



Damage control:

Do you know how to react to negative online reviews? Publicist Tingy Simoes reveals the three essential rules of engagement that will help you protect your reputation online

The vast proliferation of Yellow Pages-type directories and review sites, the number of which are growing almost daily, present today's clinicians with a new and very open digital environment. Though this environment can offer valuable marketing opportunities, it can also on occasion leave clinics and clinicians vulnerable to attacks on their reputation.

As a publicist with over 15 years experience in the private medical sector, I have often had to deal with negative comments on behalf of my clients. I have also had to advise on steps to take after receiving unpleasant feedback, merited or not.

In the big bad World Wide Web, it's easy for reviewers to cloak themselves in anonymity. Thus a patient who smiled in your consulting rooms and gave you a hug may easily walk out the door and seek to shred your reputation via online forums, without you ever knowing who that person might be. Anonymity also protects competitors or even disgruntled employees (impersonators) who are out to maliciously hurt your practice's reputation. Reviewers can of course be genuine patients wishing to air a bad experience, but sometimes they are extortioners, e.g. those who threaten with, "Refund my money, or I will leave negative reviews about you online."

Whether the negative comments are deserved or not, there are various approaches that should be considered in regards to dealing with them. There are three levels of action for unfavourable online reviews:

- > Remove <
- > Address <
- > Suppress <

Remove is obviously the ideal option, but hard to accomplish. Do consider that if you're getting negative reviews regularly, you probably need to look within your practice to examine what might be causing these issues.

Let's say however that you know the feedback to be inherently inaccurate, false or defamatory, or even left by someone who is not a patient. Your first port of call should be to look at the website's own terms and conditions in detail.

Many of these sites state that reviews must only be left by genuine customers. Therefore, someone who was rejected at the consultation stage or is the partner or relative of the patient cannot, by explicit policy, be allowed to leave a review. Or, say, they are complaining about a procedure which you simply do not offer, therefore it can only be untrue. Additionally, certain forums ask that individual doctors/nurses/surgeons not be named. If any of these situations apply and the policy prohibits them, you can cite the terms and conditions, which automatically means that the website is obligated to remove the comment. This way, there is no need for contact with the person, whoever they may be.

Address is probably the most likely and appropriate avenue to explore, if you don't want to leave the review or comment unchallenged. But beware to keep your cool in this situation. It can be all too easy to take comments personally and react defensively but this is precisely what the reviewers are seeking to activate as a response. If the issue is negative comments on social media, try to take the dialogue offline as quickly as possible.

Reply publicly if you can, explain that you're sorry they're having a difficult time and that your office would be glad to discuss their concerns with them. Offer a phone chat, a face-to-face visit, anything to get the conversation away from the prying eyes of everyone on Facebook, Twitter or on forums. Come across as polite, diplomatic and helpful, and whatever you do, do not engage in tit-for-tat! The patient will always appear more sympathetic to those reading.

You are ethically obliged to keep quiet the medical details of a patient's case so you cannot win in a public slanging match. If the review site in question offers you a right to reply, your response could be along the lines of, "I can't tell who you are, but the information here doesn't seem to fit with our procedures at the clinic..." and calmly point out the inaccuracies. Alternatively, if you think you know who the patient is, you could try to raise this with them directly, for example, "I have reason to believe you may have posted xyz. I can't believe it was you really, but perhaps we can address any issues professionally" etc. As you well know, no two patients are alike and what works with one, may not with the other – so trust your instincts.

Some of the biggest sources of complaints tend to be expectation failures and financials so always make sure to be entirely up front with your practice's policies for aftercare, revisions or refunds from the very beginning. If the disgruntled patient wants a refund and you decide to offer it to them, make sure you work out a confidentiality clause. If, despite receiving compensation, they continue to publicly discuss details of the case, perhaps they waive their right to confidentiality as well. Always examine options with an experienced solicitor before handing out any cash.



Suppress: At the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (ASAPS) annual conference last year I heard this statement in relation to online attacks: “The solution to pollution is dilution”. The key message here is to do your best to drown the reviews in positivity. Suppressing or diluting the impact of negative feedback requires you to be truly active. The era of sitting quietly behind a brass plaque in Harley Street, ignoring advertising, PR and social media marketing is well and truly over. Keenly encourage happy patients to leave positive reviews on all the most common sites. Make this part of your practice and have your team ask from the start whether patients are active online, and whether they’d be willing to review their experience.

This may seem counterintuitive but it will help you maintain control of your image online and take ownership of what appears on those crucial first few Google pages. One or two negative comments will simply be lost in a sea of positive ones. However, if the negative feedback is the only feedback that pops up, you’re in trouble. If this is the case, work with

your SEO and PR providers to standardise and optimise your site, and make sure you and your team regularly audit your online image. This can be done easily with free tools such as Google Alerts which notifies you of online coverage, or in a more sophisticated and targeted way via specialist agencies. Remember to also give the public a little bit of credit for being able to differentiate between genuine reviews and someone who seems unreasonable and disgruntled.

Most people who take to the Internet to air their grievances do so because they don’t feel listened to. Perhaps they have been calling the practice and not receiving what they perceive to be help, or are being ignored. Try doing the opposite of this: over-communicate. Tell them you’ve seen the feedback they left and you are committed to resolving the issues. Contact them regularly and keep them informed – many queries pop up post-procedure, so stay in touch. Turn lemons into lemonade by engaging and responding tactically. Always respond professionally; thank them and say you look forward to discussing the issues in person.

Whilst I do recommend seeking legal advice if comments are defamatory or outright libellous, I suggest you leave the threat of legal action as a last resort. As mentioned previously, the perception is that doctors and surgeons are ‘well-off’ and sympathy will always go to the seemingly defenceless patient. Having said all that, when all other avenues have been explored, you may be left with no other choice. Legal action is costly, so really question whether the online feedback is hurting your practice’s reputation or whether it is simply your ego.

Ultimately, if something was done wrong, saying sorry works. It is known that patients don’t sue according to outcome, they sue according to their perception of caring. Show them that you do.



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