



Negative Online Reviews Are Inevitable. Here's How to Manage Reviews Appropriately and Effectively.

Regardless of the amount of time, attention and empathy you show every patient in your practice, one or two will leave an appointment dissatisfied, even disgruntled. Sometimes that dissatisfaction may have nothing to do with your care, perhaps it was due to a bad experience with an office staff member or a dispute with their own health insurance company.

But thanks to the hundreds of consumer review sites available on the Internet -- not to mention Facebook where a negative review is seen by the patient's friends and family -- that patient can easily vent their dissatisfaction with your practice in a place for the world to see. These online reviews should not be ignored. Here's why:

93% of consumers used the Internet to find a local business last year

87% of consumers read online reviews for local businesses

71% of patients use online reviews as the very first step to finding a new doctor

Healthcare industry ranks 3rd in most-read online reviews, behind restaurants and hotels

66% of patients feel it's at least "moderately important" for providers to respond publicly to online reviews



When the criticism is based on erroneous information or it is dishonest, or if you feel the patient's assessment is unfair, it is quite normal to feel anger or frustration. You may even be tempted to refute the statements with a forcefully worded reply. Publicly responding to negative reviews, however, can be fraught with complications, especially since the patient's friends and family will likely read your responses. In some cases, not responding is the right option. Most of the time, however, an earnest and empathic response is justified.

More specifically here are the **"DO's"** and **"DON'Ts"** for responding to a negative review of your practice or care.



DO:

Apologize. Even if you feel the criticism is unfair, post a genuine apology to the patient about their experience demonstrating empathy. This alone will often disarm a lot of criticism and it reflects well on public perception of you.

Focus on the future. Acknowledge your regret that the patient had a bad experience and offer to resolve the issue offline.

Contact the patient offline. If you promise to contact the patient in your comment offline, make sure to do it promptly. Nothing will spark another online complaint faster than if the patient is expecting a phone call from you that never arrives, which can further tarnish your online reputation.

Remove spam and fake patients. Responding to fake patients who you have never cared for is a "don't," (as you'll see below). Other posters may use consumer review comment sections to post spam advertisements about goods and services, such as work-from-home schemes or fat-loss pills. Many consumer review sites enable you, as the business owner, to remove or flag these posts as fraudulent. Likely, these fake patients and spammers will not dispute the fraud flag and those posts will be removed by the site and ignored by real potential patients.

When satisfied patients post positive comments online, be sure to thank them. Doing so will show you are listening, are responsive with your patients, and are making time to build relationships.

Refund, if warranted. If a patient is highly dissatisfied and refuses additional care, contact them directly offline to offer a refund for the services. Keep in mind, in most cases, their frustration is related to their physical pain and is not a reflection of your care. Avoiding a prolonged online dispute through a refund is worth it in the long run.

DON'T

Get into a public argument. Online is not the place to dispute a patient's comments – and definitely not a place to disparage a patient or question their honesty. While you may be completely justified in refuting a patient's claims or questioning the accuracy, the unfortunate reality is it reflects poorly on you and your practice. This negative public perception is amplified if the patient complains that they are still in pain, or worse yet, alleges they were injured due to your care.

Respond directly to any reference of lawsuits or malpractice. Often a patient is just venting when they threaten to sue online -- but **DO NOT** take that chance. Anything you write can and will be used against you by a malpractice plaintiff's attorney. Seek Legal Counsel **BEFORE** responding. Advice from Counsel may change how you respond, if at all.

Violate HIPAA. Similarly, while the patient can post any protected health information (PHI) about themselves online, you, as a "covered entity" under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), do not have that right. Keep responses focused on the patient's experience and do not get into specifics of their condition or other health matters.

Respond to trolls or fake patients. For whatever reason, some people out in cyberspace just want to post negative comments online, even if they live in other states or countries and have no knowledge of you or your practice. As stated above, these comments can be flagged for fraud and be removed.

Reputation management services can help you monitor online reviews and alert you to positive or negative comments that are recently posted. High-traffic sites like Facebook, Google and Yelp are likely ones you can check regularly on your own. Whatever your reputation management strategy is, be consistent, stay empathic and try to turn a patient's negative experience into an opportunity to create a long-term, satisfied patient while working to build credibility and visibility within the online community.