

HOW TO HANDLE NEGATIVE

ONLINE FEEDBACK

by Mara Shorr

Social media has become one of the most important and relevant forms of marketing, advertising and brand communication. Social media is a dialogue, not a monologue. It's a platform where clients can give feedback—some of which will inevitably be negative. So how do you, as a business/brand, handle negative feedback and complaints for the benefit of both your business and the client?"

Step 1: Be prepared that not all of your online "friends" or "fans" will treat you as such.

While the majority of your reviews will most likely glow as much as your clients' freshly treated skin, you're bound to see not-so-kind reviews as well. That's only natural, and to be expected from time to time.

Example: Perhaps a client had to wait too long on the phone or in your reception area. Or maybe a guest didn't see the results they hoped for, and decided to take it up with you via Facebook or Yelp instead of by phone or in person. Perhaps a client didn't follow the post or pre-procedure directions you specifically outlined, leaving them with a bad reaction. Whatever the reason for a negative review—whether its deserved or not—it's important to be prepared for this

type of public feedback and remain calm.

Step 2: Respond promptly

It's of the utmost importance to acknowledge your client's negative review; lack of a response sends the message that you don't care about your client's feelings, or that you don't take the time to monitor your social media channels and review sites. However, be careful how you respond and how much information you give away. This is particularly essential if you practice medicine and must adhere to HIPAA guidelines.

Example: Respond within 24 hours; this demonstrates that you care about the client's concern. In addition, set up email alerts on your review sites so you know right away when someone posts a review. Also make sure to utilize Google alerts so that every time your name or your business name is posted on the Internet, you're made aware of it.

Step 3: Offer a solution.

Always start out with an apology—not an admission of wrongdoing if the circumstances don't warrant one, but an apology that your client feels the way they do. Work to calm the situation and fix the issue, whether it's real or perceived.

Example: Explain your mission: to please your clients, provide excellent customer service, leave your clients with skin they're proud to show off, etc. Explain why the problem may have occurred—but give an explanation, not an excuse. In other words, be humble. Did you run a weekly special and have

an unexpectedly large response, causing you to overbook your appointments or understaff your phones, for instance? Did you experience a software glitch that left out a patient's automatic appointment reminder? Apologize, and explain how you're going to correct the problem, both with that particular client, and with other clients moving forward. Thank them for bringing the issue to your attention.

Step 4: Highlight your strengths.

Emphasize how you're committed to solving the problem. Let the client know that this is not your typical client experience, and that 99 percent of your clients LOVE the pumpkin peel that this client said smelled awful, etc.

Example: Highlight your strengths: Point out how you pride yourself on clients not having to wait more than five minutes in the reception area; explain how unsatisfied clients are welcomed back for a follow-up consult. Remember: don't get defensive, just work to solve the problem. All Internet readers have the ability to see what you're typing, and you want to come off as calm, reasonable, responsible and strong in your services...not overly emotional and unstable.

Step 5: Suggest working on a resolution offline.

You'll likely know exactly who the client is behind the post; some might even have a name and photo attached to their profiles, as is the case with Yelp and Facebook. Again, working to calm the situation is key.

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Example: When you post your response on the corresponding site, let the individual with the original post know you'd welcome the opportunity to follow up with them by phone. (This is yet another reason that it's important to have a full database of your clients' most updated contact information.)

Note that while a majority of your unhappy clients will welcome the opportunity to have you correct their bad experience and show them just how amazing you can be, there will always be a client who wishes to remain anonymous and not be contacted. After all, some people do find comfort in remaining anonymous from their home computer. If the online poster responds negatively to your response, be careful to bow out gracefully and not attack or belittle the complainer. You don't want to get into an irrational online battle; it won't do anyone any good.

Step 6: Ask the poster to update their original review

You've followed the above steps and are certain that things have been smoothed over. Now what?

Example: Have you successfully shown the once-unhappy client just how great your services can be? Politely ask them to update their review. This way, the new comment comes from them—not you, making it more credible.

Step 7: Always ask for new reviews

No one is perfect all of the time, and people—including potential clients reading review sites—know that. If they see one or two negative reviews, it actually makes your positive reviews

seem stronger. The trick is to make sure the negative issues are not only resolved, but also buried among many well-deserved positive reviews.

Example: Include a link to your review site profiles in your email signatures and e-newsletters. Post a "Review Our Services" link on your website. Include a tablet in your reception area to encourage your happy clients to post reviews on the spot. *Tip: make sure they're all logging in on their own account; sometimes sites block users using the same IP address again and again, assuming it's fraud.

Step 8: Make sure all posts are legitimate

Of course, you want to make sure that each post is from an actual client, not a competitor or hostile party lying to make your practice look bad. Calmly confirm with your staff if the situations posted in negative reviews are alleged to involve a team member other than yourself.

Example: If it turns out that an incident posted didn't actually occur, contact the review site to request removal of the post, explaining the situation. You have the ability to do so yourself if the comment is made on your Facebook wall, however removing the incident altogether is only advisable if the incident is pure libel or a lie. Otherwise, go back to the beginning of the process and work with the angry poster to calm the situation.

DOS & DON'TS

OF RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE POSTS ONLINE

Do stay calm when you find a negative review, knowing that not everyone is going to love your services all the time.

DO consider the fact that the poster may be correct in their review (especially if you see a pattern among different posts from multiple clients), and sometimes the truth hurts. Use this as a learning opportunity, and work to correct the problem internally.

DO script a draft prior to hitting the "submit" button, and have a third party read and review it if responding to a negative review.

DON'T forget to check your social media and review sites on a regular basis. An unrecognized negative review starts to sit and rot like a dead, smelly fish.

DON'T respond without first considering exactly how you'll go into the dialogue.

DON'T let the online dialogue with an angry poster go on indefinitely. Know when to fold 'em and end the conversation politely; most likely after two posts.

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