

Protecting Physicians' Reputations from False Reviews

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Among those we frequently assist in the area of internet defamation, the members of one profession in particular are uniquely susceptible to false reviews on the internet: physicians.

Physicians are vulnerable to reputation attacks for a number of reasons, and false reviews are especially challenging to physicians because of HIPAA restrictions. Unlike, say, a restaurant owner hoping to practice damage control and remedy a customer's bad experience, a physician obviously cannot register a Yelp account and respond to an angry patient.

Like with other service industries, anyone can easily log onto Yelp or a medical-specific website such as Vitals.com and say what is on their mind about a physician. In addition to dissatisfied patients, other classes of people that are the sources of false physician reviews include: drug addicts upset after being denied prescriptions; medical malpractice claimants; competitors; disgruntled employees; and extortionists trying to get refunds or avoid paying medical bills.

Research has shown that most physicians have a limited number of online reviews. One [recent study involving Google searches of 200 randomly selected physicians](#) revealed that more than 75% of the physicians had fewer than three "cumulative reviews" on the first results page. Meanwhile, 96% had fewer than 10 reviews.

With such a small number of reviews for most physicians, combined with the fact that many people are only motivated to write a review after negative experiences, physicians typically suffer from a sampling bias. As a result, negative reviews can dominate their profile pages and damage their reputations.

After all, these reviews are not going unnoticed. According to an in-depth feature [story on BuzzFeed about physicians being harmed by online reviewers](#), leading patient review website Vitals.com attracts north of 13 million visitors monthly.

Steps to Protect Your Reputation Online

Ideally before your reputation is ever harmed online, we recommend taking three steps:

1. Eliminate the sampling bias with a review program;
2. Monitor for online reputation attacks; and
3. Assemble the appropriate team to help respond to reputation attacks.

First, there needs to be a system in place to encourage positive reviews. It is extremely beneficial to have software or a strategic plan to encourage patients to review their physician online, based on their positive experiences. For instance, there are programs that make it easy for offices to provide patients with a link after their appointments. Note that arranging for fake reviews should *not* be considered.

Second, it is crucial for physicians to monitor their reputations. Thus, they need some type of monitoring software, which is easy to purchase and not expensive. There are dozens of websites where physicians can be reviewed and it is simply not practical to individually search each website regularly for potential harmful reviews.

Third, it is necessary to assemble the right team of experts to help handle potential reputation attacks. Solutions are fact dependent and may require input from a multidisciplinary team of legal, cyber investigation, and PR professionals.

When faced with **false negative reviews**, arming yourself with the right team can go a long way. This team should be experienced with the type of case you are faced with and should have legal knowledge relating to HIPAA and defamation laws.

In 1966, Abraham Maslow was quoted as saying, "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." When a physician's reputation has been undermined online, it is important not to be overreliant on the same "tool."

Ultimately, physicians should balance the potential harm versus the financial costs of fixing an online reputation attack, as well as the likelihood of success. In the long run, ignoring online reputation attacks could ultimately be the most costly course of action.

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