The rise in popularity and use of social media has brought the ability for the average consumer to seek out and select service providers based on the comments and reviews of others. You can now find ratings and comment sites for everything from plumbers and contractors to runners and yes—even physicians.

With new technology comes new challenges, and that’s especially true for medical practice managers as they look to evolve their practices in innovative ways. Social media channels, physician-rating sites, and other digital communities can directly affect your practice’s online reputation. But where do you start and how do you go about influencing your online reputation?

Some simple no-cost steps to manage your reputation:

1. Assess your reputation
   To manage your online reputation you must know what already exists about you on the Internet. To find out, enter your name in a search engine such as Google. Try out different search queries that you think patients might use and take advantage of the browser’s suggestion tool. Search your name, the names of your partners, and key staff members and see what pops up about them.

2. Create a customer service policy
   Instituting customer service policies and training staff can avoid negative comments and ratings. Don’t ignore patients who appear to be unhappy or dissatisfied. Deal with any issues or misunderstandings before they leave. Develop protocols that address common patient complaints, such as being left on hold, not being able to reach a doctor or nurse, phone calls not returned, and so on.

3. Make sure your website is optimized for search and updated frequently
   A physician’s proprietary website is the most powerful tool in reputation management. It’s one of the first places on the Internet that physicians have total control over the content and message. It’s also the first point of contact for a prospective patient, as well as a common source of information for current patients. Make sure it has updated information and items relevant to your patients.

4. Acquaint yourself with key rating sites
   Educate yourself about popular rating sites. Sites that include physician ratings include those devoted entirely to medical information, such as Healthgrades and Vitals, and broader consumer sites ranging from Yelp and AngiesList to Go2Surgery.com. Some score doctors based on patient surveys, and some allow patients to post comments and reviews.
   Determine which site allows rebuttals and whether the author of the rating has the ability to alter or delete it. Although most rating sites won’t take down a review in response to a complaint from the rated business, there may be procedures for such a request in extreme circumstances—find out what they are.

5. Monitor your doctor ratings/reviews
   Don’t waist time stumbling across a negative review or hear about it from a patient or colleague. Assign someone in your office to regularly check key sites, or have an automated system or alert to let you know when someone is talking about you on a rating site.

6. Reach out to dissatisfied patients
   Occasionally, a negative review will come from a patient who is just impossible to please. More often, though, complaints stem from legitimate problems that have been blown out of proportion by emotion or from a simple miscommunication. Many such issues can be resolved with a simple phone call to the patient or former patient to learn more about the issue and ask what you can do to improve the situation.
   This process may end with the patient revising his negative rating, but don’t stop there. Assess whether or not it is reasonable to ask the patient to review or add to his review to reflect the new situation.

7. BUT, understand that sometimes it’s better to do nothing
   Depending on who made the comment, what was written and how quickly it was removed, it may be best to let an adverse review go. Nothing. Responding online is like adding fuel to the fire engine and will cause the Web page to rank even higher in search results.

8. Be conscious of confidentiality issues and professionalism
   When a site does allow for rebuttal, remember that you’re still bound by privacy laws. And, even where you can legally divulge information, it’s generally not good practice to do so. If you have grounds to request removal of a review according to the terms of the site, by all means do so. But fighting it out with your patient in a public forum will almost always do more harm than good. If you can’t get a review removed and the patient isn’t inclined to edit, delete or supplement it, the best thing you can usually do is to make every effort to dilute it with positive ratings.

Online health information combined with social media channels like Twitter and Facebook has created a new generation of patients. They are empowered. They have a voice in their own care that they never had before. And more are using social media and physician review sites to choose their doctor or medical practice. Given these stakes, you can’t afford to leave your reputation to chance.

"Kevin Pha, MD
National media commentator, author, social media expert and board-certified internal medicine physician

More tips to help manage your practice coming soon:
• How to effectively promote your practice
• Working with reporters and the media

For questions and assistance contact the FSO Communications Office at 904-998-0819.

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