



Responding to Online Reviews: Good, Bad, or Indifferent, What Do We Do?

Online reviews can be a powerful tool for a medical practice. Although most readers of online reviews acknowledge that at least some of the posted reviews are fake, a whopping 79% of consumers say they trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation¹ with 89% of consumers reading reviews prior to making a purchasing decision². Although a negative review can be frustrating, over 25% of consumers stated that they needed to believe the authenticity of the review before they would consider it trustworthy, and the fact is that sometimes the negative reviews are the ones that provide that credibility back to future prospects. In fact, approximately 94% of respondents stated that positive reviews made them more likely to choose a business for their product or service, and over half of online viewers expressed feelings of empathy upon seeing an irrational negative review posted about a product or service³.

So your practice has received online reviews...now what? The good news is, if your practice is receiving online reviews from patients, then your doctors are at least seeing patients. The bad news is, that at least some of these reviews will undoubtedly be bad. And bad reviews sting, especially when they are a direct critique of the medical or surgical care your team has so carefully provided to your patients. Although legal action is often tempting, most legal and business experts agree that litigation is not the most effective means to addressing our online naysayers. A “chin up, buttercup” and “grin and bear it” approach, however, just may be. By using a methodical approach to responding to online reviews, you – the practice – can regain control of the messaging and leverage the good reviews while minimizing the bad.

Step #1: Nominate an online review ambassador.

Whether you are building your online brand, or managing patient expectations, keeping your finger on the pulse of your online presence is an important piece of your practice’s broader marketing strategy. Set the ambassador’s boundaries, coach them on your expectations, and then empower them to respond to online reviews in the time and manner that best supports this strategy.

Step #2: Establish the timeline and tone for monitoring and responding to online reviews.

A great online review strategy includes staying engaged in the process and addressing every review, whether as a simple acknowledgement or a more detailed public response. Although the timeline for response may vary from practice to practice, there is some urgency with 20% of

¹ Murphy, R. (December 9, 2020). Local Consumer Review Survey 2020. <https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey/>

² Trustpilot. The Critical Role of Reviews in Online Trust. <https://business.trustpilot.com/guides-reports/build-trusted-brand/the-critical-role-of-reviews-in-internet-trust#downloadreport>

³ Murphy, R. (December 9, 2020). Local Consumer Review Survey 2020. <https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey/>

reviewers expecting a response within one day, and only 39% stating they would be okay waiting longer than three days for a response⁴ to their feedback.

Perhaps your model is to simply thank the authors of positive reviews and tell them you appreciate their kind words. Perhaps your strategy for negative reviewers is to thank them as well, and then offer to discuss their concerns further by phone or email. Whichever method you choose, just be sure that it is consistent, positive, and either shows your appreciation in a genuine manner, or encourages communication if further discussion is needed.

Step #3: Research the reviewer and address any concerns privately.

The truth is, that sometimes patients do have a poor experience with our practices. Although uncomfortable, wouldn't it be better to reach out and address any legitimate concerns offline, before the issue escalates online for the world to read? This step is really important, but often avoided by practices. At a very minimum, research who the reviewer is and familiarize yourself with the details of their experience so that you are better equipped to have a meaningful interaction with them later. Oftentimes these posters simply want to feel heard and validated and addressing concerns up front just might diffuse their anger long-term.

Step #4: Stay mindful of confidentiality requirements for healthcare providers.

For healthcare workers, special care must be taken to abide by required confidentiality requirements under the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), so it is especially important to ensure the online review ambassador has been properly trained in this federal regulation as well. The best advice is to err on the side of caution and acknowledge the reviewers compliment – or concern – without actually acknowledging them as a patient of your practice. Although this may seem a bit tricky, most ambassadors can quickly figure out some great techniques to accomplish both goals.

An example of how to respond to a positive review in a HIPAA-compliant way may include something like this:

“Thank you so much for your kind words. Our practice loves taking great care of patients and we truly appreciate your sharing your compliment with our online guests”.

In this example you have thanked the poster and shown that you appreciate their words, but avoided any confirmation that they are actually a patient of your practice or given any detail about their care.

Negative reviews can be a bit trickier since you want to validate the reviewer's concerns, but not give any detail that could become a confidentiality concern later. Negative reviews can be hurtful as well, so it is important not to engage in a combative or argumentative dialogue under any circumstance. An example of how to respond to a negative review in a HIPAA-compliant way may include something like this:

⁴ Ibid.

“Thank you for your feedback and post. Our team works hard to give patients a great experience and we always appreciate opportunities to discuss further. Please call me directly at (phone number) or email at your convenience”.

It is important to acknowledge that the reviewer has a concern, but then also encourage a continued discussion offline without confirming any details. This simple technique will quickly show others that you are sensitive to patient feedback and that the practice is committed to a proactive approach in resolving issues or conflict.

Step #5: Bury it.

It is okay to ask happy patients to submit an online review. My favorite step to take when a poor review sneaks online is to simply bury it with other honest, positive reviews from happy patients. The poor review will stand out as an exception to an otherwise glowing practice, and readers will question the authenticity and accuracy of the outlier. Giving a card-sized “calling card” to your happiest patients asking them to submit an online review is not only a great marketing technique, it is also a wonderful opportunity for patients to brag about your services to others. This card can be as simple as a business card that says something like “Did you have a great experience? Tell a friend!” and then include specific web sites you would like for them to submit their review to.

At the end of the day, online reviews can provide useful feedback from patients and become one of the many tools we use to monitor the overall health of our practice. Just remember that whether the review is good, bad, or indifferent, handling it in a timely and professional manner is the ultimate key to a successful online review program.