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Marketing Your Practice

Setting Yourself Apart in a Competitive Market, Online Reputation Building, and Managing Patient Experience/Satisfaction

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KEYWORDS

- Marketing • Branding • Physician branding • Online reputation • Patient experience
- Patient satisfaction • Online reviews

KEY POINTS

- In today's digital age, physicians need to understand how to compete in this new practice climate by successfully marketing online through an updated practice website and social media.
- Actively engaging in online personal branding as a physician can greatly influence how others perceive you and the value they give to your services as a surgeon.
- Optimizing patient satisfaction improves clinical outcomes, reimbursement, patient referrals, and retention. Unsatisfied patients may be effectively managed using the H.E.A.R.T. approach.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, there were far fewer options when it came to marketing a medical practice. Marketing was limited to print, referrals, and word of mouth. For patients, researching a physician practice was limited to recommendations by their friends and their own physicians. It was, therefore, much more difficult for patients to identify the best health care provider for their problem. It was also much more difficult for physicians to target potential patients in a meaningful way or calculate return on investment.

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Now, things are different. It is no longer enough to publish your number in the Yellow Pages, take out an ad in the local newspaper, or send out some mailers and then wait for patients to come to you. Not only is the market more competitive but also patients now have more access to health information at their fingertips. People no longer exclusively obtain their news from newspapers[1] but turn to a plethora of digital resources to research their symptoms, their conditions, and their physicians.

It is commonplace now for prospective patients to investigate their doctors online[2] well in advance of their first visit. This means that physicians need to understand how to compete in this new practice climate by effectively promoting themselves.

SETTING YOURSELF APART IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET

As patients are increasingly turning to a vast array of online sources[3] for health care information, the digital marketplace has become a crowded space with a multitude of platforms and content. Patients are discovering health information (and misinformation) on search engines, blogs, websites, and social media sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, YouTube, and more. It is estimated that there are over 1 billion searches for health-related content on Google[4] every single day. Many of these searches will be potential opportunities for prospective patients to find your practice.

Benefits of an Online Presence

Online information management can improve physician reputation and can bring more patients through a practice's doors, when compared to traditional offline marketing. Some other benefits include,

- Can be more cost-effective. Social media is considered free, other than the time spent creating and interacting on it. There are options to pay for targeted advertising.
- Easier to keep up-to-date. Rather than a lengthy design, review, and print process that can be expensive, time-consuming, and cumbersome to update, an online presence means you can share new information or developments at the touch of a button.
- More sustainable. Reduced print, paper, and recycling costs with an online presence.
- Face-to-face contact can be reduced. Although there is a lot to be said when it comes to in-person patient contact, some conversations, research, and discussions can take place online. Furthermore, health education obtained online can also make office visits more productive, especially if the information was obtained with materials that a medical practice has itself produced.
- Easier to target. Social media in particular makes targeting patients easy. Between hashtags, online searches, and targeted ads, a medical practice can reach patients with more precision than ever. Conversely, a wider reach can be obtained relative to printed marketing materials on this basis.
- Easier to track return on investment. With targeting, analytics, and exact results versus spending, you can really break down what marketing activity is working for you and your practice.
- Build a real-time feedback loop. With the increased focus on reviews[5] that comes with an online presence, a medical practice can get immediate feedback from patients allowing for immediate practice change implementations when and where necessary.

Reputation is no longer confined to professional circles and patients. Many other people including peers you have not met, prospective patients, and media professionals will get to know a practice online well before meeting any of a practice's physicians.

Challenges of Building an Online Presence

One of the biggest challenges for a physician trying to establish a robust online presence is HIPAA and patient confidentiality. How do you share specific, targeted content — image and video-based content at that — without breaching these guidelines?

Patient consent and anonymization is key. Private health information (PHI) should *never* be shared on social media. Even if it is the most interesting case you have ever seen, or you know that your social media audience will love it, you cannot share content that will reveal PHI in text, images, or video, without patient consent.

PHI being private is a well-understood and accepted concept. However, a study that analyzed patient information shared on the hashtag #ShareAStoryInOneTweet estimated that 32% of the stories shared by medical professionals[6] included information that could lead to a patient being identified by a friend or family member. In the same study, it was estimated that 46% of tweets could lead to a patient being able to recognize themselves.

It is also worth being aware of the possibility of negative feedback or harassment online. It is an unfortunate side effect of the digital age, but people tend to think less about an individual person at the end of a message they send. That being said, health care professionals should not avoid useful digital tools because of this risk. In fact, having an active and strong digital presence can actually help you to be in control of your own reputation.

Another challenge is keeping your online presence up-to-date with correct information, fresh content, and relevant information for your audience. As online information is constantly being updated and refreshed, it takes consistent time and effort to maintain your digital reputation. People expect to be able to find information about another person online and are increasingly interpreting a lack of online presence as negative.

There is also the question of whether to interact with commenters, questions, and messages online. Anything that could be construed as medical advice or responses to specific medical questions should be avoided. You may wish to respond to comments that are more generic in nature, especially to build engagement as you grow your presence online.

Online marketing takes time and effort. It is not an instant win unless a significant amount of time and even some money is invested, and even then, it is not a guarantee. The likelihood is that at first, your follower numbers and engagement will remain low. In the beginning, most traffic will solely come from patients visiting your website for more information. Indeed, it may take *years* for significant digital traffic to accumulate beyond this core patient traffic, even with consistent content production (**Figs. 1–3**), and you should not become discouraged with disappointing numbers, especially if you are starting out from scratch.

Active Versus Passive Marketing

In the end, the ultimate goal is for a patient visit to occur. All efforts online and offline should be geared toward this singular goal. Toward that end, all digital social media accounts and offline presences should work together collaboratively to drive traffic toward a medical practice's website. This synergy between online and offline presence can further build reputation and legitimacy in the eyes of potential patients.
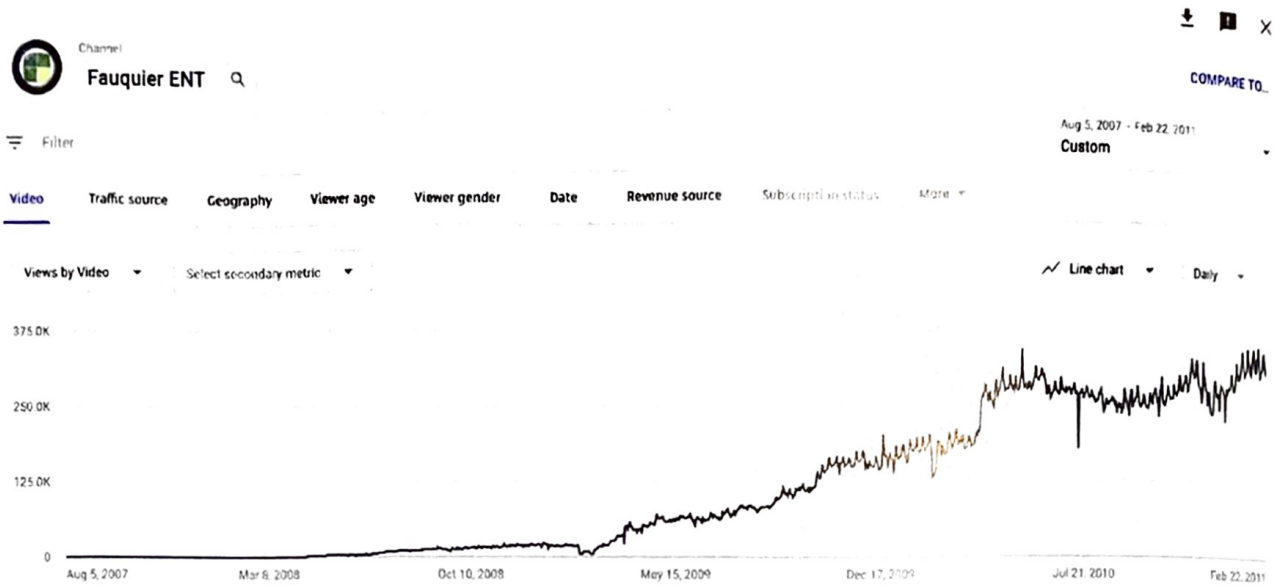
Fig. 1. YouTube traffic for Dr Christopher Chang. (*Courtesy of* Dr. Christopher Chang, MD, Warrenton, Virginia (youtube.com/fauquierent).)

Active versus passive marketing is also something to consider. *Active marketing* is a more upfront way where you broadcast your individual expertise and display it in a way that brings focus to you and your business. It is deliberate, purposeful, and requires effort to tell people why you are the health care professional for them, why they should call you for an appointment, and why you are absolutely the best at what you do. It can feel a little like a hard sell and can turn some patients off although others love it.

Passive marketing is more of an approach where you provide information, guidance, and expertise but let patients make their own decisions on what they do next. It has less of a focus on the individual physician or practice and more of an "if you build it, they will come" ethos. Neither approach is right or wrong, but it is something to consider as you build and grow your online presence. Authenticity is the key thing to create, whether as an active or passive marketer.

Do not forget to regularly measure how you are doing by using robust analytics and checking your statistics frequently. This allows you to see what is working and what is not and then to respond accordingly to optimize further growth.

ONLINE REPUTATION BUILDING
Personal Brand Versus Personal Branding

Whether we like it or not, each of us has a *personal brand.* And your personal brand is your reputation; it is how others view your expertise, personality, values, and
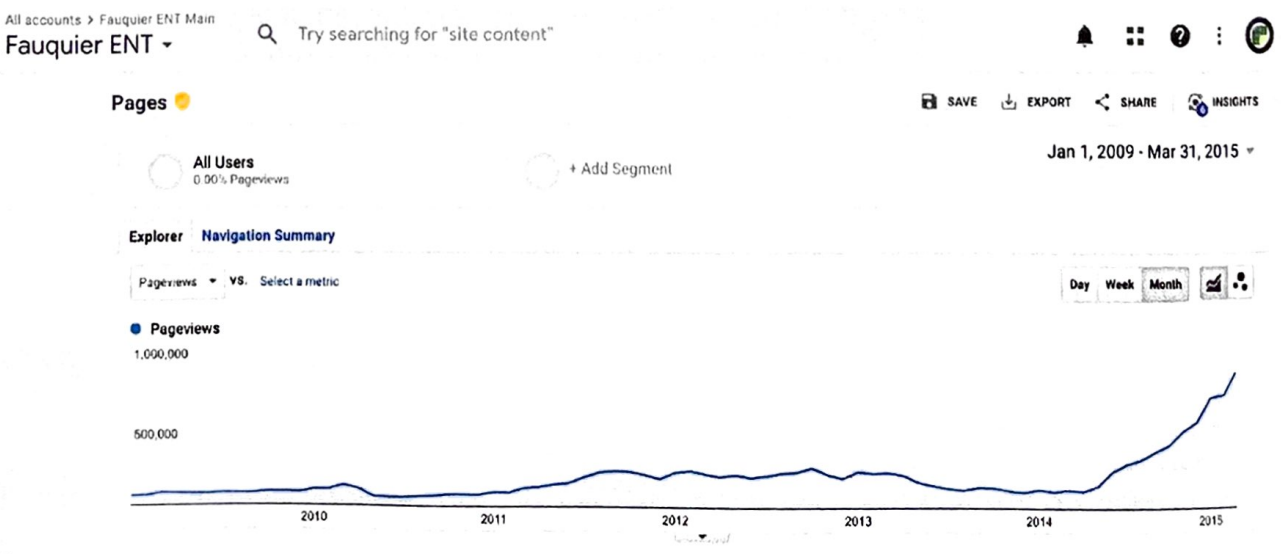

Fig. 2. Practice website traffic for Dr Christopher Chang (fauquierent.net). (*Courtesy of* Dr. Christopher Chang, MD, Warrenton, Virginia (youtube.com/fauquierent).)
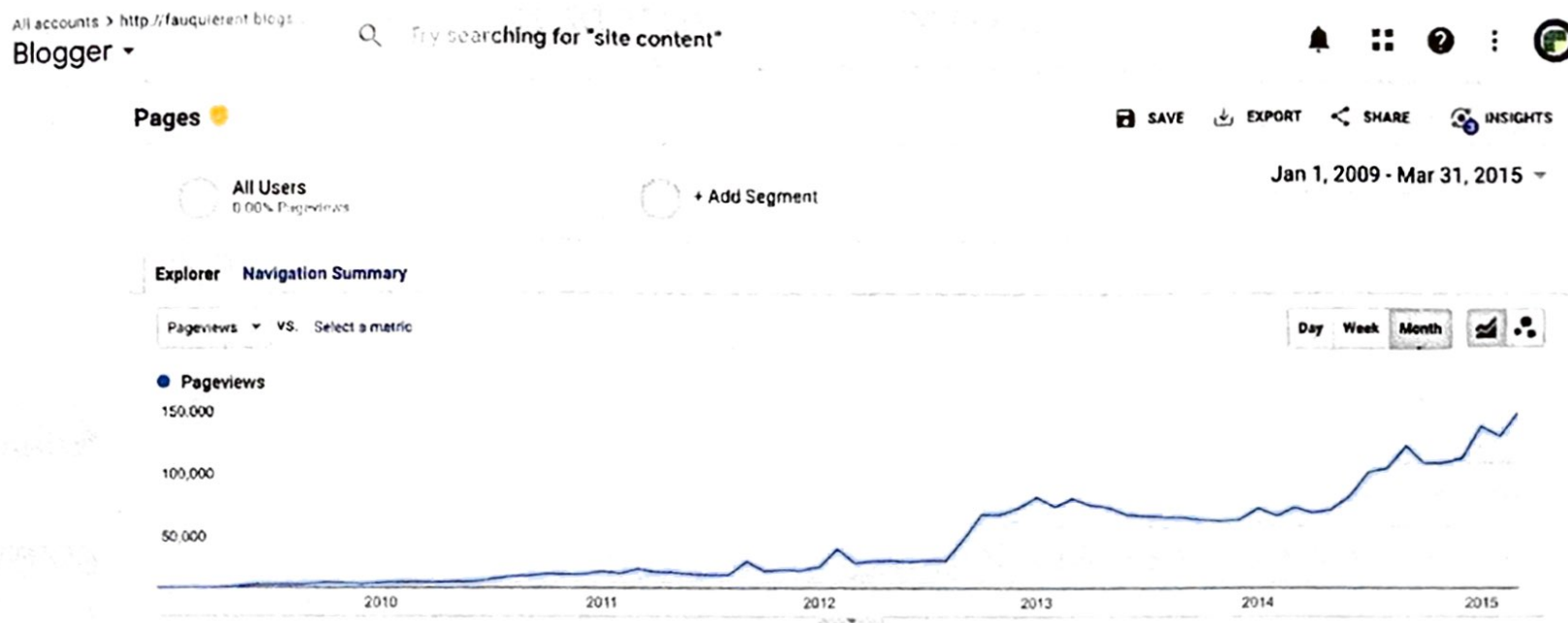
Fig. 3. Blog traffic for Dr Christopher chang (blog.fauquierent.net). (*Courtesy of* Dr. Christopher Chang, MD, Warrenton, Virginia (blog.fauquierent.net).)

mission—what others are thinking or saying about you. This is not to be confused with *personal branding*, which is the strategy used to help build your personal brand—what you are saying about yourself.

The idea of personal branding makes many people, and especially physicians, uncomfortable. But the reality is, in today's digital world, if you do not take control of your personal brand both online and off-line, then you are not only missing out on opportunities but also permitting others to control your narrative.

While you cannot completely control your personal brand (such as what others are saying about you), you can certainly try by actively engaging in personal branding: By purposefully communicating who you are, you can greatly influence how others perceive you and the value they give to your services as a surgeon.[7]

Google Yourself

Seventy-seven percent of adults start looking for health information online on a search engine,[8] so it is prudent to Google yourself and see what this brings up. Most users only view the first page (first ten website links) of Google search results,[9] so the information provided on the first page can highly impact your online reputation and personal brand as a physician.

Unfortunately, most physicians have little to no control over the content that patients and potential patients discover on that first page. This is because for most, the first page of Google search results is dominated by commercially controlled, third-party physician information and rating websites such as Healthgrades and Vitals.[10] For nearly half of otolaryngologists, a ratings website appeared higher on a Google search than their own professional website.[11] As a result, many of us are put in a situation where public opinion is more readily available than physician-curated content.

Physician Rating Websites

When making decisions about health care, people often rely on the advice of others. Physician rating websites (PRWs) such as Healthgrades and Vitals are online platforms where users can check physicians' profiles, ratings, and reviews, in their search for a suitable physician.

Several studies show that most ratings and reviews posted on PRWs are fortunately positive. However, negative comments and ratings can certainly have a direct negative influence on a person's decision to visit a physician.[12]

Factors that have been shown in several studies to be associated with higher ratings on PRWs include younger age, fewer years in practice, increased online presence, and greater number of reviews.[12,13] The potentially modifiable factors are the latter two.

Increased online presence is often seen in younger or less experienced physicians who are more likely to use social media and online marketing than their older or more experienced counterparts. Additionally, PRWs are more popular with younger patients,[14] who may have a better personal connection with physicians of a similar age, leading to higher ratings.[15]

What also matters is the number of user reviews. The sheer number of recommendations that a physician has on his/her profile can influence a user's decisions on whether to visit the physician or not. In other words, users of PRWs are more likely to visit physicians who are positively reviewed by a large number of users.[13]

As physicians, we have very limited control over the information that ultimately gets published on these rating sites. However, one potential strategy is to proactively ask happy patients to leave reviews on these sites (Healthgrades generally occupies a higher rank on Google search results than Vitals) in an effort to not only increase the number of positive user reviews but also dilute out the negative ones as well.

Another way to mitigate negative online reviews goes back to increasing online presence. Physician social media usage has been shown to decrease the Google search position of negative online reviews,[16] and active social media profiles can displace third-party rating websites from appearing on the top of physician Google search results altogether.[17]

The Role of Social Media

In training, you are taught that if you take great care of patients and perform good surgery, then patients will come. While there is truth to this, the traditional methods of practice building such as surgeon pedigree, referrals, and word of mouth are becoming increasingly supplanted by a new paradigm based on social media presence.

Social media is somewhat redefining the concept of physician expertise and online reputation to the lay public. One study found that while the total number of social media followers was associated with Google front page placement for "top 20 plastic surgeons," medical school ranking and years in practice were not.[18]

Patients gravitate online toward surgeons with influence, and that influence is increasingly being defined by (whether we like it or not) likes and followers. And this effect is exponential; the more likes and followers you have, the more easily you will obtain more likes and followers. You can therefore achieve perceived expertise through your social media presence, regardless of your experience.

Social media is a powerful tool for personal branding as a physician. The content that you put out on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and TikTok is fully yours. And this self-curated content can displace third-party rating sites, improve front page Google placement, and most importantly, allow better control of your online reputation.

Pearls and Pitfalls of Online Reputation Building

- Define your purpose. Identify the qualities about you (your expertise, personality, values, and goals) as a physician that you want to showcase online. Then Google yourself to see how your online reputation or personal brand *today* aligns with your purpose.

- Strategize how you want to deliver your content. Assess your strengths to determine how you want to deliver content to your target audience (text, photos, videos, voice, and so forth).
- Get on social media. Start by picking a handle (consider using your name and degree, the crux of your personal brand) and try to own it across all platforms, even ones you do not think you will use. Be thoughtful about your bio. Be consistent in posting valuable content and engage with others in your target audience to grow a following.
- Be authentic without compromising on professionalism. The internet is forever. Before posting anything, ask yourself: "Would my family and friends be okay with it? My boss and work colleagues? My patients?" Check institutional regulations and policies where applicable, and of course, no HIPAA violations.
- Be proactive about online reviews. Ask happy patients to write online reviews (Google, Healthgrades, Vitals, and so forth) to not only improve your online rating (the more positive reviews the better) but also dilute out any negative reviews as well.

MANAGING PATIENT EXPERIENCE/SATISFACTION
Patient Experience Versus Patient Satisfaction

Patient experience and patient satisfaction are often used in an interchangeable fashion, but these terms are not equivalent. *Patient experience* involves the interactions between the patient and a given health care practice or system, including care provided by physicians, nurses, and ancillary staff; the facility; and coordination with insurance plans. It encompasses access to appointments, health information, and communication tools. Respect for patient needs, values, and preferences is included.

With *patient satisfaction,* the important consideration is if the patient's expectations of the delivery of their health care have been met. It is an indicator of how well a patient is being treated in a medical practice, from standpoints of quality of care and from how happy the patient is with the care provided.[19] Expectations can vary considerably between individual patients, which can result in very different perceptions in satisfaction despite patients receiving similar care for similar health problems.[20]

The Price of Patient Satisfaction

The Institute of Medicine, in their influential 2001 "Crossing the Quality Chasm" report, included six aims for the health care system focusing on safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable care.[21] The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, with the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, has linked physician and hospital reimbursement to patient satisfaction. The problem with this valuation of patient satisfaction is that higher patient satisfaction in the inpatient setting is associated with higher health care utilization, more inpatient care, greater use of prescription drugs, and a corresponding increased mortality rate.[22]

The importance that patient satisfaction surveys have been given by payers and employers and the public has led to considerable negative impact among physicians, and this may be a source of burnout. Indeed, in one study among American otolaryngologists, 63.8% found that the monitoring did not result in a positive impact to their practice, and 36.2% believed it resulted in pressure to order unnecessary diagnostic testing or inappropriate prescriptions.[23] Unfortunately, the reality is that clinicians today need to embrace patient satisfaction to succeed in clinical practice.

Elements of Patient Satisfaction

In many cases, the elements of satisfaction mirror the elements of patient-centered care.

Picker.org has identified 8 principles of person-centered care that can be applied to provide consistent care of high quality[24]:

- Fast access to reliable health care advice
- Effective treatment delivered by trusted professionals
- Continuity of care and smooth transitions
- Involvement and support for family and caregivers
- Clear information, communication, and support for self-care
- Involvement in decisions and respect for preferences
- Emotional support, empathy, and respect
- Attention to physical and environmental needs

Although we may not be able to address all these factors with each patient encounter, being cognizant of them can lead to an improved patient experience and, by extension, improved patient satisfaction.

Benefits of Optimizing Patient Satisfaction

There are several reasons why a practice would want to value patient satisfaction[25]:

- Improved clinical outcomes. Patients with higher trust in their health care provider report less symptoms,[26] greater satisfaction with treatment, higher quality of life, and better health behaviors, although it should be reinforced that some outcomes are worse in satisfied patients whose providers may be acquiescing to unnecessary studies and treatments.
- Improved reimbursement. Higher patient satisfaction scores can translate into increased patient volume and additional revenue; conversely, lower patient satisfaction scores are associated with a loss of patient volume and loss of revenue. Providers may charge more for their services if they have excellent patient satisfaction scores without decreasing market share or profit. There is also an inverse correlation between patient satisfaction rates and costly medical malpractice suits.
- Improved patient referrals and retention. Satisfied patients will share their positive experience with others just as unsatisfied patients will share their negative experiences. A positive digital presence will not only attract patients to you but will help prevent establish patients from seeking care elsewhere.

Ways to Improve Patient Satisfaction

Some methods to maximize patient satisfaction and retention are as follows[27]:

- Create and foster an online presence to showcase your brand
- Offer online scheduling and communication
- Provide appointment confirmations and reminders
- Have clinical forms available online to streamline intake
- Be friendly: Clinical and nonclinical staff should all project helpful and positive attitudes at all times, from check-in to check-out
- Ensure inviting, clean, and comfortable facilities
- Minimize wait times where possible
- Spend adequate time with patients; bedside manner counts

- Survey patients after appointments to gauge strengths and areas in need of improvement
- Respond to online feedback promptly

Managing Unsatisfied Patients

In business, the concept of *service recovery* involves the process of restoring customer confidence after a service breakdown occurs. Applying this to medicine means having a strategy in place so that unsatisfied patients feel that their concerns are heard and responded to. All members of the health care team must be engaged to quickly turn a problematic experience into a positive one for a patient.

H.E.A.R.T. is an acronym that is well-suited to addressing patient complaints:

- *Hear.* Allow the patient to talk or vent without interruption. This is a crucial first step. Show compassion with positive body language. Ask questions to clarify any assumptions. This sets the stage for an unsatisfied patient to become more open to solutions your practice offers.
- *Empathize.* Name the patient's emotion, such as frustration or anger, and then validate it as understandable. This helps the patient know that you are trying to understand their perspective and are treating them with respect.
- *Apologize.* A sincere apology for a negative experience can be powerful. This is not an admission of guilt but rather demonstration that you and your practice cares. Avoid shifting blame or becoming defensive.
- *Respond.* Many complaints stem from unmet expectations. Re-establish a new expectation by providing a list of possible options to resolve the problem. Your response should be as immediate as possible, or they should be provided with a timeframe to expect the response.
- *Thank.* Thank the patient for the chance to correct their problem. This solidifies for them that their concerns were valid, addressed, and that they have helped you to improve your process.

Addressing Negative Online Reviews

When dealing with online patient reviews, there is more emotion and more risk involved. Such reviews can be seen by a wide audience of prospective patients and can cloud what other patients perceive of the care you provide, regardless of their basis in fact. Responding to online reviews can be dangerous if violation of patient privacy laws occurs or if the response is viewed as combative or negative.

There is some general guidance on what to do and not to do in responding to bad online reviews[28,29]:

What to do:

- If feasible, respond first offline, by phone or in person, to discuss their concerns. Use the H.E.A.R.T. method mentioned previously. It is possible that this personal contact may lead to the patient revising or removing the review.
- Only respond with general protocols/policies instead of specifically mentioning the reviewer. For example, state that each patient is thoroughly assessed for a given concern and that treatment depends on a patient's individual situation.
- Ensure that your online profile is professional and current on your own website, on search engines, and on health rating websites.
- Remember that most reviews are good, and one bad review may not be as destructive as it feels it will be. Proactively increase your number of positive online reviews by soliciting feedback from happy patients.

- Focus on the reviews found on the most trafficked websites (Google, Healthgrades, Vitals, and so forth).with the largest audiences.
- Be proactive in asking all patients about their experiences up front so that you can hone your office's process of optimizing patient satisfaction.

What not to do:

- Do not immediately respond online to negative reviews. Take time to compose your thoughts to prevent them from seeming angry, threatening, or petty. Never threaten litigation in a public fashion.
- Never disclose that the patient has a relationship with your practice or that they were ever in your office. It is against HIPAA to do so without a patient's expressed permission, and even their review is not considered consent to release anything related to their care.
- Do not hide from online reviews as they are a reality of patient care today.

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The authors have nothing to disclose.

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