## CHAPTER 6

# ENSURING A POSITIVE ONLINE REPUTATION

On the internet, the influence of user-generated content is growing rapidly. For your medical practice, this means that more and more control of the patient/provider relationship is being claimed by your patients. At no point is the influence of patients more keenly felt than when it comes to online practice reviews and ratings.

Authentic patient reviews and ratings are some of the most compelling marketing content available to practices, as they have the greatest potential to influence new patients, for better or worse. *Online word-of-mouth credibility for your practice is invaluable, and managing your internet reputation is a crucial part of successfully marketing your practice.*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Reputation management involves the solicitation of reviews and ratings from patients after they visit your office, while consistently monitoring your online ratings and reviews on websites like Healthgrades. Many practices today are also monitoring what's being said about them on social media. Reputation management can make patient feedback the heartbeat of your practice and a way to ensure you're providing a high quality patient experience

It used to be that you simply practiced great medicine and patients came through the office doors. In the internet era, *however, your online reputation is your reputation.* Even if a patient is referred to you by another provider or a family member, chances are they're going to check up on you online. If they have been given a few different providers to choose from, what they see about you in online reviews can greatly influence their final decision.

Although less than 10 percent of patients naturally post a rating or review about you or your practice online, unsatisfied patients are the most motivated to complain, according to a survey conducted by the research company Software Advice. This leaves providers who are not proactively soliciting and monitoring reviews with an online presence that doesn't reflect reality. It's your job to ensure that the online incarnation of your

practice seen by potential patients matches the offline experience of patients seen by your practice. Even if you're a great doctor, all it takes is a few angry patients to post negative reviews to tarnish your online reputation.

In 2015, 92 percent of consumers read online reviews to determine the reputation of a business or medical practice, according to BrightLocal's Local Patient Review Survey. Forty percent of those consumers made a judgment call after reading only a few reviews. If the top two or three practice reviews a patient sees are negative, they will be less likely to use the provider in question.

Again, imagine that a patient has been given a few names of providers in the area. The patient then begins to research her options, beginning with a simple Google search of "Dr. Smith dentist." The patient is going to see at least four or five different rating or review website profiles for Dr. Smith. If the star ratings on these sites are low across the board, or if the most recent patient reviews are negative on a particular profile, the patient is likely to come away with an unfavorable opinion of the provider. If that same patient then goes to Google with one of the other names she has, "Dr. Jane Doe dentist," and she sees positive reviews across all of her profiles (and there are plenty of them), the patient is likely to have a favorable opinion of the provider

Who do you think she is going to call or make an appointment with online?

Additionally, search engines like Google give favorable weighting in their local search engine results for practices with a large volume of positive reviews. Up to about fifty total reviews, Google will increase the positioning of your listing in their results for searches related to your practice specialty (i.e. "chiropractor," "best dentist in NYC," "dentist Atlanta," etc.). The more reviews your practice has on its Google My Business profile, the more likely you'll be to appear on the first pages of a potential patient's search related to your practice. Medical practices with

verified Google listings also see patient ratings and reviews in their Google My Business dashboard, and can reply to them.

Remember, it's in Google's best interest to show the highest-rated providers to patients. With Google driving more new patients to practices than any other online channel, it's crucial to recognize the importance of increasing the number of positive reviews of your practice. While ranking the "best provider" may be subjective, and your opinion of online ratings and review websites low, internet reviews are not going away, and there's high return on investment to an ongoing reputation management campaign.

# TOP HEALTH CARE PROVIDER REVIEW AND RATING WEBSITES

As a health care provider, there are several sites you should be aware of when it comes to your professional online reputation.

## HEALTHGRADES

Healthgrades is a website that allows patients to search for medical providers or hospitals to receive care. It's also the largest and most widely used doctor review website – in 2013, Healthgrades was the first stop for 43 percent of patients searching for providers, according to the Software Advice survey.

Health care practices can create free profiles on Healthgrades that patients can search when looking for a provider. After their visit, patients can then rate the provider on Healthgrades and leave a review. When a patient searches for a provider, the provider with the best reviews and ratings is often listed at the top of the search.

Since it's the number one site with patients, Healthgrades can't be ignored.
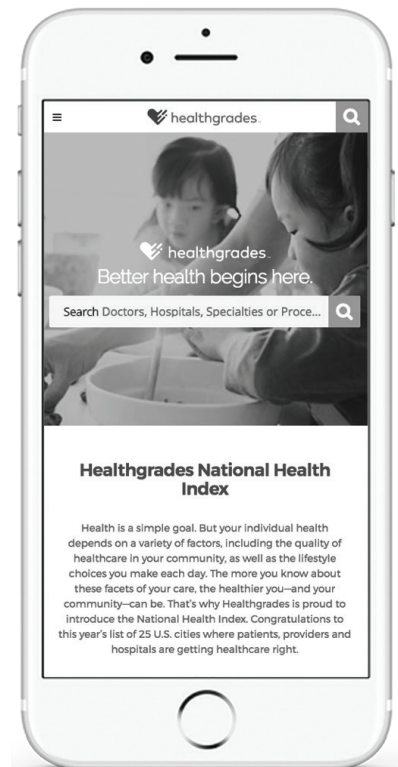
## VITALS

Vitals is the second most popular health care provider review website. Additionally, Software Advice found that almost a fifth of patients who use Vitals do so to search for reviews of a specific medical provider. A major difference between Vitals and other popular websites is that Vitals allows patients to compare the cost of one provider or procedure to other similar options.

Vitals calls itself "the most robust and accurate provider database" and claims that it has 90 million members. With such a large number of users, your Vitals profile is important to monitor.



## RATEMDS

RateMDs is another health care provider review website, similar to Healthgrades and Vitals. On RateMDs, patients can rate a doctor for knowledge, punctuality, staff, and helpfulness, as well as leave reviews based on their experience.

While not as large as Healthgrades or Vitals, about 24 percent of patients in the Software Advice survey said that RateMDs was their most trusted source of physician reviews. This is enough usage to convince any provider of the need to pay attention to his or her practice's profile on RateMDs.

## WEBMD

You've probably already heard of WebMD, the health and medical resource website that gets over 145 million visits per month. WebMD is notorious online, and is often cited by patients as their de facto source for information on their care. What you may not know is that WebMD also has a robust provider directory, which features information about individual physicians.

Given that WebMD is the largest medical and health information website on the internet, it's a no-brainer that you should claim and optimize your profile. The WebMD directory is not just a listing, either – it also features ratings and reviews from patients, making it an important profile and part of your reputation management efforts.

## MD.COM

MD.com has a long history among medical review outlets. It was one of the first doctor review websites, and over the past decade has grown into much more. The site now provides tele-health services for both patients and providers through their own mobile app.

MD.com might have changed its focus over the years, but it has never stopped allowing patients to leave reviews of providers on the website. These reviews may have taken a backseat in the context of the site's recent evolution, but with tens of thousands of existing profiles on their website already, you could be one of them without even knowing it. It's therefore in your best interest to check this site out and claim whatever profiles may exist for your practice.

## GOOGLE MY BUSINESS

Today, when a patient conducts a Google search for your specialty, the results they see are powered in part by Google My Business. This holds true even if a patient searches directly for your name; in that case, Google displays information from your Google My Business profile on the right-hand side of the results page.

Many marketers focus on Google My Business for its SEO value, but

patients can also see reviews left by patients when they search. These include reviews left directly on your Google My Business profile and also aggregated reviews from other websites, such as Facebook and Healthgrades.

Out of all the medical provider review sites, Google My Business reviews may be the most important to manage, as a large majority of patients go to Google first when looking for a provider.

## CAREDASH

CareDash is a new venture, a start-up that's taking a fresh approach to patient reviews as it seeks a seat at the table with behemoths like Healthgrades and Vitals. What sets CareDash apart is its focus on furthering transparency in the review process, working to deliver better insights and data to both patients and providers.



With its emphasis on helping the growing number of patients that value user experience and transparency in health care, CareDash is rapidly becoming a go-to starting point for patients in search of a new provider.
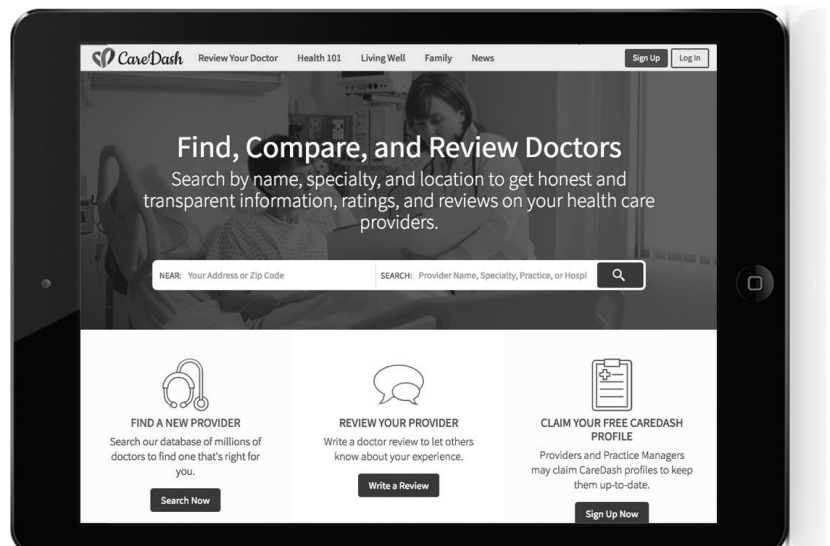
## FACEBOOK

It's important for health care providers to carefully manage and monitor their Facebook pages because, like Google, Facebook reviews are highly visible – after all, most patients will have their own Facebook profiles. Many patients are also starting to send private messages requesting appointments, something that would be missed by a provider not monitoring his or her profile.

Be careful not to use your personal page as your business page on Facebook. Instead, create a page specifically for your practice so patients aren't seeing your personal posts along with your professional content.

## YELP

Last, but certainly not least, there's Yelp.

You know Yelp. You hate Yelp. You love Yelp. You want to Yelp about Yelp.

Yelp, best known for restaurant and retailer reviews, also has a section for health care reviews that is heavily used by patients. Patients leave reviews based on their satisfaction with you as the provider, your staff, and the care they receive. You know, they Yelp. Like Facebook and Google, because Yelp is such a large review website, it's critically important for health care providers to monitor their practices' Yelp profiles.

# HOW TO ENSURE A POSITIVE ONLINE REPUTATION

Ensuring you protect your professional reputation requires a plan. Here's one to get you started:

1. Solicit reviews

The best way to prevent negative reviews from damaging your online reputation is to solicit reviews from all your patients. *By having lots of positive reviews coming in on a regular basis, you can minimize the potential damage done by an occasional negative review.*

While unhappy patients are more likely to organically leave a review online, when asked, happy patients are more than willing to leave reviews as well. In fact, a recent survey stated that 90 percent of people left a review when they were asked to do so.

To solicit reviews, there are several different methods you can employ.

- First, ask for a review in-person at your office. This is the best time to ask for a review, because the care your patients just received is still at the top of their minds. You could have patients either fill out a review on their mobile phones or you could place tablets in convenient locations, so patients can post a review as they leave.

- **Second**, you could ask for ratings and reviews via paper forms that patients fill out, either in the office or at home. This works especially well if your patients are older and don't want to post feedback online.

- **Sending follow-up emails** or text messages after the patient visits your office is another great way to solicit reviews. At the end of the email or text message, include a link for the patient to follow to post a review about their care.

Another option, which we at InboundMD recommend to all practices, is to automate the solicitation of reviews using review software such as RepCheckup. These software solutions solicit reviews from patients via email or text message after their visit, ensuring that every patient gets an opportunity to participate, and removing from you the responsibility of having to verbally request feedback from every patient you see.

It is important to note that review sites attempt to manage fake reviews in many ways, including flagging accounts whose reviews are submitted from the same physical location. Consequently, patient reviews should never be faked by people working at your practice(s), as it's inevitable that they will be removed.
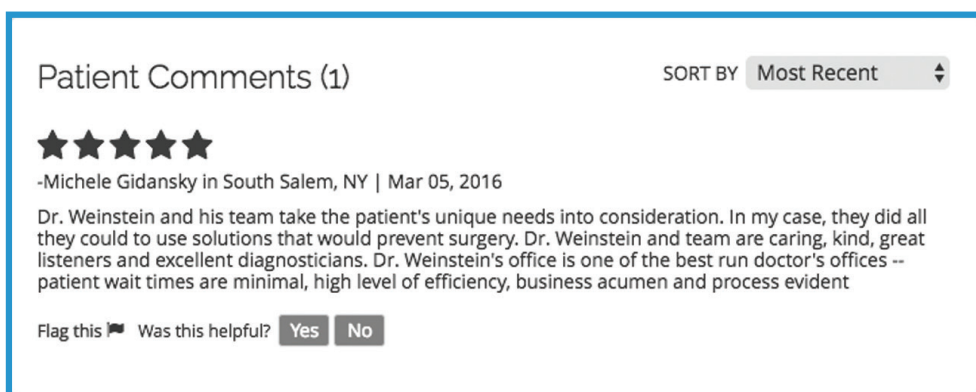


## 2. Implement a rating and review profile monitoring strategy

It's important to keep track of what your patients are saying about you. Combing the internet to find any mention of your name and reviewing multiple profiles can take hours – hours you don't have. That's where reputation management software such as

RepCheckup comes in handy. RepCheckup monitors your profiles on websites such as Facebook, Google, and Healthgrades in real time, alerting you of new reviews as soon as they are posted.

3. Create approved responses to positive and negative reviews
    Monitoring reviews isn't enough to ensure a prolific online reputation. It's also important to recognize patients by responding to both positive and negative reviews. Instead of crafting an individual response to each and every review, create a boilerplate response for positive reviews and another for negative reviews. This makes responding easier, more efficient, and also allows other staff members to post responses for you.

# RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Negative reviews from patients are going to happen, so don't fret when you see one come in. A few patients will get upset no matter how you treat them or blame all their health and insurance-related issues on you. These are the patients that will leave negative reviews, and it's important to respond to them promptly. The goal is to turn these patients' future experiences into positive ones.

In your response, never get upset and never reveal patient health information. The internet is not the place to get into arguments with patients. Keep your response cool and neutral with no inflammatory language. Also, your responses should not include any specifics about the patient or their condition, in order to comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Negative reviews with curse words, those that are clearly irrelevant, or those likely to be fake should be flagged as "inappropriate" and left to the website to rescind.

The best advice we can give in the event of a negative review is to take it offline. Instead of continuing the conversation on the review site, respond to the review with something like:

"We strive to provide the best patient care in all situations. We're sorry to hear about your disappointment and want to help. Please contact us at

1-800-999-9999, so we can discuss your situation and what can be done to improve it, immediately. Thanks, Dr. Aaron Awesome."

Once you address the patient's issue on a one-to-one basis, you will likely turn him or her into a happy, long-term patient, as well as show other viewers how you handled the concern. The patient may then withdraw their negative review, make an amendment to it, or even write a second, positive one.

Remember, the best way to fight the potential for negative reviews is to constantly be receiving new positive ones.



# OTHER USES FOR ONLINE REVIEWS AND RATINGS

Reviews are an important part of your online reputation, but they're also useful for marketing. A potential patient hearing how great you are from either yourself or your staff is one thing – hearing it from other patients is another.

You can use positive patient reviews on your website, as part of social media graphics, and in videos you post online in order to provide "social proof" of your excellence and build trust with new patients.



From reflecting the great offline care your practice provides to improving your search visibility and bringing in new patients, having a positive online reputation is an important component to online success. You may not like subjecting yourself to review, but the positives of implementing a reputation management program far outweigh any negatives.

# REPUTATION MANAGEMENT: ONLINE REVIEWS AND RATINGS CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Audit each practice's search engine and review site listings.
- ☐ Claim each practice's search engine and review site listings.
- ☐ Update each practice's search engine and review site listings.
- ☐ Solicit reviews from your patients, manually at first and eventually through automated software.
- ☐ Continuously monitor each practice's search engine and review site listings for new reviews.
- ☐ Provide review opportunities or links to review websites on each of your practice websites.
- ☐ Implement an in-practice review cue.

   Respond to positive and negative reviews on behalf of each practice.