

Online Reputation Management for Urologists

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Abstract

Introduction: “It takes 20 years to build a reputation; it can be ruined in just five minutes.” –Warren Buffet

This article will define online reputation management and outline techniques and steps to easily manage and control your online ratings. You do not want to take your reputation for granted. You want to be proactive in protecting your reputation as it is your most valuable asset. After reading this article you will understand the importance of online reputation management, the risk of ignoring this aspect of your reputation, and how every urologist can and should be involved in controlling his/her reputation.

Methods: Medical as well as nonmedical publications were reviewed to identify the importance of online reputations of physicians, and what can be done to protect one’s reputation.

Results: Research indicates that doctors do have control of their online reputations.

Conclusions: As physicians, professionally we can live and die by our reputations. We need to take action to manage our online reputations before negative reviews appear on online review sites.

Key Words: Internet, patient satisfaction, consumer behavior, health care evaluation mechanisms, social networking

It is possible for a urologist to have his/her reputation tarnished by just one patient who has had a negative experience with the practice. The Internet has replaced the Yellow Pages, and patients can easily obtain information about physician practices and services.

Research has emphasized that 61% of American adults look online for health information.¹ At one time or another, every urologist had to deal with a disgruntled patient, and some of these unhappy patients may choose to share their displeasure through an online review.

In today’s Internet savvy world it is necessary to pay attention to how your patients can affect your online reputation. Online reputation management is the art of making your name and your practice look their best on the Internet.

In the *Journal of the American Medical Association* Kuehn reported that 25% of U.S. adults consulted online

physician rating sites, and more than 33% of online viewers went to a physician or avoided one based on the ratings.²

Consumers are now using online rating sites to evaluate physicians. A 2008 Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive poll revealed that 91% of those surveyed would refer to online information about doctors provided by their health plan(s) and 87% expressed interest in providing feedback to health plan sites for physician rating.³

One of the most common urological issues reviewed on the Internet is the treatment of prostate cancer.⁴ A significant number of patients, especially men younger than 65 years with prostate cancer, access the Internet to obtain information on cancer. Smith et al suggest that urologists and radiation oncologists should be familiar with this important resource to help patients access appropriate material.⁴

Materials and Methods

In the Internet era physician exposure is much greater, and negative comments can go viral and be viewed by thousands of potential patients. What is posted on the Internet, including comments from a dissatisfied patient or even another urologist, will remain on the Internet indefinitely. The reality is that just

Submitted for publication July 15, 2014.

No direct or indirect commercial incentive associated with publishing this article.

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a few negative reviews can damage your reputation which has taken years to build.

If patients have a negative experience or are unhappy with their treatment, they may find multiple online review sites and use the Internet to tell the world about their negative experience. Unfortunately, patients who are pleased with their experience rarely bother to place a positive review. Malicious comments are often anonymous or the writer may use a false name, thus making it impossible for the physician to reach out in a personal and conciliatory manner. Additionally, in such cases there is often no way to verify if the review originates from an actual patient, or is the handiwork of a competing physician or an angry employee.⁵

A survey of 500 urologists revealed just how precarious and fragile our online reputations are.⁶ Ellimoottil et al concluded that most urologists are rated on at least 1 physician review website, and while most ratings and reviews are favorable, composite scores are typically based on a small number of reviews and, thus, can be volatile.

Of course, online reviews can be helpful to the practice, which is always trying to improve and provide better quality of care to the patients. For example, online reviews that are critical of office personnel and procedures can be helpful if they spur a physician to pay more attention to office performance, thus producing happier patients who will write more positive reviews in the future. In a German study the authors emphasized that patients may be making decisions to select a physician based on their positive reviews.⁷ Emmert et al showed that 65% of patients surveyed had chosen a particular physician based on positive ratings. The authors concluded that “neither health policy makers nor physicians should underestimate the influence of physician-rating websites.”⁷

It is important to recognize that patients can easily affect your online reputation. There are many review websites where patients can recount their experience with you and your practice, such as www.RateMDs.com, www.vitals.com, www.ZocDoc.com, www.HealthGrades.com, www.ucomparehealth.com, CitySearch.com, Google Plus and www.Yelp.com. These review sites allow patients to rate a physician based on how the staff treated the patient, patient wait time, doctor’s diagnosis, doctor’s attitude, level of trust in the doctor’s decisions, and the treatment and results.

In addition, unscrupulous doctors may post negative comments about their fellow doctors to put the competition in an unfavorable light. Fortunately this does not happen often. Most physicians have a very favorable rating score of 9.3 out of 10 with their patients and 70% of physicians have perfect scores.⁸

Results

How Can You Control Your Online Reputation?

It is incumbent on you to monitor your online reputation. If someone has posted a negative review, if possible you should respond to those comments directly on the review site. This response does not violate privacy laws if you do not mention

the patient’s name or details that identify the patient. You can explain aspects of your practice without confirming or denying that the dissatisfied reviewer was or is a patient. It is imperative that you do not talk about the specifics of any patient’s condition.

If you believe the online review is unjustified, you can dispute it with the review site. Review sites may take into consideration that a patient is ranting and remove the unfavorable comment. You should also monitor your Internet presence by setting up notifications such as Google Alerts™ (www.Google.com/alerts). You or someone on your staff should Google your name or the name of your practice at least once a month, and check all the review sites and read all of the comments. However, this is a reactive solution, and you should consider a proactive approach.

Do not wait for a bad review before starting to solicit positive reviews. Dr. Robert Wachter, Chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, expressed this well when he wrote, “Whether we like it or not, our online reputation is becoming the main prism through which we will be known — to colleagues, to friends, to patients, to prospective employers. ... With this realization comes the recognition that we can no longer afford to be passive observers of our online persona.”⁹

As large and unwieldy as the Internet is, you do have a lot of control with respect to monitoring and controlling feedback from your patients, and what you can do with the feedback you receive. However, this requires you and/or your staff to set up a system to continually request feedback/testimonials from patients.^{10,11} This area is where most urology practices fail. There is no standard system in place to solicit positive reviews. It can be as simple as having a quick meeting with the doctor and staff mentioning that the practice will now obtain testimonials from patients. The 2 places you should have patient reviews posted are on your website and on physician review sites.

Patient Testimonials on Your Website

The best time to obtain patient feedback is immediately, such as when they offer a compliment about the urologist or the staff. The positive experience is still fresh, and they are probably happy with the outcome and more receptive to providing a testimonial. It helps to have a system to follow for placing testimonials on your website.

1. Testimonials should be on the home page of your website and every subsequent page. The comments should be visible to website visitors when they first view the page without having to scroll down the page. A testimonial is worthless if the website visitor does not see it or does not take the time to find it. Figure 1 shows access to testimonials on the home page.
2. Testimonials should be in italics with quotation marks. This formatting highlights the text as a comment and prevents it from blending in with the rest of the text on the website.

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