

# Managing Your Online Status

Eye care professionals must be proactive in protecting their online reputation.

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The Internet has become the ultimate symbol of an individual's right to information and the freedom of expression. People like to share their views and personal experiences with others online. As a result, there is plenty of good information about practicing doctors, including eye care professionals, available on the Internet. Along with good information, however, there is also the risk of an equal level of misinformation and negative biases that find their way on the web.

The very nature of the Internet ensures so much freedom for every individual that it becomes difficult for an eye care professional to control and manage his or her professional reputation online. A number of rankings or ratings websites have now appeared, some of which are focused exclusively on physicians. Although these websites present an opportunity for eye care professionals to promote their practices through online publicity, they also pose the risk of creating unfairly negative or biased opinions against them online.

## TYPES OF RATINGS WEBSITES

Doctor rating websites can be broadly classified into four categories. The first category is the no-fee sites that offer free information to patients about listed health care professionals. Some of these sites earn their revenue through advertising, while others may charge a fee to the listed doctors. From an eye care professional's perspective, it is relatively easy to control information on such a website because there is a financial connection between the site and the practitioner.

The second category of websites has no relationship with the doctors but charges a fee to the patients to provide privileged access to information about doctors. The eye care provider can exercise little or no control over the views and reviews that the website may choose to publish about his or her practice.

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The third category includes insurance company websites, which have doctor reference sections and give their own ratings to the listed professionals.

The final category includes government-controlled websites that provide information about doctors licensed in their state.

## HOW ARE RATINGS DETERMINED?

Doctor rating websites usually follow one of three approaches to develop rankings or ratings. The first method involves the use of an algorithm or a formula that attaches different weights to different sets of credentials of the doctor, such as education, experience, and any specialty training. Some sites may differentiate on the basis of the type of medical school a particular physician attended. If the practitioner has settled a malpractice suit out of court, some sites may consider it as a grounds to attach lesser weight to him or her.

The second approach to determine ratings involves feedback from patients. The website invites actual patients to rate their health care providers based on various parameters. Average ratings for the doctor are then computed on the basis of the feedback of different patients. The third approach is a hybrid of the first two, which is perhaps a more comprehensive way to develop ratings. Rating an individual eye care professional remains a highly subjective area because opinions will vary widely from patient to patient. This

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entire system of online ratings is inherently controversial.

### PROACTIVE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

From an eye care professional's point of view, it makes sense to be proactive in protecting and managing his or her online reputation. A growing number of patients are inclined to check out a doctor's background on the Internet, and it may become an important factor of influence in their decision to choose a particular doctor. The first challenge for a doctor is to ensure that the ratings and review websites maintain the latest updated information about his or her practice. Most sites do not have a system to ask for such updates and expect the listed health care providers to provide updates on their own.

Patients may get confused when two or more doctors have the same or similar-sounding names. This confusion may lead to misplaced reviews and ratings. A patient may have made an unfair, false, or incorrect accusation, which can be countered only if the doctor tells his or her side of the story. Apart from damage control in such instances, eye care professionals should also contact ratings and review sites to provide accurate facts to minimize misinformation.

### CHALLENGES OF ANONYMOUS RATINGS

The Internet offers a great deal of anonymity, which can potentially be misused when individuals make irresponsible, incorrect, or false statements online and have no fear of accountability. Some may use pseudonyms on the Internet. So, while people can hide their own identity and protect their reputation, they can potentially jeopardize an eye care professional's reputation. To tackle this challenge, Google Plus has revoked the ability to post reviews anonymously or even "pseudonymously."

This kind of restriction is a welcome step for most businesses and professions, but it poses another unique problem in the specific area of health care. Patients are usually willing to be most candid when their privacy is

protected. Less than 5% of patients willingly give out their full names when providing feedback about a doctor online. Therefore, restriction on their privacy is a dilemma that may discourage patients from providing reviews and ratings about doctors on respected forums like Google Plus.

### HIRE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT EXPERTS

Eye care professionals who are looking to grow and expand their practices in their local area can no longer afford to ignore the marketing power of the Internet and must consider these three issues. First, they must have a professional and dynamic website that creates an outstanding image for them and the practice. Second, such a website needs to be promoted professionally so that it achieves high rankings on all search engines, allowing the maximum number of local patients to reach the site. Third, the eye care professional must be able to protect his or her reputation on third-party websites.

These three tasks can be performed efficiently and cost-effectively with the help of a professional who provides search engine optimization and online reputation management services. With the support of a recognized expert, it is possible to build an impeccable online reputation for an eye care professional, while following the highest ethical and professional standards.

### CONCLUSION

It takes years to build a reputation, but just one bad review that goes viral on the Internet can tear it down. With the growing influence of the web in today's society, it is smart for eye care professionals to take steps to build and protect their professional reputation online. ■

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