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# THE RATING GAME YOU'VE GOT TO BE IN IT TO WIN IT

**Wendy Lewis** shares some strategies for getting more 5-star reviews



**I**T IS BOUND TO HAPPEN, NO MATTER HOW good you are as a practitioner. At some point in your medical career, you are going to get at least one negative review and probably more.

Just do that math. How many patients do you see in a day, a week, a month? Can you honestly say to yourself that 100% of them are happy with you, your practice, the procedure they had done? It is next to impossible to receive universally positive reviews. The old adage, 'You can't please all of the people all of the time,' often credited to Abe Lincoln, still rings true. You and your patients are merely human.

So, you need to be prepared for the time when a patient will post unflattering comments about you. And it will happen, but it doesn't have to be the end of your career.

Consumers can rate almost everything online today: books, salons, florists, hotels, restaurants – and even doctors. Whereas reviews for hotels tend to center on location, amenities, comfort and price, doctor ratings often focus on a long list of issues that are more subjective. These may include waiting times, scheduling snafus, décor, billing, fees, staff, and the doctor's bedside manner, often more than the results and outcomes of treatments and services.

Aesthetic patients are more plugged in and command a high level of service from their healthcare providers. Aesthetic patients are also more demanding, have high expectations, and all too frequently, change their doctors and go practice-shopping for a lot of reasons, like better service, lower costs, location, likeability, or even improved connectivity.

### Online reputation

Without a doubt, the decks are stacked against practitioners because they are greatly limited in how they can respond to public posts. Online interaction with patients about their medical treatment and care in your practice, such as email exchanges, are widely accepted. However, these conversations should never occur on a social networking platform or open forum.

The idea of online reputation and reviews is relatively new to medicine, but it has rapidly taken on increasing importance. Social media and online reviews are now considered critical success factors for aesthetic practitioners as well as all medical practices in light of the new consumer behavior and the value reviews have taken on. ▶



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### ▷ Monitoring your brand online

Relying solely on word-of-mouth marketing just won't cut it anymore. You need to reach new patients where they are. Review and rating sites rely on public information to populate their profiles, and your profile will exist whether you initiate or not. In fact, you need to be vigilant because in many cases, public information is frequently wrong or outdated and the range of possible errors is vast. Your practice may be mislabeled or categorized incorrectly, wrong spelling, qualifications, and even location. All of these errors can result in lost patients and a revenue slump, often through no fault of your own.

### Stay on top of online listings

Most rating and review sites allow you to claim your information and make updates. Hunt down every listing that you can. You want all the information about your practice to be as accurate and up to date as possible. Whenever possible, add hyperlinks to your website and social pages. Some sites require the physician to approve any changes, and may even ask for your license number to verify your identity.

Having accurate listings does several important things for your practice. It helps improve your website's ranking on search engines and increases the prominence of your placement in online searches. The process of owning your listings will take some work in the beginning, but it will be worth it when your online reputation improves and new patients contact you for appointments.

### Rating and reviews

A decade or so ago, one unhappy patient might tell a few friends or complain about a less than perfect experience. Today, one unhappy patient can broadcast her displeasure to all of her fans and followers in a matter of seconds, which can spread like flesh-eating bacteria all over the planet. Those fans and followers can, in turn, share it with their own fans and followers, and the end result can be gut-wrenching for the practitioner. Once that unhappy patient presses the send button, her message is out there and it is virtually indelible. All it takes is one person to share it and it can take on a life of its own.

Your current and future patients are online reading what others have to say about you. The challenge is that a small



number of people may be influencing what others think of you. To stay vigilant, listen to what people are saying about you and be a part of this conversation. You also need to encourage your happy patients to post reviews in an ethical way.

## 7 STEPS TO CHECK YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION

- 1** Find and own all of your online listings on the rating and review sites that matter to your practice.
- 2** Update and complete all your online listings.
- 3** Become an active participant in the rating and review process.
- 4** Set up Google and Yahoo alerts for your name and practice names, including obvious misspelt versions to monitor the web for unflattering posts and mentions.
- 5** Be proactive about engaging with patients to encourage them to post reviews on the sites that matter to your practice.
- 6** Take good care of patients and resolve conflicts early, so they do not fester.
- 7** If/when they arise, strive to bury negative comments with positive content, so these posts are not the first thing that comes up when a patient is searching for you.

All practitioners are understandably nervous about the impact of negative reviews. As long as your reviews are not overwhelmingly negative, you may be fine. It is not until a physician's overall rating consistently falls below four out of five stars that patient preference for that provider may begin to decline significantly. As little as half a star can make a big difference when patients are reading reviews.

All five-star glowing reviews can also cause prospective patients to raise an eyebrow on occasion. This may come across as fake or planted, and the viewer may not trust that the reviews are legitimate. There is a fine balance in getting the right tone that sounds reasonable and credible, without being too over the top and full of hyperbole and remaining above a 4.0 range. This is why more reviews are constantly needed to keep your rating well above the average. For example, if you have mostly four and five stars, but only a small number of reviews, even a few three-star reviews can pull your average rating down quickly.

### Reputation management strategies

Having accurate listings, engaging in the online conversation about your practice, building your online presence, and increasing positive reviews are among the most important things you can do to

protect your reputation.

Management of negative content can take many forms. Assign a staff member to watch what is being posted on all relevant sites and social networking platforms. Using an external monitoring service can also help alert you to any new developments, such as reposts of negative content and any derivative attacks that appear in response, so you can be proactive. As you regularly check on the review sites for new postings, be careful not to respond in a way that acknowledges a doctor-patient relationship.

Consumers are skeptical of reviews and look for red flags. You can make it worse by engaging with them in a public forum. Anyone who is reading these reviews is judging whether this is the kind of practice they want to go to.

If you feel compelled to reply, proceed with caution and keep your doctor hat on. If you think a response is required, it should be very straightforward and innocuous, like, 'Thank you for expressing your concerns. Please be so kind as to contact our office, so we can discuss this with you further. Patient satisfaction is our number one goal.' Rather than the practitioner responding, it is wise to have a staff member be the point person. Always try to take the conversation offline. Showing your willingness to be responsive can be as powerful as a positive review. In this way, you have demonstrated that you stand behind your reputation and pay attention to situations flagged in public forums. You can then privately try to resolve the conflict, assuming that the post is a real patient with a valid issue.

Common complaints on rating sites often center on long waiting times, a rushed staff, the doctor didn't spend enough time, the feeling that the practice was too busy, and the ubiquitous bedside manner. You could try to distill the commentary about long waits and short visits with a statement, such as, 'We are among only a few aesthetic practices in the area, and we pride ourselves on providing quality care to all of our patients.' Do not be defensive, which can be misconstrued as arrogance, and will almost always backfire.

Devise a strategy for how to respond to these critiques within the practice with the patient directly before it escalates to a post on Yelp. The rise of reviews has certainly made switched on practitioners better listeners. Listen to your patients and help resolve any negative experiences they

may have had with you as early as possible.

When a negative comment is received, it may feel like an attack against you personally. Look at the situation from your perspective and that of the patient and sleep on it before you decide on the best way to manage the comment. Regrettably, rating sites and social media platforms have become the obvious place for patients and customers to vent and air their grievances. They are also the first port of call for spite-based attacks on your professional reputation, and unfortunately, some patients use these platforms as a weapon. In some cases, and I believe this is widely underreported, aggressive SEO companies are responsible for fake negative reviews, rather than your competitors in town. Regrettably, this is very hard to trace or validate.

The more patients you treat, the higher the odds of having some unhappy campers in the bunch. It can be difficult to keep your cool when you read what people are writing about you online. The worst thing you can do is to react in a defensive or aggressive manner. Stay rational, and reasonable, even when the post or patient feels completely unreasonable. Whenever possible, keep your emotions out of it. As a licensed healthcare professional, you do not share the privilege of overreacting with your patients.

## Top review sites

Assign a staff member to monitor all of your social media channels to note any negative posts that were not posted by an actual patient. If you are the victim of a fake review or bogus anonymous comment, and this happens often, try to take the conversation offline and address it head-on. On Facebook, at least, you can delete the comment, ban the user from posting again, and report it as spam or inappropriate content. On Instagram, you can also delete any undesirable comments.

Website hosts have significant latitude to keep or pull a thread. There are circumstances where they are more likely to do so. Read the Terms of Service on the site with a fine-toothed comb. If the poster has violated the terms even slightly, you may have recourse to get the post removed.



## REVIEW SITES TO MONITOR

- RealSelf
- Google
- Facebook
- Yelp
- TripAdvisor
- Healthgrades
- RateMDs
- Vitals
- Healthcarereviews
- Voro
- RealPatientReviews
- ZocDoc



For example, Yelp's terms of service state that you must be a customer to post a comment, so this would be a clear violation and you might have some recourse, although nothing is guaranteed.

If you can prove that a post is fake, such as the writer is complaining about a procedure that your practice does not offer, and you have evidence to substantiate that. If the post is just an opinion, you may be stuck. Reviewers are entitled to their opinions. If they are stating something as fact that can be perceived as defamatory to your reputation, you may have a case to get the post taken down—but don't hold your breath.

Some physicians have resorted to taking legal action to get negative posts or fake reviews taken off some sites. Regrettably, at least in my experience, this is rarely successful and can be a very expensive and drawn out process.

## How to get patients to post positive reviews

The best way to avoid negativity is to not create any reason for it in the first place. However, this is nearly impossible anymore. The next best way to counter negative ratings is to make sure they are buried under a slew of positive ratings from real satisfied patients who are your advocates.

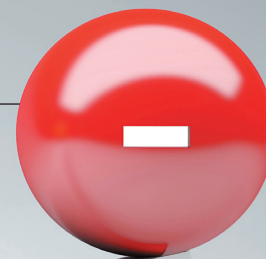
So, how do you get patients to post good reviews? Sometimes you just have to ask them. It is much easier for staff to ask than the doctor. When a patient compliments

**“Regrettably, rating sites and social media platforms have become the obvious place for patients and customers to vent and air their grievances.”**

the result, office, or staff, it is very easy for the staff to say to the patient, 'You will make our day if you give us a positive review.' There is no shame in doing that. In fact, it has become common practice among all service businesses, including hotels, restaurants, salons, airlines, Uber, eBay and Instacart. The practitioner can do the same if he or she has the kind of relationship with the patient that feels comfortable. Just asking a patient may not be enough as the thought may pass out of their mind immediately after they leave your office. Giving them a card with various rating sites may be a good reminder. Having patients write reviews while they are in your office will not work because they will come from the same ISP address and will >



“Your ongoing mission is to create a large body of positive content to outweigh any negative posts that may arise—and they will.”



▷ not be considered legitimate. However, there are programs available that allow you to bypass this issue so reviews can be posted right in your practice.

Start the process from the initial consultation when they are sitting in the waiting room. Use patient satisfaction surveys and questionnaires to show patients that you value their opinion and get them to participate. Most hotel chains, airlines, retailers, restaurants listed on OpenTable, and other services businesses use this strategy routinely. Surveys can be a very valuable tool if you take them seriously. You may find out about an issue that needs attention, so you have an opportunity to swiftly make improvements. It also demonstrates to patients that your practice cares and wants to keep them satisfied.

Encouraging patients to post good reviews about your practice is a constant battle, but the rewards will pay off. Be consistent. Do all you can, every day, to garner positive ratings. If you don't, you will fall into the rut of getting a negative rating and then suddenly scrambling for some

good reviews, which will be very apparent when someone looks at the site.

Honest practitioners may admit, if only themselves, that the threat of negative reviews has made them just a little more caring and humble. We all know that there are more consequences to bad behavior than in the past. That little voice inside your head keeps telling you to just be nice and smile more. Maybe that is not such a bad thing after all. Everyone will get some negative reviews, some unwarranted, yet some deserved. No one likes it. When it happens, first look in the mirror and ask, 'Is there some truth to this critique?' Use this as an opportunity to improve how you do things, rather than just getting your back up and acting defensively. If there is a flaw in your system, address it and deal with it head-on. If your bedside manner is the main issue, do a little soul-searching.

### Turn a negative into a positive

If you are consistently getting three stars or less, there may be a few things that demand immediate attention. When a post points

out a genuine shortcoming in your practice, use it as an opportunity to do better. Develop an approach that instills trust and confidence with each patient visit. If you have to rush to get through a busy day of patients, apologize to anyone who has been kept waiting and explain why. Get the staff involved in answering questions and moving patients through more quickly. Make an extra effort to avoid scheduling mishaps and billing snafus that are sure to cause patients to be irate. Another patient pet peeve is promising to do something and letting it slip through the cracks—such as calling back, contacting their insurance company, sending a receipt, making a copy of a chart, or calling in a prescription. It is the little things that matter too.

A collection of sincerely favorable reviews by real patients will outweigh a few negative ones, so being vigilant about fostering good will with patients is even more critical now. Persuade patients to write good reviews about your practice by showing that it matters to you. Include some of your positive reviews on your website and brochures. Post a sign at the reception desk stating that you value patient feedback by any means, including in person, by phone or email, or via online forums.

Your ongoing mission is to create a large body of positive content to outweigh any negative posts that may arise—and they will.

► Read up on aesthetic clinic marketing in a new book by PRIME Editorial Board member WENDY LEWIS — *Aesthetic Clinic Marketing in the Digital Age* (CRC Press). Order your copy today at [crcpress.com](http://crcpress.com) — use PR15 to get a special 15% discount.

### ONLINE REPUTATION CHECKLIST

- ✓ Assign a staff member to manage the process
- ✓ Work with your web team for external support as needed
- ✓ List all the relevant sites and platforms that apply to your practice
- ✓ Conduct a Google search at specific intervals using your name, the name of all the doctors and physician extenders in your practice, and the practice name
- ✓ Return to each site periodically after submitting updates to make sure that your changes have been entered correctly
- ✓ Set a regular date on your calendar to check for new reviews and ratings (monthly or bi-weekly)
- ✓ Look into directories, medical societies, patient communities to make sure you have a listing on relevant platforms, and it is up to date





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