



Is your practice getting good reviews on Yelp? What are patients saying about you on Facebook and Twitter?

It's no secret that consumers are hitting the web in droves to research businesses in their area. According to Google, 73 percent of all online activity is related to local content.¹ But those consumers aren't just looking up your address, they're reading the experiences of your customers and using that feedback to decide if they want to join them.

Your online reputation is a critically important aspect of your practice's brand identity. By paying attention to what your patients say about you on social media and participating when and where it's appropriate, you can help ensure your practice is fairly and positively represented online.

Here are three ways to start monitoring your practice's online reputation, and a few tips on how to participate.

"Claim" Your Online Business Listings

Web portals such as Yelp and Google+ Local are highly popular starting points for consumers searching for local businesses. Presence on these sites is every bit as important as your Facebook and Twitter profiles. But without a complete, accurate and up-to-date listing, you'll miss attracting the attention of many potential patients.

Your first step is to verify that you represent your business and are authorized to manage the listed information. Sites like Yelp and Google+ will send a code to a phone number or address they have on file, usually collected from another directory listing or perhaps your website.

Once you've claimed and verified your listings on these sites, you can create brand-consistent profiles and monitor them to see what patients are saying. Enter complete company information – name, address, key personnel, etc. – making sure to keep every detail consistent.

1. Markowitz, Eric. "How to Market Your Business Using Google Places." *Inc.com*. July 2011.

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You'll get a few SEO benefits from claiming these profiles. Verified listings on Google properties (e.g. Google+ Local) get better exposure in Google's search engines. Additionally, once you have standardized listings for all of your local site profiles, search engines will recognize that these profiles refer to the same business and group them together in search results, increasing your search-engine visibility.

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Monitor Online Conversations Relevant to Your Practice

The only way to find out what patients are saying about your practice online is to listen – on Yelp, Facebook, Twitter and any other online communities in which your patients spend time.

Monitoring social media conversations about your practice will allow you to:

1. Assess patient satisfaction.

People are often more forthright online than in person. Listening to your patients' online conversations – reviews, comments, tweets, etc. – will give you a good sense of what they love, or don't love, about your practice.

2. Initiate meaningful improvements to your practice.

Not every two-star Yelp review will be actionable, but often-times you can use negative online patient feedback to start a discussion at your practice about something that can be improved. For every person who complains online, many more could complain but don't. So resist the urge to dismiss a sole negative commenter as "just one person."

Respond Appropriately to Both Positive and Negative Patient Comments

A huge part of managing your online reputation involves swiftly and effectively responding to negative reviews, posts and comments as appropriate. Failure to acknowledge online feedback is a huge turn-off for both current and potential patients. One study by RightNow found that 50 percent of consumers

only give brands a week to respond to their questions on social media before they stop doing business with them.²

An improper response can be even worse than no response at all. Actions such as deleting negative feedback or engaging in ad hominem attacks can just about kill your practice's reputation, online and offline.

Here are a few quick tips for responding to negative customer feedback online:

1. Be authentic and compassionate.

How you respond is as important as whether you respond in the first place. Once you've determined that a patient's online complaint has merit, own up to it, apologize, and, if necessary, outline what you will do to make things right. Compassion and courtesy are vital to maintaining a positive online reputation. Don't get defensive or quibble over details. On the other hand...

2. Correct incorrect information, politely.

Misinformation can hurt your online reputation, too. If a review or comment contains information that you can verify is wrong, gently correct that person.

3. Resolve the issue in private, if possible.

Some minor issues can be resolved in an online forum, but often you'll want to direct patients to a special e-mail address (e.g. customerservice@yourdentalpractice.com) you can use to privately correspond with them. Transparency is important, but it's unnecessary to go through the whole conflict resolution process while all of your fans or followers watch. Starting an e-mail or phone correspondence will also let the patient know you're taking his or her complaint seriously. Once the complaint has been resolved, be sure to circle back to the original post and let everyone else know what has been done.

The good news is your patients don't expect perfection. A simple acknowledgement of a concern, or a quick "Thank you!" to a positive comment lets your patients know you're listening and you care.

Whether you're aware of it, your patients are talking about your practice online. Observing these conversations, and joining in when necessary, will help you strengthen patient goodwill, defuse customer-service problems and keep your online reputation as pristine as a set of well-maintained teeth. ■



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Diana P. Friedman is president and chief executive officer of Sesame Communications. She has a 20-year success track record in leading dental innovation and marketing. Throughout her career Diana has served as a recognized practice management consultant, author and speaker. She holds an MA in sociology and an MBA from Arizona State University.

