How to Deal with Negative Online Reviews

It's happened to most plastic surgeons: no matter how many satisfied patients you've treated over the years, there are always a few who are less than happy with your work. Thanks to the internet, anyone can voice an opinion about anything — good, bad or ugly. Online marketing is a vital tool for professional survival; it's important to learn how to navigate its pitfalls, and find ways to turn negatives into positives for your practice.

Let's start with what NOT to do if you get a bad review. As you can see from the linked article, some surgeons are tempted to take legal recourse, and sometimes they give in to that temptation. This can be a bad idea for two reasons: one is that such action is unlikely to be successful. Legal regulation of online speech is a tricky issue, at best, in most countries. If the review is posted on a public platform like Yelp or Realself.com, the site will probably not remove it unless it specifically violates their Terms & Conditions. You have a bit more control over reviews that are posted on your practice's website or Facebook page… but before you hit the "delete" button, consider the following.

Negative reviews aren't necessarily bad for you. In fact, studies indicate that buyers tend to be more skeptical if a business has only 100% glowingly positive reviews. It can create the impression that either a) the reviews are largely fake, or b) the practice has deleted poor feedback. The first is an ethical problem, and is not recommended. The second, of course, can and should be exercised judiciously. If the reviewer has written things that are false and/or defamatory, you are justified in removing these (if possible). Your past, present and future patients deserve to be fully informed about your skills and practice, but they also deserve not to be confused or misled by misleading information.

When a patient does leave a less-than-positive review of his or her experience, you and/or your social media marketing team need to do immediate damage control:

- First, express regret for the patient's negative experience. In many cultures an apology is seen as an admission of wrongdoing (and with good reason), so try to avoid creating this impression. A statement like "We are sorry to hear you had this experience" carries an appropriate tone of empathy without placing blame on either party. DON'T become defensive — stay positive and professional.

- Second, offer some kind of solution: a free consultation, revision surgery at a discounted rate, or some other step toward resolving the problem and satisfying the patient. Be sure not to over-promise — keep such negotiations realistic, especially in writing. It's very unlikely that the conflict will be resolved solely through online exchanges, so this is more of one step in the process getting things back on track.

- Third, invite unhappy patients to take some further action — a return visit, a call to the office or something else that will keep the doctor-patient relationship moving forward. Keep in mind the service recovery paradox — a *positive recovery*

from a bad customer experience often creates *greater* customer satisfaction and loyalty than if there had never been a problem at all!

Remember, you're not just dealing with a single unsatisfied individual; a negative review — and your response to it — will be seen by other prospective patients. How you handle complaints may well determine whether future patients choose to come to you or go to a competitor. Use negative feedback as an opportunity to improve your customer service. Patients may even edit or remove the complaint on their own if they feel they've been listened to and treated with respect, and end up telling their friends what great patient experience they had!