

## The Yelpification of Healthcare

By Cassandra  
Perez

**With the increased use of physician review websites, providers should understand the importance of their digital reputation and its expanding role in a consumer's search for quality healthcare.**

In the modern digital age, technology has advanced the way patients seek healthcare providers and share their experiences including the increasing use of physician review websites (PRWs) such as RateMDs.com, Healthgrades.com, and Vitals.com. These sites offer prospective patients reviews as well as ratings of doctors from virtually all areas of medicine, including sleep. In an era of increasing access to electronic information, online reviews have become a modernized *viva voce*, according to the authors of the article "[Online Physician Reviews: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly](#)," which was published in the *Bulletin of the American College of Surgeons* in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Though the increasing use of PRWs has positive benefits for patients and healthcare professionals, there are disadvantages too, such as determining the accuracy of an online testimonial. However, despite the drawbacks of this "Yelpification" of the healthcare industry (the use of online sites to review doctors), physicians may no longer be able to ignore the increasing demand for digital healthcare provider information and the growing popularity of PRWs for prospective patients. As such, it is imperative to understand the importance of online reviews, how to manage your online reputation, and how to participate in these patient resources.

### Impact and Importance

As shown by a survey published in 2014 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), the use of online reviews and testimonials to select physicians is growing and is of increasing importance to consumers.<sup>2</sup> The results show that 40% of patients think physician ratings on websites are "somewhat important" and, of those who used the web to search for a physician, 35% selected a doctor based on good ratings. In addition, 27% of these web users reported avoiding a provider with bad ratings.

JD Allen, digital marketing advisor for Internet marketing agency [Sweet Spot Marketing](#) (which shares the same parent company as *Sleep Review*), says, "The impact of review sites, Yelp, Google Places, etc, is huge as it has become the 21st century 'word of mouth' platform for patient referrals....All medical professionals should place enormous weight on the online review process."

Online reviews can be seen as constructive criticism for the business, and healthcare professionals can use digital feedback to improve specific areas of the practice. Dutch Rojas, director of physician marketing at [BetterDoctor.com](#), says, "The increasing use of the Internet to review medical professionals has given patients a voice. This is a new way for doctors to interact with patients and to benefit from valuable patient feedback." Rojas says healthcare professionals should not view the increasing use of PRWs as negative. "Doctors can read their online reviews, incorporate the feedback into their practice, and respond directly," he says.

Rajan Chopra, director of Vertical Scope who works with physician review website [RateMDs](#) to manage its growth

and development, says the use of PRWs has been extremely positive for both medical professionals and patients. Chopra says, “Patients are now able to connect with a medical professional that best suits their needs. For medical professionals, the Yelpification presents an opportunity to grow their practices in a cost-effective manner.”

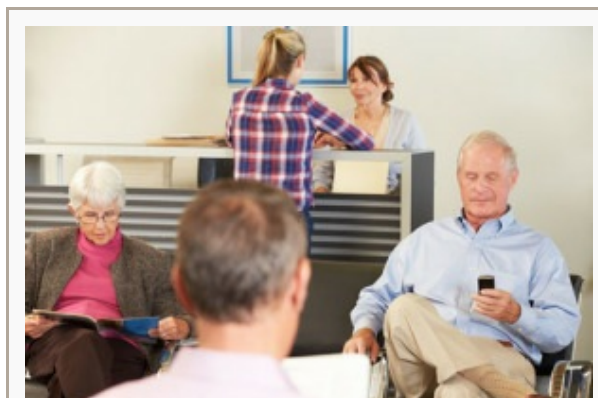
Overall, Chopra says, “Sleep medicine professionals should consider online reviews an important part of their reputation management and communications program.”

## What Are Patients Looking For?

The most common types of information being sought online range from physician-patient interaction to courtesy of the office staff. According to the authors of “Online Physician Reviews,” consumers are searching for information in one of the following five categories: communication skills (listening skills, bedside manner, etc); staff (friendliness, professionalism); overall rating; access (scheduling, punctuality); and facilities (office cleanliness, waiting room accommodations).<sup>1</sup>

The interaction between a physician and a patient appears to be one of the most essential pieces of information patients are interested in. Allen says patient interaction, or a physician’s “bedside manner,” is the most sought after information. Rojas also says patients are looking for information on bedside manner but adds that web users are seeking details about the timeliness and efficiency of the office staff.

Chopra says, “Generally speaking, patients are looking at online reviews to see if a medical professional is a fit with their personal needs. Some patients value knowledge as the most important factor in selecting a medical professional while others care deeply about the overall helpfulness of the medical professional.” Chopra explains the RateMDs site captures the following four dimensions they have determined to be of common interest to patients: professionalism of staff, knowledge of practitioner, and helpfulness and punctuality of the practitioner.



Using smart phones, patients can review your sleep center's facilities while in the waiting room. This adds new challenges and opportunities to online reputation management.

## Requests for Online Testimonials

According to a [Medical Journal Houston](#) article, while a growing number of patients are using the Internet for physician-related research, only an estimated 10% are actually posting reviews. As such, some physicians are recognizing the benefits of increased online exposure and encouraging their patients to write reviews. The question then arises: Should all healthcare professionals encourage patients to write online reviews?

Rojas says healthcare providers can certainly encourage their patients to write online reviews. Chopra echoes the sentiment, saying, “It is [in] the healthcare provider’s best interest to encourage their patients to write reviews. It adds to the healthcare provider’s credibility for them to have as many reviews as possible.”

## Responding to Reviews

With the increasing use of online review websites for healthcare, there is the possibility of receiving a negative review. As unfavorable online reviews can be an opportunity to improve clinical practices and procedures, Chopra encourages physicians to respond to negative testimonials as well as positive reviews. He says, “All healthcare providers receive negative reviews from time to time—it is the nature of the industry they are in. If a healthcare provider disagrees with a bad review, they should respond to the rating. This ensures that potential patients have both perspectives of a story...This demonstrates to potential patients that the healthcare professionals are interested in the quality of experience and care they provide to their patients.”

While responding to an online review can show that a business is interested in providing exceptional care, Allen says physicians should respond to an online review only if they are reaching out to a patient in an effort to correct an issue. Allen says, “Never get in a back and forth exchange on a review platform. Adding positive reviews after a bad one to the same platform will help ‘push’ the negative review down.”

In a *Forbes* article “[How Doctors Should Respond to Negative Online Reviews](#),” author Eric Goldman advises that responding privately to a patient is best, and a public response to a negative review should be done only if necessary. A response to an unhappy patient should show sympathy, sincerity, and contrition, and Goldman says when done properly, physicians can frequently turn their worst critic into a loyal ally.

## **Online Reputation Management**

Online reputation management is essentially the practice of making people and businesses look their best online. Healthcare professionals can utilize the power of the web to gain new clients, improve business, and maintain a positive reputation. Chopra says online reputation management is vital because a provider’s practice is their business.

Allen says, “What people find out about a practice is the first impression the practice makes when someone searches for their services. That being said, we all know the importance of making a first impression in life and you only get one chance to do so. The same can be said of a digital impression.”

As such, Rojas recommends providers ensure their online information is accurate and update any outdated phone numbers or addresses. In addition, healthcare professionals can create a personal website to offer prospective patients important details. Rojas suggests such a website can include the physician’s up-to-date contact information, medical area of specialty, any procedures they specialize in, and personal information such as a brief biography, if desired.

In order to effectively manage your online reputation, physicians can also set up a Google Places business page and a Google+ profile, as well as corresponding pages with Yahoo! and Bing, and subsequently encourage patients to write reviews, Allen says. He encourages patient reviews via these platforms as they have “better processes in place to get rid of bad reviews, and if one is warranted, positive reviews will push the negative review down and out of sight of future visitors.” However, the digital marketing advisor suggests healthcare providers not sign up for Yelp as the review process may make it difficult to have an unwarranted attack removed.

Also, to maintain a strong online presence for prospective and future patients, Allen emphasizes that the “growth and dominance of mobile search will make the need for mobile-responsive websites and local search visibility invaluable in the quest for more patients.” He adds, “Mobile search will outpace desktop for the first time in 2015 and Google has changed their algorithm to penalize those sites that are not mobile responsive in the search results. Get mobilized fast.”

## **Future of Online Reviews**

“Online reviews will continue to be an important tool for patients,” Rojas says. “We’re entering an era of patient-powered health, and this can be empowering for doctors. Now instead of marketing yourself, you can amplify your word-of-mouth referrals through the Internet. You’re really rewarded for being a good doctor with good patient reviews.”

Allen also says the Yelpification of the healthcare industry will be a mainstay in the future and its importance may increase. He says, “We’ve arrived at a point where people from all walks of life, age groups, and demographics use the Internet to find goods and services. Online reputation, visibility, and reviews are only going to become more important moving forward.”

The trend of the Yelpification of the healthcare industry is on the rise, and physicians must understand the importance of online reviews and actively manage these in order to leverage the power of the Internet to grow their practice. Chopra says, “Yelpification is an important trend in the medical industry. Providers cannot be bystanders, and they can use it to either their benefit or detriment.”

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