

Hard Internet Truths

34,748 online reviews reveal what patients really want from doctors.

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Businesses often live and die by online reviews, whether or not those reviews are fair and accurate. It should come as no surprise that healthcare consumers are likely to check those reviews when it comes time to select providers. Many patients prefer to have another patient's opinion of a doctor or a physician group or a hospital before scheduling a first appointment, particularly for treatment of any kind of serious, chronic, or potentially life-threatening condition. According to research published in 2013 by the Pew Research Center,¹ nearly three of four Americans (72%) go online at least once a year to research health information, and about one in six Internet users (17%) have consulted online healthcare reviews.²

A 2013 poll by the accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers indicates a heavier reliance on online reviews: among 1000 respondents, roughly half (48%) said they read healthcare reviews, and more than two-thirds of those (68%) said they had used online reviews to help make healthcare decisions.³

A German study⁴ indicated even higher reliance on other patients' experiences with healthcare providers and their practices, showing that 65% of patients surveyed had chosen a

particular physician based on positive ratings. The authors concluded, "Neither health policy makers nor physicians should underestimate the influence of physician-rating websites."

In today's Internet-savvy world every healthcare professional must recognize that patients can easily affect online reputation and decisions made by healthcare consumers. Some of the more popular review websites where patients can express opinions are the following:

- RateMDs.com;
- Vitals.com;

the doctor's decisions; and

- The patient's treatment and results.

What Can Providers Do About Online Reviews?

The ubiquity of rate-your-doctor websites is not lost on physicians. One of the authors (RHK), who owns a marketing and public relations firm for specialty physicians, gets one or two phone calls or e-mails almost daily from medical practices desperately seeking help in improving their online reputations. A common assumption is that the best way to handle online

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- ZocDoc.com;
- HealthGrades.com;
- Ucomparehealth.com;
- CitySearch.com;
- Google +; and
- Yelp.com.

These sites allow patients to rate a physician or a healthcare provider group on a number of things:

- How staff has treated a patient;
- Patient wait time;
- Accuracy of diagnosis;
- The doctor's attitude;
- The patient's level of trust in

reviews by patients is to merely get rid of the bad ones. Every provider wants more favorable reviews, but evidently very few physicians spring to action before they get Internet complaints or negative reviews. As a result, just one or two negative reviews can reduce the number of stars significantly.

A popular myth is that any practice or business that receives a hurtful review can have it removed either by contacting the publisher of the website where the review originated or by paying a digital public relations

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specialist to make it disappear. Legitimate review websites remove negative reviews only in rare instances of foul language, strong evidence of fraud (e.g., a competitor of the practice or business), or other exceptional circumstances. In most cases, the reviews are there to stay.

The growing use of online reviews explains why healthcare providers number heavily among the customers flocking to firms offering their services in online reputation management. In 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that BIA/Kelsey—a Chantilly, Virginia, media research firm—estimated that small to medium-sized U.S. businesses were expected to spend \$700 million on technology to monitor online reviews.⁵

Unfortunately, many businesses buy software informing the business owner or proprietor that they have a problem (i.e., a complaint on a review website) rather than investing in addressing the problem.

A thorough evaluation of patient complaints in more than 34,000 online healthcare reviews reveals an astonishing truth about online reputation in healthcare—how easy it is to manage and improve digital reputation proac-

taining millions of words patients have used in describing their experiences. Additionally, the software identified the most common phrases associated with each star rating level, as reviewers are able to rate their

them with the attention they often crave? Does some degree of patient dissatisfaction simply come with the territory of trying to do the best job possible under the pressures of declining reimbursements, increased ex-

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experiences on a scale of one to five stars.

The evaluation revealed that customer service—not clinical skill—dominates as the leading distinction between highly rated and poorly rated doctors and provider groups, and the degree to which customer service dominates online complaints was mathematically overwhelming. Specifically, analysis of the most common phrases revealed that 96% of patient complaints are related to customer service. Only 4% are about the quality of clinical care or misdiagnoses.

In summary, the study found that fewer than 1 in 20 online complaints cite diagnosis, treatments,

penses, and growing administration demands from healthcare reform?

In the pursuit of thoughtful reflection, let us acknowledge several indisputable facts. Every provider group—including those famous for stellar customer service and earning the best online reviews—has at least an occasional dissatisfied patient. No matter how hard doctors, nurses, and healthcare staffs may try to please, some patients cannot be satisfied.

Every practice wants to avoid a handful of one-and two-star reviews and strive for four-and five-star scores. Further, critical online reviews never seem to go away. In the Internet era, negative comments can go viral and be read by thousands of potential patients.

What is posted on the Internet, regardless of validity, remains on the Internet indefinitely. Unfortunately, a mere handful of negative reviews can ruin a good reputation that has taken years to build.

As evidence, a survey of 500 urologists pointed out the fragility of online reputations. The study concluded that most urologists are rated on at least one physician review website, and while most ratings and reviews are favorable, composite scores typically are based on a small number of reviews and, therefore, can be volatile.⁶

Of course, there are rare cases of unscrupulous doctors posting negative comments about fellow doctors who are competitors in order to put their competition in an unfavorable light. Fortunately, this doesn't happen very often. More encouragingly, one study found most physicians to

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tively rather than reactively. To use a healthcare metaphor, preventing a disease is much easier than curing it.

Research Findings: Patients Want to Like Their Doctors

To learn more about causes of online patient discontent, the researchers for this project developed customized software to analyze Google+ reviews of doctors, group medical practices, clinics, and hospitals across the United States. The software identified 34,748 such reviews nationwide and returned data con-

and outcomes in healthcare as unsatisfactory, whereas more than 19 of 20 unhappy patients say inadequate communications and disorganized operations are what drove them to post harsh reviews.

Addressing Patient Complaints from the Inside

Given the preponderance of complaints about nonmedical issues, how should practices respond? Are patient expectations unrealistic in today's healthcare universe in which there are rarely sufficient resources to shower



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have a very favorable average rating score of 9.3 out of 10 with their patients, and 70% of physicians had perfect scores.⁷

Unfortunately, patients who are pleased with their experience may not be as motivated to post a positive review. Malicious comments often are anonymous, or the writer may use a false name, thus making it impossible for a physician to even attempt a conciliatory personal response. Additionally, there is often no way to verify whether the negative review originates from an actual patient or is the handiwork of a competing physician or even an angry employee.⁸

Regardless, any seasoned manager recognizes that customer feedback has its value. Rather than chafing at unpleasant remarks, medical practices can choose to regard valid complaints as opportunities to improve quality of care. For example, online reviews critical of office personnel and procedures can be helpful if they spur a physician or practice administrator to pay more attention to office

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performance, thus producing happier patients who will write more positive reviews in the future.

Forming an Effective Long-Term Online Reputation Management Plan

Of course, a revised focus on customer service won't make all complaints and negative reviews disappear. Nor will it necessarily earn an explosive upswing in online praise. Improving online reputation requires a proactive rather than a reactive strategy.

The first step in maintaining your online reputation is to monitor online reviews as they appear. The cheapest (free) way to know when someone has posted a review of any kind is to go to the most popular half-dozen rate-your-doctor websites (listed earlier) and claim the practice's identity. Claiming an identity is usually simple, starting with a click on a link labeled "Is this business you?" or similar and then following the prompts.

A supplementary (and also free) technique is to set up Google alerts (www.google.com/alerts), in which Google software scours the Internet for mentions of any set of words and sends messages whenever those words appear on websites. A third free-of-charge technique is to periodically do a Google search for a doctor's name or the name of the practice (at least once a month) and then follow the resulting links to review sites and read the comments.

With these tools in hand, once a practice has claimed its identity on the ratings websites, it can respond to bad reviews directly on the site. This does not violate privacy laws if you do not mention the patient's name or provide

details identifying the patient. You can explain policies of your practice without confirming or denying that the dissatisfied reviewer was or is a patient. It is imperative that you not discuss specifics of any patient's condition.

If you feel the online review is unjustified, you can dispute it with the review site. Review sites may take into consideration that a patient is ranting and occasionally will remove the unfavorable comment, but this seldom is an effective method of managing a negative review. In the meantime, there is no need to wait for a bad review to show up before soliciting positive reviews. As large and unwieldy as the Internet is, healthcare professionals have considerable influence online through asking for and monitoring feedback from patients and responding to that feedback.^{9,10}

This does require setting up an in-house system to continually request feedback and testimonials from patients. And this is where most practices fail—they have no system in place. It can be as simple as motivating all providers and staff to brainstorm ways of obtaining reviews and testimonials from patients. Some practices do this by contacting patients who've sent thank-you notes and holiday cards in gratitude for their treatment. Others also use online patient satisfaction surveys to ferret out grateful patients and ask for their public comments.

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Some physicians are comfortable asking for both online and other feedback at the end of appointments. Dr. Baum, for example, frequently receives a compliment, and this is a trigger to request patients do an online survey of their experience with the practice while they are in the exam room. This request takes about three to five minutes, and it is possible to achieve three to five positive reviews every day.

Additionally, it is becoming more common for practices to place counter cards in clinics asking for patients to follow them on social media and to post reviews there. Of course, this approach invites complaints as well as compliments; however, if customer service is a priority, odds are good that more if not most comments will be positive.

In any case, online reviews are becoming a force that virtually no provider group can ignore. Dr. Robert Wachter, Chairman of the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, points out in the foreword to the book *Establishing, Managing, and Protecting Your Online Reputation*:¹¹ “Whether we like it or not, our online reputation is becoming the main prism through which we will be known—to colleagues, to friends, to patients, to prospective employers... With this realization comes the recognition that

we can no longer afford to be passive observers of our online persona.”

Bottom Line

A doctor or practice’s reputation is one of the most important possessions that he or she can have. We spend our whole lives polishing and protecting our reputations. Now we have to protect our digital reputation as well. This article provides you with the action steps you need to take to keep your star(s) shining brightly. **PM**

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