fraction of patients will take the time spontaneously to post reviews online. If you don't ask, most likely patients will not post reviews for you.

No. 6: The solution to pollution is dilution. Negative reviews are not necessarily bad. We all want to be perfect, but in reality nobody is perfect. A study by researchers at the Stanford Graduate School of Business found that in some cases negative publicity can increase sales when a product or company is relatively unknown, simply because it stimulates product awareness.¹ Embrace the negative reviews, learn from them, and become a better doctor tomorrow than you were today.

Unfortunately, not all review websites represent true patient reviews; they may be postings by local competitors or slanderous individuals. The solution to negative reviews is not litigation or gag orders, which may expose one to litigation for violating free speech laws, as was seen in a case involving a New York dentist.² Also, posting of false testimonials to one's own practice can lead to loss of medical license and a large monetary fine, as occurred in the case of a New York plastic surgeon in 2009.³

The answer to negative reviews is to learn from the review and then accumulate more positive than negative reviews.

No. 7: Encourage the posting of third-party verified reviews. Work with a third-party organization, such as Verified Reviews, that will collect, process, and post reviews on your behalf. One answer to the current review system that naturally attracts negative reviews is

to have a credible organization collect, verify, and post reviews to protect both doctor and patients.

First-mover advantage—a marketing term meaning the advantage gained by being the first to take advantage of a particular market segment—is important when encouraging patients to review your medical and professional services. First-mover advantage allows a doctor to accumulate more reviews than the competition.

When patients search for doctors on the Internet, the two most influential factors are the star rating and the number of reviews for a doctor; the higher the star rating and the greater the number of reviews, the greater the competence and value conveyed to patients.

CONCLUSION

The advancement and evolution of information technology is exciting, but it also presents new challenges for physicians and patients. Many patients prefer Internet resources and are likely to use online resources as their primary reference, including searching for, finding, and reviewing doctors. Your online reputation rests in their hands. The advice in this article may help return some of that control to your own. ■

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Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Navy, Department of Defense, or the United States Government.

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