

# Managing online reputation for dentists

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with Vikas Vij

The Internet has become the ultimate symbol of an individual's right to information and freedom of expression. As a result, there is plenty of good information available on the Internet regarding doctors and dentists. However, along with the good information, there is also the risk of misinformation and negative biases finding its way to the World Wide Web.

The very nature of the Internet ensures so much freedom for every individual that it becomes difficult for dentists to control and manage their professional reputations online. The number of rankings or ratings websites have also increased, and some are focused exclusively on physicians. While these websites present an opportunity for dentists to promote their practices through word of mouth publicity, they also pose the risk of creating unfairly negative pinions against them.



## Types of ratings websites

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

The second category of websites are the ones that have no relationship with the doctors, but charge patients a fee for privileged access to information about doctors. Dentists can exercise little or no control over the views and reviews that the website chooses to publish about a practice.

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

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

## How are ratings determined?

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

The second approach to determine ratings involves feedback from patients. The website will invite patients to rate their doctors on various parameters. Average ratings for a doctor are then computed on the basis of the patient feedback.

The third approach is a hybrid of the first two, which is a more comprehensive way to develop ratings. However, rating a dentist still remains a highly subjective area because the opinions vary widely from patient to patient. That makes this entire system of online ratings inherently controversial.

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## Proactive online reputation management

From a practicing dentist's point of view, it makes a lot of 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 in their decision to choose a doctor. The first challenge for a doctor is to ensure that the ratings and review websites maintain the latest information about the doctor's practice. Most such sites do not have a system to ask for such updates, and the sites expect the listed doctors to provide updates on their own.

Patients may get mixed up when two or more doctors have the same or similar names. It may lead to misplaced patient reviews and ratings. Sometimes a particular patient may have made an unfair, false, or incorrect accusation, which can be countered only if the doctor takes care to tell his side of the story. Apart from damage control in such instances, dentists should also reach out to ratings and review sites to provide accurate facts so that the chances of misinformation are minimized.



### **Challenges of anonymous ratings**

The Internet offers a great deal of anonymity, which can be misused to make irresponsible, incorrect, or false statements online, without any fear of being held accountable. Many individuals operate under pseudonyms on the Internet. So while they can hide their identity and protect their reputation, they can potentially jeopardize the reputation of a dentist or other professional online. To tackle this challenge, Google Plus has taken the initiative and revoked the ability of users to post reviews anonymously, or even pseudonymously.

While this kind of restriction is a welcome step for most businesses and professions, it poses another unique problem in the 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 of their privacy is a dilemma that may discourage patients from providing reviews and ratings about doctors and dentists on respected forums such as Google Plus.

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### **Hire online reputation management experts**

Dental practitioners who are looking to grow and expand their practices in their area can no longer afford to ignore the marketing power of the Internet. They should have a professional and dynamic website that creates an outstanding image for the dentist and practice. Secondly, such a website needs to be promoted professionally so that it achieves high rankings on all search engines, which allows the maximum number of local patients to reach the website. Thirdly, the dentist must be able to protect his or her reputation on third party websites on the Internet.

All these tasks can be performed efficiently and cost-effectively with the help of a professional SEO and online reputation management services provider. With the support of recognized experts in this area, it is possible to build an impeccable online reputation for a dentist, while following the highest ethical and professional standards.

It takes years to build an online reputation, and it can take one bad review that goes viral on the Internet to tear it down. With the growing influence of the World Wide Web in our lives, it is a smart move for practicing dentists to take the steps to build and protect their professional reputation online.

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