



## White Paper

### ***Healthcare PR Insights: 5 Steps for Medical Practices to Follow When Responding to Negative Reviews***



Scott Public Relations

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When patients will feel angry or frustrated with their doctors, they may complain. A direct complaint is manageable, but today social media has afforded disgruntled consumers with a bully pulpit the size of which we've never seen before.

A decade ago, when patients had a negative experience they would tell the doctor or practice manager directly, along with perhaps 10 or 15 of their friends and family members. Today they're blogging, posting and tweeting to hundreds and thousands. This can be a frightening situation for an unprepared practitioner. When left unanswered, complaints can fester and damage the practice's reputation. They can do the same when answered inappropriately.



Remember the first time you received a patient complaint? Many of the same tools you used then apply to handling negative online comments in the social media world. The big difference is that more people are listening. That's good. Think of it as an opportunity to clear things up with a lot of people all at once.

**These five steps will help you effectively manage complaints on social media so you don't have to fear repercussions each time someone has something negative to say.**

### Step One: Listen With a New Attitude

If you can view negative online comments as a way to gain insight into a segment of your community population, then you will grow to value them instead of dread them.

Granted, some of the feedback may not be in the tone or language that you would like to see associated with your practice, but it's key to remember how valuable this information is and approach it as an opportunity for correcting misinformation or to gain insight on ways to improve service – an opportunity to reach a lot of people with a positive message.



It's important to communicate this approach to your staff. Having a thick skin helps, along with reminders not to take the comments personally or respond personally — but view them for what they are — customer perceptions.

### Step Two: Monitor the Conversation

Before you are able to fashion a response, you need to be aware that the comments exist. If, on Saturday, an unhappy patient blogs about the extreme wait times or your office billing practices and several other community members join in the flame-throwing, you don't want to wait until Monday morning to respond.

Make sure someone from your practice is charged with monitoring your social networks, blogs and the web for comments, even on the weekends; and make sure you give that person the authority to respond or contact someone who can.

To assist with the monitoring process, there are several online tools and programs ranging in price and sophistication. Some tools are free; others are fee-based. Whichever you choose, medical practices still need a human eye to monitor the conversation.



### Step Three: Think Before You Speak

When you receive a critical comment, don't react immediately. Take a deep breath and ask these three important questions suggested by Jesse Stanchack, an editor at SmartBlogs.com:

- 1. Who is this person?** Putting an unhappy commenter in context is critical. Do they have a history with your practice? Do they belong to an influential group or organization? Do they constantly complain? Or are they a critical thinker? Tailor your response to the individual.
- 2. Are they asking for a response or just venting?** There are cases when no response is the best social media response. "The more irrational, profane or immature a comment seems, the more likely it is that your commenter is after attention, not resolution," writes Stanchack. When someone is ranting about your practice, most reasonable people who see it will realize the poster is not rational — especially if they are ranting in CAPITAL LETTERS! Some commenters are simply trolling — posting inflammatory or off-topic messages to provoke an emotional reaction. Don't bite. Instead, look for ways to address legitimate grievances offline. Or, simply reply, "Please contact our office and we would be happy to work with you to resolve your issue."
- 3. Who should respond?** Is the complainant reacting to something you said or to something someone else did in another context? In most cases, the response should come from the originating source of the complaint. If you are the lead physician, taking time to respond will add credibility to your communication. Otherwise, a response from the practice manager is appropriate.

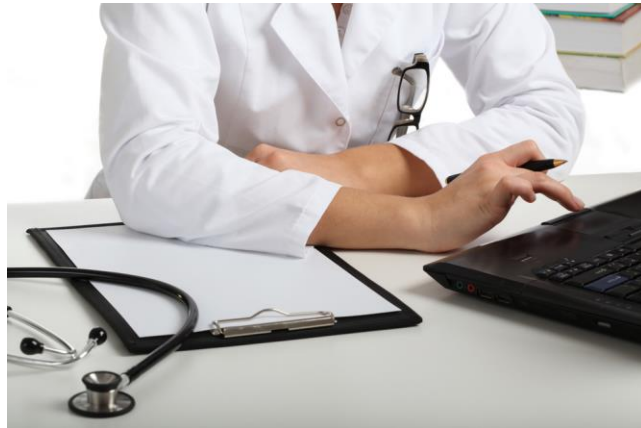
### Step Four: Respond Appropriately

If a response is warranted, it's important to respond thoughtfully and appropriately.

**Respond on the same channel first.** In your quest to communicate about the problem it's important that you do it in the same space as where the comment was first posted. If it's a tweet, respond first on Twitter. If it's a post on Facebook, Google+ or Yelp, respond there.

**Be honest.** Don't promise more than you can deliver and make sure that you don't appear to be covering up a problem.

**Take the high road.** Don't adopt the tone of your attacker. When you respond in a relaxed, calm way you'll build sympathy with your followers. You're not going to win anyone over by belittling or being sarcastic or dismissive. Write back as the pleasant, reasonable person you are. Be professional but drop the corporate gobbledygook and legalese.



**Don't get defensive.** There may be times when a patient will write an anonymous negative comment and you or your staff will know who wrote it. You might know the comment is misinformed and want to defend yourself. Take a deep breath. When you encounter a negative, anonymous comment with potentially valid concerns, invite the writer to contact you directly to see what you can do to correct the situation.

**Tread with caution.** If you get into a "fact correction" exchange, you will lose. You can't disclose patient details, but they can, whether true or not. Instead, highlight your concern and emphasize positive steps you're taking. Invite them to contact you personally, rather than argue online. This can go a long way, especially for readers not directly involved in the situation.

**Beware of potential HIPAA or regulatory violations.** If you receive comments that reveal protected health information, look closely. Is the information about the person posting the comment? If so, by posting they're consenting to share information. Is the violating comment from a friend or family member? If it's on your practice blog site, consider removing it. Even under these circumstances, it's important to give a brief explanation on the site why you've deleted the comment.

Some patients are more open than others and are willing to post details about themselves that others consider private. If someone posts these details in a public forum like Yelp (e.g., "I'm cancer-free two years post-treatment!"), that posting constitutes consent to the disclosure itself. Your response, however, should never disclose protected health information or offer tailored medical advice. The best approach is to respond publicly with a generic statement (e.g. "Great! Check out our recent article about *Cancer Prevention* at ..."), and reply privately as may be appropriate.

Some physician practices are developing patient portals to allow for more secure communication, and this is something you may want to consider.

**Have conversations, not arguments.** An angry patient is an invested patient. They wouldn't take time to comment if they didn't care. Ask questions about the complaint, rather than saying they are wrong. Show empathy. If you demonstrate that you take concerns seriously, then you're rewarded with a positive reputation.

**Say what you can.** If you can't access facts immediately, a response such as: "I'm sorry you experienced a long wait in our office today. Dr. Sue Jones would like to hear from you. She's been trying to alleviate wait times, but obviously today we fell short. You can contact her directly by calling 555-1212 or emailing her at SueJones@greatmedicine.com." Even though little information was given out, knowing someone is listening and responding can make a big difference.

## Step Five: Invite a Private Meeting

Always invite the person to call or meet personally with the person who can help them fix their problem. This demonstrates that you are willing to give “face-time” to people who have concerns. Taking the conversation offline makes most people more reasonable because they’re no longer playing to the crowd.

**Handling disagreements properly is a visible way to show that you really care about your patients.**

When your practice adopts social media tools, plan to use them as “conversations”. You’ll have the opportunity to be both speaker and listener. And, just as in face-to-face conversations, most exchanges are pleasant but don’t expect that from everyone.

**When you follow these steps and healthcare PR insights, you’ll be well on your way to building stronger, more meaningful relationships with your patients, their families and your community.**

*We extend our thanks to our friend and colleague, Dan Hinmon, for his input and wisdom about healthcare social media. Dan is principal at Hive Strategies, a firm that helps hospitals and their physicians engage patients through social media.*

### About Scott Public Relations



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