

In Pursuit of Positive Online Ratings

by David Evans, PhD, MBA



It's a brave new online world, as plastic surgeons and the surgeries they perform increasingly become fodder for online reviews—and not all of them are raves. Physicians, already vulnerable to word-of-mouth and potential malpractice suits, are now reviewed online as often as new restaurants and the latest movies.

Online physician critiques have sired a new industry, as consumers rely more heavily on them to research businesses and business-people. Almost half of all patients who look for health care information online may be looking to reviews to make a decision about a surgeon and surgery, according to Pew Research Strategy.

You have to be in it to win it, to paraphrase Randy Jackson in *American Idol*. Follow our six-step action plan for developing positive online reviews.

1) CHOOSE YOUR PATIENTS CAREFULLY

As many plastic surgeons can attest, there is usually more to the story when a patient unleashes dissatisfaction online, but surgeons are bound from discussing these "extenuating circumstances" due to confidentiality issues.

Perhaps a patient's expectations weren't realistic going in, or perhaps he or she has body dysmorphic disorder. Screening patients thoroughly and engaging in frank discussions about their expectations may help eliminate a potential problem before it starts.

2) LEARN THE LAY OF THE LAND

Yelp is the Number 1 online review site. Consumers place a lot of credibility on Yelp because of how it functions. Yelp encourages consumers to post detailed reviews and does not allow a simple one-click star rating (as Google does).

3) CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES

Some patients may complain about nonconfidential, easily fixable issues, such as office parking, the quality of your staff, or the complexity of your financing plans. The best way to troubleshoot these negative reviews is to post an explanation, including the steps that have been taken to correct the situation.

4) DON'T PROTEST TOO MUCH

The most detrimental reviews are those that deal with cosmetic outcomes. Many plastic surgeons have taken legal action against former patients who have posted damaging negative reviews. A Chicago surgeon sued three patients for \$100,000 each for calling him "dangerous" on Yelp and other review sites (such as Citysearch).

As tempting as it may be, do not take the bait and do not respond online. You will appear defensive

and your words may be taken out of context. Many review sites allow doctors to send private messages to patients. Convince the reviewer to modify her comments. Some review services provide special contracts that allow the doctor to own the copyright for any public statements made, meaning you would have the right to remove any negative comments from the review Web site.

For more about online privacy, see this month's Smart Practices article titled "What You Should and Should Not Say Online."

5) ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE, ELIMINATE THE NEGATIVE

It's simple physics. Two positives overwhelm one negative. Mobilize your satisfied patient base. Find out if happy patients have a Yelp or Google account. If they do, encourage them to post a positive review. Hand out a postcard with simple instructions on how to do this.

Some review programs, such as Demandforce and DoctorBase, offer their own review sites that are Google-friendly. This means that they post reviews on their sites and then Google links them on its "Places" page. The early results have been excellent, and the feedback from surgeons has been predominantly positive, but these specialty review sites are successful only because Google likes them. If Google stops favoring these sites, then their value to your practice will be greatly diminished. Reviews published on these services do not show up on Yelp, so it is best to continue to encourage Yelp reviews.

Publishing patient testimonials and before-and-after pictures on your

In Pursuit of Positive... (Continued)

by David Evans, PhD, MBA

Web site are excellent ways to show your work. Distribute your photos to top plastic surgery directory sites to provide more credibility and branding for your practice and artistry. This third-party presentation can go a long way toward counterbalancing any negative comments, even on Yelp and Google.

6) SET GOOGLE ALERTS

You can't protect yourself or your practice if you don't know what is being said about you. Set up a Google Alert (www.google.com/alerts) to monitor online reviews.

One negative review about a tummy tuck or rhinoplasty surgery can have a big effect on your practice, but implementing these six simple strategies will help manage and protect your online reputation.

David Evans, PhD, MBA, is the CEO of Ceatus Media Group, based in San Diego. A recognized authority on Internet medical marketing strategies, Evans has spoken at meetings of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, European Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery, and the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, among others. He can be reached at devans@ceatus.com or (858) 454-5505.