



Generate Appointments and Build Trust with an Online Review Plan

It's essential that practices develop a proactive approach to cultivating authentic online reviews.

BY JIM MCDANNALD, DPM

The internet is changing the way patients research and make decisions about their foot and ankle care. Appointments generated from Google searches are multiplying and are now as commonplace as physician referrals. Practices that develop a proactive approach to cultivating authentic reviews increase their online visibility and book additional appointments.

Online reviews have become popular because they provide a straightforward way for patients to discover and receive excellent care. Reviews can positively impact a clinic's bottom line as they pass trust from one satisfied patient to many prospective patients. Google, HealthGrades, Vitals, etc., provide the opportunity for patients to share their experiences and describe the quality of care received. Patient reviews can also provide additional visibility in search engines like Google. When written reviews include essential keywords related to the care you

provide, these sentences or paragraphs may help boost your local rankings in Google and provide you with a competitive edge.

Online reviews also provide valuable feedback. You learn about the clinic and the care experience you

This article will walk you through the best practices to follow when developing and implementing an online review plan for your clinic.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask

If you don't ask for online reviews,

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provide from a different perspective. It's an opportunity to gain more precise insights into how patients honestly feel about your care. And a chance for them to share positive "digital word of mouth". Of course, you'll receive both positive and negative reviews. It's unlikely that 100% of patients will be satisfied. However, there are ways to increase the likelihood of patients sharing positive reviews and experiences.

you're unlikely to get many. Yes, a tiny trickle will happen with no effort, but you're unlikely to gather enough to stand out in the search results. And while we didn't take Requesting Reviews 101 in podiatry school or residency, learning how is simple and helpful to patients. Yes, *helpful to patients*. Patients today want a voice and are happy to share with others when they receive excellent care.

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I don't suggest asking a patient after their first visit. But later on, if they're satisfied with your care, they'll likely be more than happy to spread the word about you and your clinic. Asking for permission at the right time will produce better results. For example, after you identify someone as a good candidate for a review, you could pass that information to your front desk staff via EMR or note. It's essential you (or your staff) ask the patient's permission. No one wants to be put on the spot or receive another spam text message or email.

A request could be: "Mrs. Jones, we greatly appreciate you seeking care at Talus Podiatry. Would you like to help other local patients learn about us by leaving a Google Review?" Suppose she says "yes," great. Send her a text or email request later that day. If "no," let her know it's not a problem and continue with check-out. It's all about giving them the option and asking in a kind, non-pushy manner.

Make It Simple

The key to increasing the number and quality of online reviews is to make them simple for patients to complete. The more steps required (e.g., a card with a QR code or a verbal request to "go leave a review from the link on our website,"), the more likely they'll drop off. The review will be forgotten once they leave your office and jump back into their busy day. The easier the process, the higher likelihood of patients following through with a testimonial.

After asking for a review, use a system integrated into your EMR or standalone software, like *GatherUp*, to send them the request. An email or text later that day is best. The message should include a link to Google Reviews (or your preferred review website) and ask them to leave feedback about their experience at your clinic. Some clinics hand out cards or pamphlets with links or QR codes. While this is better than leaving things to chance, those will end up in the trash. So instead of piling

one more thing on your clinic's front desk, go the text or email route.

Personalize, Don't Automate

Which method do you think patients would prefer and has the potential to generate more authentic written reviews:

A front desk staff member saying: "Hi, Mrs. Jones, we appreciate you trusting us for your foot and ankle care.

it's best to check first before getting too worked up. If they are indeed a patient of your clinic, you should always reach out to them privately. Don't ask them to take it down, as this will likely put them on the defensive. Maybe you know why they are unhappy, but it can still be good to get them on the phone, ask them some open-ended questions, and listen.

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Online reviews help others learn about our clinic. Would you be willing to share your experiences in a Google Review?"

or

A generic automated review request email with a logo is sent to Mrs. Jones' inbox without permission.

The goal of developing an online review plan is not to have 1,000 5-star reviews for your clinic. The motivating factor should be creating a place where established patients can share authentic feedback, and prospective patients can build trust in your expertise. Reviews provide insights into areas your clinic can improve upon, and future patients researching foot and ankle care solutions can discover you. While automated review requests can save a little time and generate a large volume of star ratings, you won't get the same quality of authentic testimonials.

A patient publicly posting sentences or paragraphs about how you are the top foot and ankle expert is golden. You're more likely to get these high-quality patient testimonials when a person is asking, not a generic email.

Negative Reviews Are an Opportunity

If you receive a negative review, don't ignore it or leave it sitting unanswered. Before taking action, first, take a deep breath. Find out if the review is from an actual patient. Fake reviews do happen, so

"Mrs. Jones, I'm calling because I read on Google Reviews that you were unhappy with the care you received at Talus Podiatry. How can we work together to find a solution?"

Sometimes, it's just an upset patient venting, and they just want to be heard. But if it's past the point of private resolution, it's essential to reply to the review within 24 hours. And while you may feel like you, your staff, clinic, and reputation are under attack, don't leave an emotional response.

When handled in the right way, a negative review is an opportunity to show your clinic takes patients' concerns seriously and doesn't ignore them. A caring and open response (HIPAA-compliant, of course) that acknowledges the patient and focuses on finding a resolution can sometimes lead to them removing the review. And no, it's improbable that appealing to Google will result in them removing or deleting it. The good news is that a flood of positive ratings and reviews will push down the occasional 1-star.

Negative reviews can provide helpful information about your clinic. Even if the criticism isn't very constructive, this presents an opportunity to figure out what led to this situation and consider implementing changes within your practice to eliminate similar issues in the future. By addressing negative reviews, you

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show patients that you're engaged, responsible, and open to their feedback. Patients want a doctor who can both fix their foot and ankle problems and who cares as well about their overall well-being. Developing a plan to gather patient feedback and address concerns demonstrates empathy and builds trust.

Making Patient Testimonials Visible

Once your online review plan has been running for a while, I recommend sharing patient reviews on your

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website, social media, email newsletter, and online presence. By highlighting these positive experiences, you're providing social proof to prospective patients that you are the local foot and ankle expert. They'll read about the successes of those under your care and desire the same.

Patients trust the words of other patients. Even if your clinic website lists your extensive training and education, it can still ring hollow. Patients want to see proof or examples of you helping people like them. Sharing how your foot and ankle care has made a difference in the lives of those under your care is compelling to future patients.

Wrap-Up

As referral patterns are disrupted, online reviews provide a valuable opportunity for foot and ankle clinics. Developing an online review plan can positively impact a practice, passing trust from a single satisfied patient to many prospective patients. Along with helping patients receive excellent foot and ankle care, honest feedback helps clinics and podiatrists improve the patient experience.

Getting started might seem daunting, but patients are happy to spread "digital word of mouth" about your clinic when they receive excellent care. But don't leave it to chance—a caring, proactive approach to online reviews benefits both practices and patients. **PM**



Dr. McDannald is the founder of Podiatry Growth (www.podiatrygrowth.com), where he provides advisory services to help podiatrists stand out online and grow their practices. He is a graduate of Scholl College, completed a three-year surgical residency at Portland Legacy Kaiser, and has practiced in both the US and Canada.