

## MODULE 5

# The Basics of Reputation Management

## » Your Online Reputation

In this module we're going to be covering the basics of reputation management. Some of the most common questions that I see over and over again while lecturing at various conferences include:

How would I know about a review that's been made about my practice?

- *If we go online, won't we just be opening ourselves up for more bad reviews?*
- *If there is a review, what should I do about it and how do I protect myself, my staff and my practice from potentially slanderous reviews while providing a balanced, honest opinion and feedback?*
- *Before going any further I'd like to go over some insightful data that will really set the stage for why reputation management has become an integral part of the veterinary marketing formula.*

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It has been shown that 67% of consumers now read online reviews. I was recently speaking with a practice owner who studies this very carefully in his own clinic, and he cites online reviews as a major force behind his new client acquisition. In a further statistic, 69% of consumers now trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. The veterinary profession has always been a word of mouth industry, and always will be. But now that word of mouth phenomena is going online.

As we all know, it can be very frustrating to try to respond to reviews when you have no knowledge of when they were posted or who they were posted by. That's why it's extremely important that you and your practice are able to monitor the conversation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and have a strategy in place for what to do when those reviews come in. Of course, not all reviews are bad; it's just that these are the ones that are the most painful for veterinarians.

Finally, 49% of consumers say that they are more likely to use a business that has good reviews.

## » The First Step

So, what's our first step? Well, first we have to take a snapshot of what current reviews are out there about you and your practice right now. The best and quickest way to do this is to follow this formula:

Type into Google: the name of your practice, your state or province, and the words "veterinarian review".

This will provide you with robust search engine results showing you the vast majority of the reviews about your practice. I recommend copying and pasting these reviews, as well as where they were located, into a Word document. This will be your snapshot about what is currently being written about you and your practice.

The question at the top of everyone's mind is: what happens if you find a negative review? An important point is that every business receives negative reviews. If you're operating with a substantial number of clients, which most practices are, it is inevitable that there will be a few clients that won't receive the communication and customer service that we strive to provide for the rest of our clients. Often, these will then show up as negative reviews.

The first step is not to get emotionally offended by these reviews, but to be able to apply this strategy and conceptual framework to solve the problem. Let's take a look at an actual review, for which I've change the name of the veterinarian:

*"Dr. Doe takes pride in gouging the senior population with terrible veterinary bills, taking advantage of their loneliness and dependency on their pets. Dr. Doe demands outrageously high prices for services that make no sense - procedures on very old pets, imaginary diseases that need shots, exposing pets to unneeded vaccinations and their loving owners to provide payment for them. The clinic staff is rude and will hang up the phone on customers if they don't get their way. Be aware."*

I can only imagine the poor staff members that were on the phone with this individual. Clearly there was frustration or a communication breakdown between

the veterinarian and this client, and now this review is one of the primary things that a potential client will be coming across when searching for this practice.

## » The Three Types of Online Reviews

Before we jump into the strategy of how to respond to reviews such as this one, let's discuss the three types of reviews:

**Neutral/Positive** – Of course, you don't mind these and the more your practice can foster these positive reviews, the more balanced perspective your prospective clients will receive when reading about your practice.

**Negative** – This could be complaining about the wait time in the exam room, or that someone within your practice was rude. It does not contain any slanderous or offensive language, it is simply pointing out some breakdown within your practice. It is this category that we're going to have to respond to online and directly to the reviewer.

**Malicious/Slanderous** – As soon as you see a review that can be interpreted as slanderous, this is your opportunity to have that review taken down and removed from the web. The way you do this is by flagging it as inappropriate on the website. It's in the best interest of these review websites that they have a self-policing mechanism so that if people read these types of reviews that have foul or offensive language, they can then be immediately removed.

If you do flag a review and it's not removed, the unfortunate next step is to go the legal route by having your lawyer draft a letter and sending it to the website company. All of these websites have a system in place to facilitate this type of legal action, and many times just receiving the letter from your lawyer will motivate them to take action.

## » The Do's and Don'ts of Responding to Online Reviews

Now, let's focus on those purely negative reviews for which we can't use the offensive language or slanderous nature to have them removed.

*The 4 "do's" for responding to an online review:*

**Do listen and take ownership.** This immediately disarms the reviewer and shows everyone that you are there and are listening. For example: "Hello and thank you

for your review. I know that whatever the problem is can be quite frustrating.” Immediately, if I had a problem with your practice, I would relax because you’re acknowledging the issue and you’re now present to be able to listen to my grievance.

**Do show that you’re taking action.** For example, you could say something like, “After your review came to our attention, we held a team meeting to further understand and prevent such a scenario from happening again.” It’s important to understand that there are two different audiences for your response. The first, of course, is the reviewer, and the second is the potential client who is reading this review to try and evaluate if they want to come to your practice. By showing that this problem has been solved because of the review, they know that they won’t face the same issue, and the reviewer feels satisfied because something has actually happened.

**Do offer further communication offline.** In many scenarios, once you do the first two steps explaining that a policy is now in place, you can then offer the reviewer to call them and explain the new policy that you’ve created. Often, through this offline communication, the reviewer will go back and update the review, either changing the star rating or explaining that you reached out to them and that now they’re satisfied. This is so much better than leaving that negative review un-

**Do write to your prospects.** This means that through the response to a review, especially near the end, you should really emphasize the sincerity of yourself and your staff. By explaining that you take this review very seriously because you have a team of passionate animal lovers, this will help the potential client to get an insight into the positive aspects of your practice instead of just the negative components of the review.

If we take a step back and look at this framework, you’re going to first listen and take ownership, show you’re taking action so your potential clients won’t face the same issue, offer further communication offline, and write to your prospects emphasizing the ‘why’ behind your practice. Write these principles down and put them in a file. When that negative review comes up, and it will, you can simply pull this out and use it as the basis for your response.

*The 4 “don’ts” of responding to an online review:*

**Don’t (never ever) respond with emotion.** This is so easy to say and so hard to do, because these reviews really impact us personally and it’s a real challenge to not respond viscerally. I recommend that when you read a negative review, just wait. Then, once you’ve written your response, allow your family or other members of your team to read it first.

**Don’t be defensive.** It’s all too easy to accidentally come across as defensive. Remember, in an argument, nobody wins. Even if you feel you’ve won an argument, you’re really going to lose because everyone reading the review is going to consider you standoffish, and if you’re defensive and the reviewer comes back and says something additional, it’s just going to make matters worse. Be sure that your response cannot in any way be misconstrued as defensive.

**Don’t discount for reviews.** It can be tempting to offer coupons or discounts to encourage positive reviews. This may seem like a good idea, but it can actually backfire as those that write negative reviews can find out about the discounting and then use that as a character attack. There are strategies that we can use to encourage positive reviews, but never through discounting.

**Don’t write your own reviews.** Unfortunately, a number of practices that I’ve consulted with have confessed to writing their own reviews out of frustration by everything that they were reading. This is a big no-no and something that you absolutely must avoid.

So, with the 4 do’s and the 4 don’ts as your framework for responding to a negative review, how are you going to monitor the conversation and know when one of these types of reviews – positive, neutral, negative or malicious – actually occurs? You’re going to use what’s called Google Alerts, a free service by Google that you can use to get an email whenever anything is referenced about your practice name, your veterinarians name’s, or other practices in your area. There’s a tool within the toolbox that will walk you through exactly how to do this. By taking 5 minutes to set up Google Alerts, you will always be on top of monitoring the conversation about you and your practice.

## » The Reputation Prophylaxis

The counterintuitive reality is that if you are not online, you are extremely vulnerable to these negative reviews. Why is that? Well, Google will return search results for something, and either it will be content that you are in control of, or it will be reviews from these review sites. The more active you are online, the more you are going to be able to protect yourself and your practice from these reviews. They will still be there, but the chance of them coming up as the primary result about your practice will be significantly reduced.

So, how do we actually go about this? I recommend the “SCALPEL” method.

Social media - Facebook, for example, is a great way to generate online content about your practice. This will inevitably be one major thing that potential clients will come across when reading reviews. It’s one thing to see a couple of old, potentially negative reviews, and nothing else about the practice. It’s an entirely different situation to see these old reviews and then to see a flourishing community on Facebook. To see hundreds or even thousands of people that support a clinic really goes a long way toward showing that this practice is doing everything right.

Customer service – The unfortunate reality is that if you are finding a number of negative reviews about your practice, then you should take a look at your customer service to see where in the customer experience these negative reviews are being generated.

Alerts – Google Alerts should be set up to make sure you are always listening to the conversation, automatically, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Listing Verification – In Module 3A, we covered the importance of claiming citations, which are basically your online listings in a review site. What this enables you to do is to really craft the image that your practice is portraying, so instead of just having a line item about your clinic, you can have compassion-focused imagery along with a custom paragraph. This goes a long way toward putting your best foot forward and really showcasing your clinic to potential clients, and to those clients that may be disgruntled. To see a passionate team interacting with animals can greatly offset a potentially negative disposition. Another benefit is that whenever a review is made you will receive an instant email, not only from Google Alerts, but also from that review site directly. This is a second mechanism to make sure you are on top of the conversation.

**Press releases** – This is a great way to create positive content about your practice that will always be there to balance any negative reviews, if and when they do happen.

**Engaging website with a blog** - As we've covered, your website is the foundation of all of your client engagement efforts, especially potential clients, and the engine behind that website is your blog. Through writing blog articles, you will be able to produce content that those potential clients will be able to find.

**Learning local regulations** – Many states and provinces have different regulations about what is and isn't acceptable with regards to online reviews.

## » Common Mistakes to Avoid

**Not Knowing** – You'll be able to solve this by setting up your Google Alerts.

**Not Caring** – The philosophy that online reviews are not important is unfortunately becoming very misguided. As painful as it is, we have to care about these online reviews as this is the cornerstone of your practice's online reputation.

**Not Acknowledging** – If you put yourself in a potential client's shoes and there are a number of negative reviews about a clinic, and there's no response to those negative reviews, you will just assume that that same problem is still occurring in that clinic. What's more, if they have a good point, you may opt to go somewhere else. This is why it's important that you have a strategy for response.

## » Conclusion

So what are you going to do right now to start protecting your practice?

First, put in the veterinary review formula - that is the name of your practice, your state or province and the words "veterinarian reviews" - and take a snapshot of what you find.

Next, go to the toolbox and set up your Google Alerts. You will find that the process is laid out in a step-by-step fashion and it will only take you five minutes to do. This will be what will keep you in the loop for years to come.

Finally, just file these notes away. If you come across a review that requires a delicate response, pull them out and use them as the framework for crafting your response.

This takes us to the conclusion of the Jumpstart Your Practice online program. My hope is that these strategies become your conceptual framework and that each practice will be able to take them and adapt them to create something entirely new. Each module has been developed through experience with hundreds of practices, and these strategies have been proven to be successful over and over again. If at any time, while implementing these techniques, you have any questions, just email [phpjumpstart@dvmelite.com](mailto:phpjumpstart@dvmelite.com).

Best of luck, and I look forward to meeting you at a conference in your area!