Online Reviews:
Opportunity or Disaster?

Managing Your Reputation Is Important
by Carolyn Shadle, PhD, and John Meyer, PhD

WHEN YOU THINK OF ONLINE REVIEWS, YELP.COM may be the first thing that comes to mind. That's probably because Yelp has 168 million monthly unique visitors and 108 million reviews.

But Yelp is not the only online review site. There are online reviews posted on sites such as Google, Bing, Facebook, and CitySearch, as well as vertical sites like Open Table for restaurants and Amazon for products.
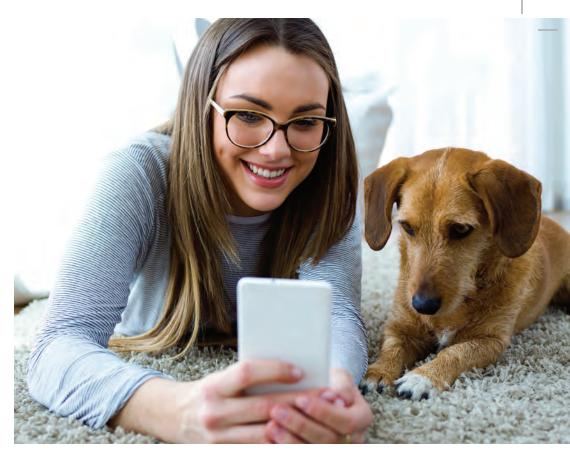
Some businesses want nothing to do with these sites, certain that only negative comments are posted. But others see these sites as an opportunity for their business to get much-needed exposure—mostly at no cost.

Clients have become accustomed to checking reviews before they select a new service, and they are posting their opinions in increasing numbers.

To avoid the pitfalls and maximize the opportunities, it is helpful to understand how these sites operate and to consider the larger topic of reputation management.

The first thing to understand is that online reviews are here to stay. Since Yelp started in 2004, clients have become accustomed to checking reviews before they select a new service, and they are posting their opinions in increasing numbers. In fact, according to Jim Hansbauer, vice president of sales with Vetstreet, 85% of customers expect businesses to be active in social media.

As consultant Karyn Gavzer, MPA, CVPM, says, "If a practice has no reviews, it seems strange, if not suspect; does no one go there? If a practice has dated reviews from months ago, it is suspect; what is going on now? If there are only negative reviews, it will kill their business. If they see recent, positive reviews, it will affirm their choice to call the practice."

Whereas your practice website is a bulletin board in your control, in little more than a decade the phenomenon of online reviewing has brought democracy to local reviews. Online review sites take clients beyond your website to a realm that is not in your control, posting reviews that might run the gamut from informative to angry.

Jason McDonald, PhD, of JM Internet Group, points out that when clients see positive reviews, they are primed to expect a positive experience. Unfortunately, when they read negative reviews, they either avoid the business or enter the practice with some suspicion or expectation of a negative experience, and the practice has to work extra hard to overcome that expectation.

Reviews can, of course, impact the bottom line. Hansbauer cites a Harvard Business School study that found that a one-star increase in online reputation results in a 5–9% increase in revenue.

Reputation Management Tips

If you see reviews as an opportunity and want to control review sites as best you can, note the six key points below.

1. Understand the review site

It is important to gain an overall understanding from the perspective of the site, the reviewer, and your business. While anyone can post a review of your

practice on a public site like Yelp, to make it work for you, you need to claim it and optimize your listing or, in Yelp parlance, "unlock" it. This means editing how the business description is worded, uploading enticing and informative photos, and responding to reviews (positive and negative). Do a search to see what the competition has posted. Know your demographics and whom you want to serve. Those steps will determine how you describe your business.

One concern that businesses have voiced is that good reviews sometimes do not show up, while negative ones do. Jennifer Grant-Miritello, practice manager at AAHA-accredited Somers Animal Hospital in Somers, New York, says, "Yelp has an algorithm that filters reviews based on how many friends and previous reviews had been written, and what we found is that it is inaccurate."

She was particularly irked about the presence of a negative review that she thought was unjustified. In her words, "We had legitimate reviews that were hidden and one review—by a lunatic who never had even been to our practice—remains active to this day. We tried to dispute it, having proof this that this person had never even stepped foot in our building, and Yelp was less than useless."

Whereas your practice website is a bulletin board in your control, in little more than a decade the phenomenon of online reviewing has brought democracy to local reviews.

Yelp indicates how many friends the reviewer has on Yelp and how many reviews each person has written. That has a bearing on whether the review shows up and where it is placed. It's not clear how the algorithm measures (that's a company secret), but it is reasonable to assume that Yelp uses an algorithm to present a certain percentage of negative reviews in order to appear unbiased. That's, of course, disappointing to the practice.

Clients come to the review site with varying expectations and styles of communication. Some write too much and some not enough. They have what professionals call differing "emotional drivers." This means that they are not looking for the same thing, and their needs and expectations will color their reviews. To appreciate the reviewer's perspective, it can be helpful to know the reviewer. You can find some information by clicking on the reviewer's name or photo. This research might help determine if the review is legitimate, solicited, paid, or even fake.

It is also important to scroll to the very bottom and click on "reviews that are not currently recommended." Yelp states, "We use automated software to recommend the reviews we think will be the most helpful to the Yelp community based primarily on quality, reliability and the reviewer's activity on Yelp. Advertisers get no special treatment. The reviews below didn't make the cut and are therefore not factored into this business's overall star rating." You can then, of course, read these reviews. With this software, Yelp's filter attempts to filter out "fake" reviews and filter in "real reviews."

2. Be objective

It's easy to be persuaded by people who view any of these sites with disdain. It is common wisdom to believe that the most likely customer to leave an unsolicited review is the unhappy customer, but it may not be accurate. In fact, according to online marketing consultants Gradiva Couzin and Jennifer Grappone, 79% of reviews are three-star or above.

3. Encourage reviews

You can add a "review badge" to your website, on your receipts, or on your clinic door to announce to your clients that you have a Yelp page and invite reviews.

You can also add check-in offers, deals, or call-to-action buttons at no cost, as well as paid ads that draw clients to your page. If you use check-in offers, Yelp will reach out to encourage Yelpers to write a review after the check-in.

Unlike establishing, claiming, unlocking, or optimizing your page, which is free, adding an ad, called "upgrading," will require payment, but you might find

it to be worthwhile. Note that Yelp can allow ads from a nearby competing practice to show up on *your* page, and only an upgrade will remove these.

To particularly encourage positive reviews, practices are increasingly turning to middleware, which we will discuss below.

4. Monitor postings on review sites
Since clients can post reviews and as well as photos, it's important to remain aware of activity on your page, add your own information, and upload your own carefully chosen photos.

To be alerted to your clients' postings, sign up to get a notification when clients leave a review. This can be done through Yelp or by means of third-party services.

It's important to respond to both negative and positive reviews, and that can be done either publicly or privately.

Monitoring also enables you to measure results, such as how many visitors engage your site, or the impact of the reviews, your offers, or your ad measured in number of visits and/or dollars spent.

Be aware that only with very large volumes can you provide numbers that are statistically valid. You can, however, look for responses to a specific performance indicator, such as a new grooming service or new competition. If you post an ad, have a code to help you determine if the business generated is, indeed, a result of the ad.

5. Respond to reviews
It's important to respond to both negative and positive reviews, and that can be done either publicly or privately.

Brenda Tassava, CVPM, CJV, describes the type of online review that everyone fears: one that is posted by a disgruntled employee under a pseudonym. However, she notes that this actually happens rarely.

The more likely situation is where a frustrated client wants resolution to a problem and, after having attempted to correct the situation, felt ignored or treated unfairly. In the case of a negative client review, it is probably wise to engage privately.

How you respond is important. Take your time, relax, prepare to listen, and empathize. Research the client and patient records and discuss the situation with team members who were involved during the client's visit to gain their insight into why this particular client might be unhappy. After resolving the situation (and maybe getting a new review on Yelp), share the conversation with your team to provide them with the insight and training they need in order to avoid such situations in the future. When appropriate, a public response to either a positive or negative review gives you an opportunity to share useful information.

6. Increase the number of positive reviews
Many hospitals make a regular practice of asking satisfied customers to take a few minutes to tell their happy stories. For example, Loving Hands Animal Hospital in Chino, California, actively solicits positive reviews. Judi Bailey, CVPM, hospital administrator, says, "My employees are on a point system for their performance that directly impacts their annual wage reviews. One of the ways they can gain points is to be mentioned in a positive client review, so they are trained (with scripts) to ask clients that had a good experience to name them personally in a review. Our clients get 500 loyalty points to earn rewards for positing a review on our VetScene portal, which, in turn, pops up on Google and other online review sites."

A flood of positive reviews can drown out the negative reviews.

Middleware Tools

In addition to taking control where you can with Yelp and other online review sites, don't forget the opportunity you have to build a positive online reputation using LinkedIn and your practice's blog.

Many veterinary practices are also turning to middleware, software that provides services beyond your operating system, sometimes described as "software glue." Middleware enables you to solicit and post reviews that you can control—responding, if they are negative, and posting, if they are positive.

1. GO! by InTouch Practice Communications

InTouch's client communication system integrates with most practice management systems, automatically sends text and email reminders for upcoming and overdue appointments, and will send a request for a client to review the practice after each visit. Practices are provided an online dashboard where they can review and sort the results. There, comments can be sorted, evaluated for search engine optimization value, and easily *pushed directly to the practice website* on a page where the review makes sense to both a visitor and the search engines like Google.

2. Pet Health Network Pro, owned by IDEXX

Endorsed by AAHA, this tool integrates with your client management system, linking with your clients before, during, and after their visits.

Mike Erickson, vice president and general manager of veterinary software for IDEXX, describes the veterinary practice challenge as a bucket with holes. Some clients "leak" through the holes, leaving as a result of a pet dying, the client relocating, or some other reason. In the meantime, the bucket needs to be refilled with new clients. Erickson points out that research has shown that the best avenue for acquiring new clients is through existing clients. Hence, it is important to use online review sites where existing clients can share information with potential new clients.

IDEXX's Pet Health Network Pro provides a configurable, automated survey that is sent, with a thank you, after

Many hospitals make a regular practice of asking satisfied customers to take a few minutes to tell their happy stories.

each client visit. One key question on the survey registers clients' level of satisfaction. If it is high, clients are prompted to share their reviews on any number of sites, such as Yelp, Google, or Yellow Pages. If the rating is negative, the practice has the opportunity to reach out and address the concern.

IDEXX sends your practice the survey results, including the scoring that the pet owner has given you. Along with the software, IDEXX provides a team to work with its practices to get the most out of using the tool by configuring the survey questions and selecting the online review sites.

3. Reputation Engagement Program from Vetstreet, owned by Henry Schein

Vetstreet is a provider of integrated veterinary marketing solutions that leverage practice-level information and consumer insights to deliver personal and timely communications. Like IDEXX's Pet Health Network Pro, Vetstreet's tool also automatically sends a survey after

clients' visits. If the clients respond positively to the survey, they receive a polite email asking them if they would post a review online, along with links to different online review sites. All the client has to do to leave a review is click on one.

Jennifer Ries, operations coordinator at Cat Doctor & Friends in Santa Clarita, California, states that Vetstreet's service makes it easy to monitor their business information on sites like Google, Yelp, and Facebook by getting alerts each time a new review appears online.

4. Reputation Builder from ePetHealth, by Patterson Veterinary

The ePetHealth program helps veterinarians better facilitate communication with clients through mail, phone, email, and an online portal. Within that program is a tool called "Reputation Builder" that integrates with your client records and automatically elicits positive online reviews. With this tool you can send a tailored survey and receive a real-time report of client feedback. You can also be alerted every time a positive or negative response is received, and you can choose to post the client comments directly to your website.

Dana Bender-Rios, office manager at Perrin-410 Animal Hospital in San Antonio, Texas, says, "We've been with ePetHealth Reputation Builder for a while. If a pet comes in for surgery, we can ask questions directly related to surgery. I also like being able to set alerts to allow [for a] quick response to a problem."

5. ProActive Patient Portal from VetScene, independent

VetScene offers another middleware product that connects with your client records. It is a portal that includes a variety of tools that are fully integrated with sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, and YouTube.

Bailey says, "Since we implemented VetScene, I don't have to worry about our online presence like I did years ago. We consistently get enough positive reviews that a few that comment about how expensive we are get hidden among the reviews that talk about how great we are. If there is anything negative, we draft up a response immediately and set up a conversation with a manager or, if we know the reviewer, we call the client directly— and always thank them for their comments."

Review Tracking Services

There are a number of companies and services that can help you track reviews:

1. **InTouch Practice Communications**, part of the AAHA Member Values Program, offers reputation management services as a standalone service and as part of custom comprehensive marketing programs. InTouch's efforts are designed to provide practice awareness, promote positive messaging, and increase the number of well-informed new clients.

2. **Beyond Indigo Pets**, part of the AAHA Member Values Program, offers a comprehensive Online Reputation Management service, which includes staff training, personalized consultation, and creation of a "Review Us" page on your website.

3. **DVM Multimedia**, a veterinary marketing firm based in San Diego, California, provides a review tracking service, notifying you by email when a review of your clinic is posted on any of more than 50 different review sites, to which you can respond immediately.

4. **ReviewPush** is a service you can pay for that will let you know whenever a review is published about your practice.

5. **Google Analytics** is a free service that tracks and reports website traffic.

In summary, armed with knowledge of how online review sites work and tools to help you control the review process, you can be empowered to take advantage of this new digital world. ※

Carolyn C. Shadle earned her PhD degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo in interpersonal and organizational communication. John L. Meyer earned his PhD degree from the University of Minnesota in communication studies and speech arts. They both write and train through ICS, Inc. (icsworkplacecommunication.com). They have trained at numerous veterinary conferences, including AAHA, ICCVM, OAVT, and WVC.