



BY ANDREA LINNE

**“R**ecently, a patient called my office to make an appointment because he had a running injury,” says Andrew J. Schneider, DPM, who has a private practice in Houston. “He couldn’t get a timely appointment, so he posted a negative review on Facebook. I have an



Dr. Schneider

app that alerts me and a marketer in my office whenever a review is posted on Google, Facebook, or Yelp. When I saw the review, my office contacted the patient and rectified the situation. He was injured while training for an event, which I consider an emergency. I also reminded my office staff

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members of our policy.”

Increasingly, prospective patients trust the opinions of strangers who leave reviews on Google, Facebook, Yelp, and other platforms. Online reviews can make or break your practice. Consider these statistics:

- Based on survey responses from 1,221 people nationwide, the “2023 Patient Perspective Report” from Tebra found that three in four people search online for information about healthcare providers.<sup>1</sup>
- The “5 Healthcare Trends for 2022” report, compiled by *YouGov for Reputation*, included responses from

more than 1,000 consumers between ages 27 and 64. The survey revealed that 72 percent of U.S. adults read online ratings and reviews when considering a new healthcare provider. In addition, 72 percent of healthcare consumers want the provider they choose to be rated four out of 5 stars or higher.<sup>2</sup>

- The “2021 Consumer Experience Trends in Healthcare” report from *Press Ganey* included survey responses from some 1,140 adult patients. It found that 84 percent of respondents said they would not visit a

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clinician who had fewer than four stars and that patients rely on digital resources 2.2 times more than provider referrals when choosing a healthcare provider. The report also found that, on average, consumers use three websites during their healthcare research process and read 5.5 reviews before making a decision.<sup>3</sup>

Reputation management is the process of monitoring how consumers view your practice. “Reputation management is not on the top of mind of most podiatrists until they get a negative review,” says Dr. Schneider, who is also president of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management. “But it should be. We’re all human and eventually everyone is going to get a bad review. Patients who had a bad experience are the loudest.”



Randy Rosler

“Many consumers tend to believe reviews written by strangers, even though there’s no way to verify their accuracy,” says Randy Rosler, national director for Podiatry Content Connection. “The most common reasons for negative reviews are emotions, insurance, late appointments, and rude staff. Typically, bad reviews are not about the doctor.” Dr. Schneider agrees that most often

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complaints are not about the care the patient received but about financials or a team member. “Many patients don’t understand their insurance deductible and will comment in reviews about having to pay,” he says. “I consider reviews as a way to see how my practice is doing and, at times, as an opportunity to retrain staff members.”

Podiatrists should pay close attention to patient reviews and take action to manage their online reputation. “I coach many podiatrists nationwide,” says Cindy Pezza, PMAC, president and CEO of Pinnacle Practice Achievement.



Cindy Pezza

“With older practices, there is normally a mix of referral sources from providers, patients, community and online, while newer practices see a much higher volume of patients who found them through a Google search. In both cases, new patient conversion is heavily influenced by reviews. Most patients who find doctors online make—or don’t make—appointments because of reviews.”

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“Reputation management is a marketing issue,” says Tina Del Buono, a director and consultant at the Top Practices Practice Management Institute. “Online reviews are a lifeline for many practices. Make sure patients have had a good experience when they walk out your door.”



“I think anybody with a business, and medicine these days is definitely

Tina Del Buono

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Dr. Mirkin

a business, is aware of the need for reputation management,” says Gene Mirkin, DPM, president of Foot and Ankle Specialists of the Mid-Atlantic. “Our group now has over 200 providers. Our younger doctors, trying to build their practices, are the ones who pay the most attention to maintaining positive online reviews with great concern about negative comments.

Our more established doctors seem to be less concerned, noting that their years of practice have generated more goodwill that will eventually outnumber any negative reviews.”

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### **Ask for and Monitor Reviews**

“Everyone should hire a company to manage their reviews,” Rosler says. “Most podiatry offices are overwhelmed and overworked. Some management systems are not automatic, and staff members don’t have time to send a link requesting reviews. Outsource and delegate and stick to your specialty.”

“Make it easy for patients to post reviews,” Dr. Schneider says. “I use a service called Swell that integrates with my practice management software and sends

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a text or email to patients thanking them for coming to the office and asking them to please leave a review. Some VOIP phone companies, such as Weave, will also have it as an option. Most important, it provides a link to Google or wherever you'd like the patient to post their review. If there's a patient who I think has a negative experience, I can opt out from sending them a review request. I think reputation management firms are expensive and no better than available apps."

"It's important to have recent reviews," Pezza says. "Personally, when I see any business with only five-star reviews, I tend to think it's rigged, and the reviews have been bought or posted by family and friends. If you have a busy practice with a high number of reviews, it's more realistic to have a 4.8 or 4.9 rating. No matter how good you are, at some point there will always

be an unavoidable billing or wait time issue resulting in a dissatisfied patient.

Many podiatrists are reluctant to ask patients for reviews, but if you make it easy by sending a text or email link and telling them how much you'd appreciate their help, they most often do it." Pezza recom-

mends that podiatrists hire a firm to monitor their social media. "Most practices are too busy to have a staff member do this," she says. "It's important to choose a marketing firm that understands podiatry. The marketing firm should also do reputation management because they're related, and it is often more cost-effective than hiring separate companies. Online marketing efforts take time to show a return on investment, so when choosing a marketing firm for the first time or changing to a new one, ask to speak with other podiatry practices that have been using their services for more than three months."

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"We always ask patients how things were so we can address any possible issue before they post a negative review," says Del Buono, who also manages the practice of John Hollander, DPM, in Santa Rosa, CA, to whom she is married. "We have software that sends patients a text that asks for a review. When we see a positive online review, we put a note in the patient's record so we can thank them at their next appointment."

## Reputation Management: Key Takeaways

- **Pay attention to online reviews.** A head-in-the-sand approach could be harming your practice. Consider setting up an alert when a review is posted.
- **Streamline a process for requesting and collecting reviews.** Use a text or email link to make it easy for patients.
- **Acknowledge positive reviews.** Make a note of patients' comments in their file so you can thank them at the next visit.
- **Use legitimate patient reviews.** Prospective patients will be wary of practices with all five-star reviews compiled from family and friends.
- **Ask patients how things were before they leave your office.** This way, you can address an issue before they post a negative review.
- **Respond immediately to negative reviews.** Find the source of the issue and fix or address it, if possible.
- **Don't respond defensively or argumentatively online.** Apologize online, then take the conversation offline (phone call or email, for example) to address the problem.
- **Never delete a negative review.** Instead, focus on increasing the number of positive reviews.
- **See if the reviews indicate a staff issue.** If so, address it immediately to avoid further negative reviews. This may be an opportunity to retrain.
- **Consider outsourcing your reputation management.** You might consider having a single firm do both reputation management and online marketing. **PM**

*Edited by Stephanie Kloos Donoghue*

### **Manage Negative Reviews**

The best way to deal with a negative review is to bury it with positive reviews. "You can't delete the review," Rosler says. "If a reputation management firm says they can delete the review, run for the hills. But don't call all your friends and relatives and ask them to write reviews. They must be legitimate reviews. All five-star reviews won't be believable. The sweet spot for ratings is 4.6 to 4.8."

"Do not respond to a negative review by being defensive or getting into an online argument," Pezza says. "Instead, apologize briefly and let the patient know that someone from the office will reach out. If you don't respond or attempt to communicate in order to resolve the issue, it will look like you don't care. If a patient seems unhappy or upset, try to address their concerns before they leave the office. If a patient bought a cash product they didn't like, consider giving them a credit so they don't go online and complain. Doctors and staff members

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# The Economic Impact of Bad Reviews

By Stephanie Kloos Donoghue

According to a recent *Podiatry Management* Quick Poll, more than one-third (35 percent) of the 574 doctors surveyed said they “never” check their online reviews. Forty-five percent said they check them “occasionally”, while only 19 percent said they check them “frequently”.

Are there costs associated to ignoring what people are saying about your business online? Yes, according to the bulk of research on five-star reviews in the retail and service sectors. One study from Review Control Center put that loss at \$750-\$3,000 per bad review. If you look at the impact on medical practices, the costs could be much higher. Consider the following:

- 1) **Bad reviews can cost you patients.** While very low star ratings are a red flag, detailed descriptions of bad experiences can be particularly damaging. It’s likely this negative experience will be described to friends and family as well, which could impact your ability to grow your practice—costing you both financially in the near- and long-term.
- 2) **Top job candidates may look elsewhere.** Whether you’re looking for an associate or an assistant, bad reviews may steer potential hires away from your practice. A report in *Harvard Business Review* indicated that a bad reputation can cost a company at least 10 percent more per hire.
- 3) **Current staff members may question their choice to stay at the practice.** Angry patient reviews may uncover issues that aren’t readily apparent to every staff member. If employees hear repeatedly about problems that are not being addressed, they may not stay. Now you have the added costs for hiring and training someone new.

Note that fake reviews could soon cost you as well. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has proposed a new rule to that would prohibit selling or obtaining fake consumer reviews and testimonials. The FTC is also looking to prohibit businesses from providing compensation for reviews. In its explanation for the need for the ruling, the FTC news release indicated that “the widespread emergence of generative AI...is likely to make it easier for bad actors to write fake reviews,” and the FTC is looking to “level the playing field for honest companies.” **PM**

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are often remiss in apologizing in order to placate patients, but when thinking of the big picture ‘I’m sorry’ goes a long way.”

“When you see a negative review, you can usually figure out who wrote it,” Dr. Schneider says. “It’s smart to respond and say you’re sorry and we’ll be in touch. But be careful not to publicly divulge any medical information, such as ‘I’m sorry about your pain.’” Sometimes, a negative review comes from a disgruntled employee. And some reputation managers will post negative reviews about competitors to build up their clients. It’s a good idea to have 25 patients in mind who you can ask for a positive review if you need to bury a negative review.”

“If a poor review is given online, the entire office needs to think about how that could have been prevented and what staff members could have done to improve the patient experience,” Del Buono says. “Of course, sometimes a patient has

a different expectation and complains. When that happens, thank them for their feedback and ask them to call the office to resolve their issue. When other people see that the office responded to a negative review, it tones it down. With new patients, you can avoid possible problems and negative reviews by getting as much information as possible on the phone before their appointment. It should be a standard protocol to ask about a patient’s health issue and to clarify their insurance coverage and co-pay, but at many offices it is not.”

“Podiatrists must be aware of their online reviews so they can control their reputation,” Dr. Schneider says. “It’s also a smart marketing strategy because it enables you to make a good first impression on prospective patients. Patients who find me from online reviews usually mention it at the end of their visit. I say, ‘I hope I’ve lived up to my reviews and I hope you can add yours’ and often they do. You must be aware

and in control of your online reputation. If you’re not in control, someone else will be.” **PM**

References

<sup>1</sup> Tebra. 4 ways patients find doctors online. <https://www.tebra.com/blog/4-places-patients-find-doctors-online>

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<sup>3</sup> The digital experience is the key driver of growth and patient retention, according to Press Ganey’s 2021 Consumer Report, <https://www.pressganey.com/news/the-digital-experience-is-the-key-driver-of-growth-and-patient-retention-according-to-press-ganey-2021-consumer-report>

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