
The National Society of Dental Practitioners and the Dentist's Advantage Insurance Program for Dentists

RISK MANAGEMENT ARTICLE

Online Reputation Management

The numbers reveal the deep embedding of social media in our society: According to the Pew Research Center, 74 percent of all adults who are online use social networking sites, and seven of 10 internet users have looked online for health information in the past year. The other activity online users are engaging in is posting reviews on consumer sites such as Yelp and Angie's List.

Dentists naturally welcome positive reviews but may be distressed by negative ones. Keep in mind that no business has 100 percent positive reviews. If it did, consumers would be suspicious of the reviewers' veracity.

That does not mean dentists should ignore negative comments. Sometimes no response is the best action, but often responding appropriately can enhance the dentist's reputation. Dentists should have a plan in place to address reviews. First, however, they need to create an online presence so users can easily find them and to provide a forum for generating patient comments that can help grow the practice.

Establishing a brand

The dentist's name and the name of the practice are valuable brands that need to be protected. Protection includes ensuring that the practice's desired messages are promulgated through social media sites. Also, remember that all online websites, documents, and displays of any kind, must follow the advertising and marketing dental laws and regulations of the state where the practice is located.

Dentists can establish a means of communication by creating pages on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Other possible outlets include Google Plus, YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram.

Being active across multiple social media sites not only helps establish a brand, it also can help dilute negative comments with positive ones.

Staking a claim

For review sites such as Yelp that use publically available data to create a page for a business, dentists should "claim" the page. If a page has not been created, the dentist can start one. Claiming a page gives the dentist control, allowing him or her to respond to reviews and to measure visitor activity, but not to delete negative reviews. Having a business page also provides an avenue for dentists to communicate key aspects about their practice and their expertise.

Dentists also should be aware of rating sites that specialize in practitioners such as dentists and physicians. These include no-fee sites that simply offer information to patients about practitioners who are listed, sites that charge users to access additional information about a practitioner, insurance company websites, and government-based websites that provide information about practitioners licensed in a state. Rating websites typically use one of three approaches to establish ratings: a formula to evaluate factors such as credentials and education, feedback from patients, or a combination of the two.

One popular rating site for dentists is Healthgrades (www.healthgrades.com). Users of this site rank dentists by

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completing a survey of criteria ranging from “ease of scheduling urgent appointments” to “level of trust in provider’s decision.” Users are required to note how likely they are to recommend the dentist to family and friends. Healthgrades also factors in practitioner experience.

Dentists can register on Healthgrades to complete their profile and provide general information. They can also upload a professional photo, which may improve response. Dentists who are members of the American Dental Association (ADA) will want to complete their free profile on the “Find an ADA Member Dentist” section of the organization’s website (www.mouthhealthy.org).

Dentists do not have to sit back and wait for reviews. Instead, they can ask patients to post reviews. Easy methods for doing so include posting a link to a review site on the practice’s website and posting a sign in the office.

Using social media responsibly

Dentists often turn to auxiliaries for posting information on social media and responding to comments, so it is important to establish guidelines for what is appropriate—and what is not. Educating auxiliaries about the policy is essential before any posting on social media sites begin. Failure to do so could result in inadvertent posting of confidential information and expose the practice to liability.

Consider including the following elements in the policy:

- Do not post any information about patients or employees. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Guidelines must be followed.
- Do not post any confidential or copyright information. Auxiliaries need to understand that even if an image is online, copyright rules still apply. They must obtain permission from the source before, for example, posting an illustration showing the parts of the tooth. One source for free images is Wikimedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Images>); check to see if there is a note on how to credit the person who provided the image.
- Before posting patient testimonials, obtain signed permission from the patient or the patient’s caregiver or guardian. Even with permission, it is wise to use only the patient’s first name.
- Consider the reputation of the practice before posting any information online.
- Do not share proprietary information about the practice.

Limit the number of people who are authorized to post. In its book *The ADA Practical Guide to Social Media Planning*, second edition, the ADA recommends adding a policy statement to the practice’s social media sites stating that although comments are welcome, the dentist reserves the right to remove inflammatory postings such as expletives or personal attacks.

Monitoring social media

Participating in social media requires monitoring posts made by staff to ensure they are complying with established policy and monitoring posts from the public, including comments on review sites. According to a 2014 survey, more than two-thirds of dentists reported they were “not sure” how many reviews the practice receives a month. Lacking this type of data limits the dentist’s ability to respond to reviews.

To monitor “traffic” about the practice, the dentist can set up a Google Alert (<https://support.google.com/alerts/>)

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answer/4815696?hl=en) for his or her name and the name of the practice. The alert allows the user to customize how often results will be delivered by email (each time new results are found, once a day, or once a week). Be precise by including quotation marks around the name and the name of the practice, and include possible variations. For instance, a company may be named Healthy Smiles of Local City, Inc., but entries may appear under Health Smiles of Local City, without the "Inc." Other tools for monitoring social media mentions of the practice include Hashtagify.me, SocialMention, Tagboard, and TweetBinder. For dentists who desire greater sophistication about what is occurring in social media, other options include Google Analytics and Hootsuite.

Responding to posts

Whether it is positive or negative, not every post on the practice's website or social media site or on review sites requires a response. The ADA recommends considering questions such as:

- Is there any value in responding?
- Do I appear uncaring if I don't respond?
- Is there anything positive I can say?
- Does the person who commented have a large following? (If the person has a limited following it might be best to simply ignore it unless more people start responding.)

The answers to these questions will help with the decision as to whether to respond and, if a response is needed, to craft a thoughtful one (see *Responding to social media reviews*). If a patient's posted question on the dentist's social media page requires a telephone conversation, respond by saying that the dentist will call. Once the call is made, the dentist or auxiliary should note the fact in the comment section so other users can see that the dentist is responsive. This can be as simple as, "I'm glad we were able to talk this morning. Please call if you have any more questions."

In rare cases, a post on a review site may be extremely negative, untrue, and a potential danger to the practice. For example, a poster who claims a dentist's receptionist can be bribed to get better appointment times poses a serious threat to the health of the practice. In this case, the dentist may choose to contact the site directly to have the post removed. Keep in mind that this is extremely difficult to accomplish, since review sites pride themselves on not "laundering" comments.

Depending on the situation, dentists may want to consult an attorney. If the post is from a patient, the dentist may want to reach out and have a telephone conversation to correct misconceptions that may have prompted the negative post.

Responding to social media reviews

Consumers often appreciate when business owners respond to a complaint or acknowledge a positive comment. Responding to favorable reviews lets users know their comments are appreciated. It also provides an opportunity to mention a relevant service. For instance, if a patient mentions he appreciated the dentist coming in an hour earlier than normal to accommodate his shift schedule, the dentist could mention that the office has expanded its hours.

Responding to negative reviews is more challenging. Here are some strategies to keep in mind:

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- **Curtail emotions.** Although the comment might be rude, it is important to take the high road. Remember that the poster may have had a particularly rough day and even be sorry for the post.
- **Respond quickly.** The sooner a dentist or staff member responds to a negative posting, the sooner the response will be available for other users to read. Negative comments spread far faster than positive ones, so quick action is needed to minimize potential damage.
- **Apologize.** Do not underestimate the power of saying, "I'm sorry XXX happened," or, "I'm sorry you experienced such frustration." Apologizing does not mean the poster was right; it is simply a way of acknowledging that the experience was not ideal.
- **Address the issue.** Social media users know when someone is sidestepping the problem. State how the problem is being addressed and be honest if for some reason the issue cannot be rectified or will take time to rectify. For example, if an office is installing a new phone system, it would be appropriate to note that some unexpected problems arose that are being addressed.
- **Thank the person.** It is often appropriate to write something like, "Thank you for bringing this to our attention." Another possibility is, "We appreciate knowing how our patients feel." These types of comments help the dentist and the practice connect with the person posting on a human level.

Protecting reputations

Being aware of online reviews and responding appropriately are important components of a dentist's social media strategy. Managing reviews can help the dentist promote business, while protecting his or her own reputation and the reputation of the practice.

Resources

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