



## The Art of Removing a Negative Review

*Bad critiques of the practice are potent advertising. Learn how to remove them, and keep emotions to a minimum.*

By David Evans, PhD, Ceatus Media, L.L.C.

Nielsen data show that potential patients believe online reviews just as much as referrals from friends and family members.<sup>1</sup> Also, reviews significantly impact buying decisions.<sup>2</sup> A Better Business Bureau study found that 88% of consumers use reviews when making purchasing decisions.<sup>2</sup> Even more importantly, a now-famous study from Harvard Business School showed that a one-star differential in your star rating on Yelp can change revenue by up to 18%.<sup>3</sup>

All of these should direct you to one unmistakable conclusion: You and your practice staff must be focused on achieving an effective review strategy.

Since premium eye-care practices usually see a high volume of patients, it is inevitable that every practice (and surgeon) will receive a negative review at some point. When this happens, what should you do?

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### MONITOR REVIEW SITES



You should see a negative review before potential patients see it online. You must have a monitoring system to alert both the office and surgical staff within

hours of when a negative review goes live. The system should be automated. Ceatus Media Group offers an automated system that provides the necessary components for a comprehensive reviews program (Disclosure: I have a financial interest in Ceatus).

*The key components of a review platform should include:*

- Automated review alerts with daily, weekly and monthly e-mail reports
- An automated solicitation tool that sends patients to the best review sites for the practice
- Automated reviews publishing of positive reviews on the website and social media



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Should you choose not to use an automated service, elect a staff member to monitor the major review sites. This person should spend time each day looking at the 20 to 25 sites where consumers post comments about health-care practices and doctors. As soon as the staff member detects a negative review, she needs to immediately alert the other office staff and the surgeons.

Once a negative review is posted, act and focus on getting the review removed. Negative reviews may elicit significant emotion from your eye surgeon(s) and staff members, but they must place this emotion aside. Consumers have the advantage with the review sites, and surgeons and practice staff members' hands are tied due to HIPAA restrictions. Do not respond to the negative review with any type of identifying information about the patient, appointment, treatment or even confirmation that the person is a patient. Also, do not lash out at the reviewer with a badly worded or enraged response. Once you post an enraged response, it is less likely that the review can be removed.

*Examples of requests to have reviews removed:*

- Insulting or degrading language. Mrs. Gregory mentioned in her review that her “fat technician” was rude and did not answer her questions. While there are two or three employees in our practice who could be considered overweight, we cannot identify who the reviewer was targeting. Regardless, I believe that this rude and insulting personal attack on staff violates the Google Terms of Service.
- Ex-employee. Tom G. is an ex-employee who posted this review the day after he was terminated. This review is nothing more than retaliation from a former employee, and I believe it violates the Yelp Terms of Service.

### **MAKE THE CALL**

If you can determine the patient's identity from the content of the review, then immediately call the patient and discuss the issue. In many cases, the patient is thrilled that the doctor has taken an interest in her



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concerns and will remove the negative review once you address the issue.

If you cannot identify the patient, then the next best option is to respond to the review with concern about the patient's issue. The following is an example of an excellent response: "We are very sorry that you had a negative experience at our practice. At Smith Eye Care, we strive to make every patient's experience the very best. Please contact me directly at 555-1212 so that I can understand more about your concerns and help to address them."

This type of response accomplishes two goals. Firstly, it provides an outlet for the unhappy patient to contact you directly and get the issue off her chest. After a short conversation, patients often voluntarily remove the review. Secondly, consumers pay close attention to how practices deal with negative reviews. They actually expect every business to receive negative reviews at some point, so they are interested in how the practice deals with the unhappy patient. A direct response offering your apologies and an attempt to correct the issue goes a long

way with prospective patients, even if the original negative review is never removed.

### YOUR OTHER OPTIONS



If the negative review writer does not respond to your offer and leaves the review online, you have other options. The review sites have clear guidelines that specify when a review is inappropriate and can be removed at the request of the practice. Examples include when the reviewer's comments identify specific nonowner people in the practice in a negative way and when the comments are clearly false, insulting, a personal attack, racist, derogatory or in any other way discriminatory. Ex-employees posting reviews also violates the terms of service.

When you prepare to request the removal of a review, remember to use the words Terms of Service or TOS in the initial request to the review site, because those words typically trigger the algorithm to alert actual personnel who will immediately review your message. Also, once the request has been submitted,



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respond to the review indicating that this review has been flagged as being in violation of the review site's Terms of Service.

### TAKE LEGAL ACTION

Legal action is typically the last resort to counteract a negative review. Do not lash out at the review sites publicly and threaten legal action, as this will accomplish nothing but make you look worse. These review sites live in the courtroom and have legions of lawyers to protect their well-established rights to post consumer comments. And in truth, even a private lash-out is unlikely to have any benefit.

If, on the other hand, you have proof that someone, such as a competitor, is conspiring to hurt your business through negative reviews, then you could use legal action to put a stop to its activities. Find an attorney who has experience in Internet marketing and technology. His first step should be a "cease and desist" letter to the reviewer (if you can identify him or it), demanding that all the negative reviews be taken down. In many cases, this will work when the reviews are fake and the reviewer knows he is facing

potential legal consequences. If this strategy does not work, the attorney can provide advice on how to proceed with more aggressive action.

If you have proof that an actual crime was committed, such as someone trying to blackmail you through negative reviews, then you and your attorney should seek advice from a law enforcement official.

### THE OTHER SIDE OF REVIEWS: THE POSITIVE



The best overall defense against negative reviews is positive reviews — lots of them. Since it is inevitable that a busy eye-care practice will receive negative reviews, you should employ a proactive strategy in your practice to bury negative reviews among a "firewall" of positive patient comments.

The best methodology to solicit positive reviews is an automated two-step process. An automated system would automatically send out a short survey to determine whether



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the patient is happy with his or her experience. After establishing the patient's satisfaction level, then a request is automatically sent asking for a review.

In ophthalmology, because of the great "Wow" factor immediately after LASIK and cataract surgery, the best time to solicit the review is immediately postop. At this time, patients are most happy with their new vision and are most emotionally attached to the practice. Practices that use the automated solicitation during the postop session have been extremely successful in building massive numbers of positive reviews in a matter of months.

It is extremely important that the review system automatically sends patients to review sites where the practice or surgeons need positive reviews. Too many practices use systems, either manual or automatic, that focus on only two to three review sites. This can be a catastrophic strategy, because it exposes the other review sites to the power of a single negative review.

For example, if your practice has generated dozens of reviews on Google and Yelp but

you only have one review on RateMDs or Vitals, it only takes a single one-star review to reduce a five-star rating on the site to a three-star rating. Since these review sites often appear at the top of search results on Google, a subpar rating is glaring when prospective patients search for the practice name or surgeon name.

Once you put a system in place to obtain volumes of positive reviews, the next step is to show off and promote them to your prospective patients. Publish the positive comments on your website and social media, as this helps in multiple ways. First, it exposes prospective patients to your positive reviews while they are reviewing your website. This is extremely important because these people are in the process of making a buying decision about a procedure and the surgeon who will perform it. A study from iPerceptions found that sales increase by 18% when reviews are mixed with product information.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, publishing reviews on your website keeps visitors engaged with the site as opposed to sending them off to look for reviews on Yelp, Google or the other review



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sites. Since consumers use reviews to make buying decisions, why let them wander around the review sites where other surgeons are listed, and where the practice or surgeon may have a negative review? It is better to feed consumers information on the practice's site and control the message.

### SUMMARY

All busy eye-care practices can expect to receive a negative review at one point or another. Always respond to negative reviews in an unemotional and logical way, be nice and make amends when possible. And, as a firewall to negative reviews, invest in a strategy to generate streams of positive reviews. Then, publish these on your practice website and social media.

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