

Keys to Promoting—and Protecting—Your Online Reputation

Online reviews are rapidly replacing traditional word-of-mouth recommendations for service industries—and health care is no exception. As more patients turn to the internet to help them choose a doctor, “the biggest mistake a practice can make is ignoring its online presence,” said Ravi D. Goel, MD, comprehensive ophthalmologist and social media lecturer in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Fortunately, managing your practice in the online realm requires no more than a few branding fundamentals.

Build Your Brand

The first step to a great online presence is creating and maintaining a clear individual brand, which encompasses all the attributes that patients associate with you, said Robert F. Melendez, MD, MBA, comprehensive ophthalmologist in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Choose an image. The easiest way to become recognizable is to “establish a visual brand, much like you would a logo, and use it on everything associated with your practice so that it is instantly recognized online,” said Randall V. Wong, MD, retina specialist and internet marketing consultant in Bethesda, Maryland. Market research has consistently shown that the average person is far more likely to engage with a product or service online if they recognize it; this is because familiarity

lends the brand credibility.¹

Dr. Goel recommended using one professional photo that is consistent across all websites. The image should reflect the tone you want to set for your practice, so think about whether you want a photo that is more patient-focused and personable, more expert-focused and professional, etc. He emphasized that using more than one central photo for your brand could confuse potential clients.

Create online accounts. Cultivating your brand also requires that you: 1) have a high-quality website that is accessible and appealing across devices; 2) create a Facebook page that is updated regularly; and 3) claim your account on physician review sites, according to Dr. Melendez.

In addition to using Facebook, you should post content on Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube, Dr. Melendez said. Blog posts and videos can elevate your brand because they serve as a reminder of your expertise. They are also a great marketing tool since interesting posts will make readers more inclined to click on your bio and learn about your practice, he said.

Manage external profiles. Being a professional in the digital realm requires that you are aware of what is published about you and that you take steps to ensure that facts about your practice are accurate. Dr. Goel suggested Googling yourself at least once per

quarter. A Google search of your name will most likely prioritize Healthgrades, Google My Business, Yelp, and Vitals. Since these sites appear first, they will also be the most popular with patients and potential patients, so they require particular attention.

To correct mistakes and keep your profile current, you must claim your page on the review site. (There is typically an option to do so at the bottom or top of your page.) Once you have editing privileges, make it easy for potential patients to learn about your practice by providing a current business phone number, work hours, accepted types of insurance, and a business address accessible through Google Maps, said Dr. Goel.

One site to start with is Healthgrades, which has an account for nearly every U.S. physician. “At the very least, all physicians should claim this account and post a professional photo,” said Dr. Goel. “Unclaimed accounts and those lacking a photo can cause potential patients to question whether the information is even accurate,” added Dr. Wong.

Reviews: Prevent Negative, Promote Positive

Online reviews reflect offline behavior, said Dr. Melendez. Your online reputation is established while you are in the clinic, performing surgery, on call, and interacting in your community, so focusing on patient satisfaction is crucial.

Know the reasons behind negative reviews. A single negative review about you or your practice can potentially

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deter others from seeking your services. According to Dr. Wong's observations, unhappy ophthalmology patients typically write reviews to complain about excessive wait times, customer service issues, billing, inadequate exams, and poor outcomes. Actionable online feedback provides information for improving patient communications, operations, and office policies and protocols that can enhance your patients' experiences. "No matter what type of feedback you get from a patient, it is important to reflect on it and find its core cause. One patient review could equal five or 10 unspoken sentiments," said Dr. Goel.

Ask patients for reviews. The easiest way to obtain positive reviews is to ask patients. Dr. Melendez said that he typically asks a patient for a review a week after cataract surgery since that is when patients tend to be the most satisfied with his performance. "When they are already complimenting my work in the examination room, I take this as an opportunity to both express my appreciation for the compliment and ask for a review. Then I instruct them where to go online in order to post it," he said, though he cautioned that physicians and their staff should never ask for a particular comment or rating, nor should they offer rewards in exchange for reviews.

If you need help getting started, Healthgrades offers registered physicians free materials that can be printed and distributed to patients in your office indicating where to post a review.

Know the expectation. Physicians need only as many reviews as their closest competitors. For example, if you are one of two glaucoma specialists in a small town, and the other physician has 15 great reviews, your goal should be 16. Perfect scores are nice but are not necessary. In fact, too many five-star ratings could seem unrealistic and fake, said Dr. Melendez. "As long as your ratings are four stars or better, it is likely that you are doing okay."

Respond to Reviews

To maintain a positive online image, you will need to track feedback. You can and should monitor all review sites

indexed by Google via Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts), a free service that notifies you whenever a review is posted about you or your practice. All reviews, positive or negative, merit a response, said Dr. Wong.

Addressing positive reviews.

Acknowledging positive reviews is important, said Dr. Wong. "If you come upon a site where every time a review is left or comment is made someone from the office thanks the writer, others will be inspired to review as well."

Addressing negative reviews. Your response to negative reviews should be crafted such that it acknowledges the complaint and seeks an equitable resolution. "Delegate this task to your office manager or someone who can remain objective and respond in a supportive, thankful, and accurate manner," said Dr. Wong. In creating your reaction plan, follow these guidelines:

- Wait 24 hours to respond so that you have time to think about what you are going to say.
- Keep it professional.
- Never say anything negative about the person.
- Always thank the person for bringing the issue to your attention.
- Acknowledge the problem.
- Offer a solution.
- Never disclose anything about a patient's identity or condition.
- Be honest and transparent.

1 Malik M et al. *International Journal of Business and Science*. 2019;4(5):167-171.

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