

How to Dispute & Remove Negative Online Reviews



Welcome to the New World of Digital Patient Engagement

We live in an age where digital engagement has largely replaced personal engagement. People today communicate with others using their smartphones or tablets far more often than they do verbally or face-to-face. As a result, online patient reviews have become a major decision-making factor for any patient looking to find a medical, dental, veterinary or other type of healthcare practice. They have also become a major headache for some healthcare practitioners.

In a perfect world, patients would only write fair and honest reviews. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. We live in a world where online reviews can be complete misrepresentations of people, facts or events. Everyone from disgruntled ex-employees to competitors masquerading as patients can write reviews. In some cases, reviews can even be completely faked.

The first question most healthcare practitioners ask is, "How can I get this review removed?" The purpose of this white paper is to advise you about the proper ways of handling, disputing and removing unfavorable reviews.



First, What Not to Do

DO NOT react emotionally or “freak out” over a negative review. Accept the fact that even the best healthcare practitioners get at least one bad review. **DO NOT** post an angry, hastily written response to the negative reviewer. This will not only make you look bad, it will hurt your chances of having the review removed.

DO NOT threaten to sue the review site or the reviewer over a negative review. The vast majority of these lawsuits have failed in court, even though the practitioner may have perceived valid reasons for suing. Huge companies such as Yelp and Google have very deep pockets and high-powered attorneys to defend against these types of lawsuits and the courts have overwhelmingly sided with them.

DO NOT retaliate in any way against the reviewer. This will only result in an even bigger headache for you and your practice. **DO NOT** get involved in a war of words with a reviewer. This makes you look unreasonable and unprofessional. Worse, it might drive the reviewer to other review sites (there are dozens) to badmouth you or your practice even further.



Take a Deep Breath

Your first steps are your most important. So take a deep breath, calm yourself and contact the review site directly to learn about their policies. Each review site has different policies regarding disputes and removal of reviews.

YELP, for example, generally prohibits healthcare practitioners and other business owners from writing negative reviews about their competitors. Yelp runs each submitted review through an algorithm that determines legitimacy before posting. Yelp may hide suspect reviews from the public but include them in their “Filtered” section. Even some legitimate reviews fail to clear that filter and will not appear as a result. Yelp also favors reviews written by frequent reviewers over first-time reviewers.

GOOGLE does not arbitrate disputes and typically keeps negative reviews posted unless you can prove they are false, misleading, in violation of their Terms of Service (TOS) or fake. Just know that the burden of proof is on you. Without proof, it is unlikely you will convince Google, Yelp or any other review site to remove a negative comment.

Understand that it is not in the best interests of review sites to simply remove reviews because you don't like them. Patients trust third-party site reviews exactly because practitioners cannot arbitrarily censor them.



How to Contest Negative Reviews

Here are four potentially surefire methods and conditions for having negative reviews removed. Just remember that the burden of proof is on you.

TOS VIOLATIONS – Every review site has a Terms of Service policy where they list what’s allowed or disallowed. The TOS, for example, does not allow personal attacks on you or your staff, including defamatory or derogatory comments about race, religion, disability, ethnicity or other factors. Contact the review site and let them know you believe there is a Terms of Service violation. Many review sites use a ticketing system that’s programmed to look for certain words. If you mention “TOS violation” in your subject line or message, your comments will go directly to someone who deals with TOS violations and improve your chances of having the review removed. Also reply directly to the review stating that it is a violation of the site’s TOS and you have requested it be removed.

LEGAL VIOLATIONS – Highly offensive or illegal posts can be grounds for removal. Examples of legal violations are threatening, racist or sexist comments, graphic language or content or content that is a copyright infringement. Google offers specific advice for submitting complaints about such legal violations.

SLANDER BY COMPETITORS – If an unscrupulous competitor slanders you on a review site, you can often have the review removed or hidden. One way to prove your claim is to show that the reviewer’s email address belongs to a competitor or someone who works for that competitor.

ERRONEOUS REVIEWS – Sometimes customers write reviews for another practice on your page by accident. Sometimes patients write stellar reviews but accidentally click one star instead of five. Contact the reviewer using a polite, professional tone and explain the situation and they will often amend the review or remove it. Reviewers can always update/amend/remove their own online reviews.



Understand Review Sites' Removal Policies

Each site may have different policies regarding the removal of reviews. Here's a quick rundown of what you can expect from the major review sites Yelp, Google, Vitals and Healthgrades:

YELP – Once a review is posted on Yelp, it belongs to Yelp. You cannot have it removed unless you can prove it has violated Yelp's TOS. You'll find Yelp's TOS link in the footer on every page. In Yelp's own words, "If you see a questionable review, please report it and include any information that our moderators can independently verify. Please note, however, that we don't typically take sides in factual disputes and generally allow Yelpers to stand behind their reviews."

GOOGLE – Google says, "If you find a review that you think violates the review policies, you can use the Flag as Inappropriate link next to a review. We will then check if the review violates any of our policies, and will take appropriate action." Read the review policies carefully to make sure you understand what type of action you can take to get a review removed.

VITALS – Vitals.com will generally remove reviews if your patient did not write them or they refer to another doctor, or if they contain threatening language or confidential information about you (e.g. your personal phone number or address). Vitals.com lets doctors request removal of up to two reviews without cause or explanation. According to Vitals.com, "We do not edit any of the comments or rating selections of doctors or practices. Vitals does reserve the right to remove from public posting any comments which may be deemed offensive, malicious, inappropriate, sexually explicit in nature, or not made in good faith."



HEALTHGRADES – This physician review site expressly prohibits defamatory reviews while retaining the right to remove them at its sole discretion. According to the site, “User-generated content deemed inappropriate will be filtered and not posted to Healthgrades if it contains:

- Hateful or vulgar language
- Comments not related to the health experience or quality of care received
- Misleading, deceptive or fraudulent content
- Illegal, controversial or objectionable activities
- Content that discriminates against, ridicules or disparages an individual or group on the basis of race, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, disability or any other status that the Healthgrades editorial team deems inappropriate
- Marketing material that directly advertises a service or a product
- Personal information including but not limited to phone number, address and email address
- Personal website links or mentions
- Mentions or endorsements of specific brands including pharmaceuticals
- Content that mentions another person or potential patient by full name
- Pictures that you do not have the rights to use or distribute; or inappropriate pictures or videos
- Content that is deemed unproductive, off-topic or inappropriate by Healthgrades in its sole discretion
- Content that is deemed obscene or graphic by Healthgrades in its sole discretion”

Take a Positive First Step

If you cannot get a negative post removed by a review site, there are other steps you can take. Once you understand the site's dispute/removal policies, your next step is to contact the reviewer by phone, if possible, and ask for any insights that may help you resolve the problem. The easiest way to get a negative review removed is to politely ask the reviewer to remove it. If that does not work, then craft a written response. This public response to a negative review is critical.

First, apologize to the reviewer for whatever negative experience fueled their review. Offer to correct the problem immediately, if possible. If you have already corrected the problem, share the steps you took to ensure better patient care or service in the future. Offer to discuss and resolve the issue by phone. Your goal is to win back that dissatisfied patient with a thoughtful response. Your public response can also demonstrate to potential patients that you really care.

If you see the same negative comments repeated in multiple reviews, use them to improve your practice. Not only will this reduce negative reviews, it will give you a competitive advantage by making your practice more attractive to patients. Share your improvement plans with disgruntled reviewers. Thank them for helping you identify the problem then post your solution in your reply to their negative review.

One caution about responding to negative reviewers: If the reviewer sounds completely unreasonable or posts comments that make them appear uninformed, unstable or ignorant, you need not reply at all. Most users will get it and ignore those reviews, anyway. Many review sites have "helpful" and "not helpful" buttons. You can click "not helpful" and encourage your staff to do the same. Just make sure they don't all do it at once! Review sites consider this suspicious and will ignore those clicks.

The one silver lining in negative reviews is that they often provide a different perspective on what may not be working in your practice. If patients frequently complain about long waits, impersonal treatment or rude staff members, you may need to address those issues to avoid future negative reviews.



More Ammo for Beating Bad Reviews

Here are some more of the best tips we have found for dealing with negative online reviews and reviewers:

- Always check to make sure the reviewer is a current or former patient. (If not, simply post that “This false review is not from a current or former patient of ours.”)
- Always contact the reviewer calmly, politely and nicely.
- Always attempt personal contact first, in person or by phone.
- Always try to understand their frustration or the reason they are upset.
- Ask them to remove or at least modify their review.
- Always post proof that a review is false using clear, unemotional facts, but...
- Never divulge ANY personal information about ANY patient in ANY public medium, including websites, posts, review responses, emails or text messages, as this is clearly a HIPAA violation.



And most importantly, do whatever you can to help facilitate more positive reviews. Your goal is to outweigh and ultimately overwhelm any negative reviews. Leave comment cards and satisfaction surveys out in plain sight where patients can see and use them. Have your staff remind patients to complete the comment cards and satisfaction surveys while they are in the practice. Read the comment cards and satisfaction surveys

to uncover problems that might lead to negative reviews, then address and correct those concerns directly with the patients.

Encourage patients who express verbal satisfaction to share their comments with others online. Do whatever you can to streamline the process for them. Regularly check the major online review sites yourself – Yelp, Google, Vitals and Healthgrades (there are over two dozen review sites at this writing) – to keep up with your reviews.

If that sounds like a lot of work and diligence on your part, it's probably because it is. And very few medical professionals have that kind of spare time. Of course, there is a smarter and far less time-consuming way to manage your online reputation...

Find a Partner in Online Healthcare Reputation Management

Handling online reviews can be extremely time-consuming. And you would rather devote your time to patient care. That's why Practice Builders offers myPracticeReputation, a suite of solutions that streamline the whole online reputation management process.

See all of your online reviews and reputation management activities on one convenient dashboard. This technology even automates sending "please review us" emails and simple instructions to your patients, streamlines the review process for them and much more.

Finally, you should know that, according to a study published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine, nearly 90 percent of online physician ratings to date have been positive. Use that fact to your advantage by providing patients with simple written instructions for rating you online. These reviews are likely to be better than you might think. According to Yelp, 80 percent of Yelp ratings are three or more stars and many doctors and dentists receive four- and five-star ratings.

With myPracticeReputation, you will gain more positive reviews and make those few negative reviews look more and more like outliers. Learn more about Practice Builders and the benefits of using myPracticeReputation by calling 800.679.1200 or visiting myPracticeReputation.com.



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800.679.1200 | EMAIL: INFO@PRACTICEBUILDERS.COM | WWW.PRACTICEBUILDERS.COM

