

12 Tips for Getting Great Online Reviews from Your Patients



PatientPass.com

Recent statistics regarding online healthcare reviews won't surprise anyone who is a member of a physician practice: For starters, nearly three-quarters of patients now use online reviews as a first step to finding a new doctor, according to a survey by independent software consulting firm Software Advice.¹ Reviews have become so important in the physician-selection process that nearly half of those patients would be willing to go out of network to see a highly recommended physician.

Considering that just six short years ago only 25 percent of patients relied on online reviews for evaluating a new physician, the stakes are rapidly getting higher. But, despite the technical implications, you don't actually have to be a social media expert to get great online reviews from patients. You just have to capitalize on the compassionate, patient-focused care you're already striving to provide.

Which components of the patient-care experience will have the most impact on your practice's online reviews? Start with these 12 tips.



1. Focus on the First Impression

You're intimately familiar with every link on your website, but if you were a newly referred patient approaching the medical practice for the first time, how easy would it be to initiate a relationship? Are the online forms easy to find? Is the most critical information presented clearly, or is it likely that patients will miss something important?

When a patient calls in, how long does she wait on hold before she is able to schedule an appointment?

Few of us take time to "think like a patient" periodically and review our intake process with a fresh perspective. However, in the current customer-focused healthcare environment, friction during the initial communication process can destroy a relationship before it begins.

Ensure that the right people are entrusted with a patient's initial interaction and are empowered to revise and improve the process where needed. Invest in keeping them happy by offering opportunities for professional development and ways to contribute meaningfully to the culture of the practice. Happy employees, according to a Gallup report, are more likely to improve customer relationships.²



2. Manage Patient Expectations

As it turns out, delays and schedule changes are not what truly unnerve patients—it's the uncertainty. In a recent survey, simply being informed in advance how long they'd have to wait was reported to reduce frustration for 88 percent of patients.³

In other words, patients are much more flexible and less frustrated when they know what to expect. Before putting patients on hold, ask them if they have time to wait; this small gesture restores patients' sense of control. If the doctor won't be returning calls until after 4 p.m., make sure patients aren't expecting to hear from him sooner. If they are, you can expect anxious patients to call back a couple more times.

The reverse holds true, as well: Patient satisfaction depends upon keeping your promises. If a patient is told he will receive confirmation of a scheduled surgery by tomorrow, it's essential that he does—or at least that he receives a call to explain any delay.



3. Make it Easier to Communicate with Your Office

Healthcare therapies and treatments are at the cutting edge, yet hospitals and medical practices are still using landlines, pagers and fax machines for communication. It's time to use 21st century tools.

Patients certainly expect it. Ninety-one percent of patients surveyed said they'd like to be able to communicate with healthcare providers using secure mobile messaging.⁴ In a survey of 600 global healthcare IT leaders, 96 percent said that using mobile communication tools directly increased their organizations' patient experience scores.⁵

Mobile communication is directly impacting patient care, as well. Text messaging has been shown to double the odds of medication adherence among patients.⁶ And, in a study published in *The Journal of Bone & Joint Surgery*, automated mobile reminders promoted faster recovery after total knee or hip replacement surgery.⁷

Mobile technology removes all the potential friction of communicating with a medical office, too. Newly referred patients can be sent text messages that enable quick appointment-setting via secure chat, which alleviates the frustration of cumbersome phone trees and online portals. On the staff end, escalation settings alert the team if a message has been sitting too long, which helps them manage excessive on-hold times. Text and chat messages also provide automated responses and visual confirmation that a message has been received, so patients don't wonder and worry if their issues are in process.



4. Provide a Healing Waiting Room Environment

Nothing says neglect quite like a tattered stack of two-year-old magazines. Patients may be treated in the exam and procedure rooms, but the healing actually begins in the waiting room.

Consider that patients may have traveled long distances for their appointments, or they may be particularly anxious about their medical conditions. At best, a run-down waiting room does little to soothe or comfort a stressed-out patient. At worst, it suggests that patients at this office may not be getting top-notch care. According to a study published in the *Journal of Ambulatory Care Management*, the physical environment of a healthcare facility influences patients' waiting experience and their perception of quality of care.⁸

You already know the hallmarks of healing design—cheerful artwork, healthy plants, natural light from large windows, and peaceful hues of blue and green. You can take it up a notch by diffusing lavender essential oil, which is prized among aromatherapists for its calming properties, or by employing the soothing sounds of a water fountain or a gentle spa-style soundtrack.

But here's what you may not have thought about: If no one is monitoring the waiting room throughout the day, even the most well-designed waiting room oasis will devolve to chaos by 2 p.m.



5. Prioritize Shorter Wait Times

There's a strong correlation between wait times and physicians' star ratings, according to a study by the healthcare consumer engagement group Vitals. Doctors with 5-star ratings averaged 12-and-a-half-minute wait times, while 1-star physicians averaged more than 33-minute wait times.⁹

But the impact of wait times is apparently a blind spot for physicians. Another survey showed that, although physicians were aware of patient wait-time complaints, fully 63 percent of them believed wait times had little or no impact on their practices' ability to retain patients. The patients told another story, however. Twenty-eight percent of patients surveyed said they'd left an office without seeing a doctor because they'd waited too long, and 26 percent said they had changed doctors as a result of long wait times.¹⁰

Wait times can't always be helped, of course. So, how can the members of a medical practice keep inevitable delays from dragging down online reviews?

Start by referring to Tip 2—keep patients informed. Apologize, and explain to patients that the delays are happening because of another patient's medical necessity, which is important because, believe it or not, patients have a tendency to incorrectly assume that delays are caused by office mismanagement. You can also make incremental improvements by promoting a culture that prioritizes getting to work and starting on time.

And, you can make significant improvements in *perceived* wait time, which is often more important than actual wait time. In-process waiting periods feel shorter to patients than pre-appointment waiting periods, so by moving patients through preliminary paperwork and nurse pre-checks, patients may not notice if they have to wait a bit longer to see the doctor.



6. Sit Down

While we're on the subject of time perception, studies have shown that patients actually believe their physician encounters are longer when the clinician is sitting versus standing during the interaction.¹¹ Patients feel rushed and anxious when physicians stand during an encounter, fearing that the physician is poised to leave abruptly at any moment. Sitting down, conversely, makes patients feel like they have their doctors' full attention, which is a key driver of patient satisfaction.

The benefits of this tip extend far beyond positive reviews, however. Patients who feel rushed and anxious may fail to fully explain their symptoms or to provide a complete medical history. That, of course, impacts care.



7. Show Some Respect

When the Cleveland Clinic set out to improve patient satisfaction, data analysis revealed a surprising factor at the top of the list for patients: respect.¹² Yes, being treated with respect actually turned out to be much more important than shorter wait times!

Physicians are taught to be detached, but patients feel more confident and believe their care team providers make fewer mistakes when they experience a personal connection.

For members of a medical practice, this tip is very easy to accomplish. Check on patients when they've waited longer than expected, offering a glass of water or assistance to the restroom. Speak to patients directly and involve them actively in setting referral appointments; don't coordinate care around them. Take a moment to listen to patients and let them voice frustrations or concerns—sometimes that's all they really want. And, make sure your communication technology allows you to promptly respond to patients and quickly provide help. Service shows respect, and service involves being readily available.



8. Confirm Next Steps

Given that only one in four adults is clear about discharge instructions when leaving the hospital,¹³ it's likely that some patients leaving your office are confused about next steps.

Build time into your check-out procedure to repeat follow-up instructions and ensure that patients are comfortable with self-care regimens and future appointment schedules. Confused, frightened patients who don't know what to do next will not only miss important self-care steps, but they're also more likely to lash out with a bad online review.



9. Communicate with the Care Team

If your office has ever represented the third or fourth specialist a patient has seen within a short time period, you've likely witnessed the frustration patients feel when they have to explain their symptoms multiple times. It's not the repetition that worries patients; it's that they assumed physicians had collaborated on the referral and that the new office was expecting them.

Sadly, that's not always the case. Seventy percent of specialists say the information they receive from referring providers is fair or poor. On the flip side, as many as 50 percent of referring physicians never know whether their patients actually saw the specialist to whom they were referred.¹⁴

Closing that gap will improve both care delivery and patient experience. Look for ways to refine your office's referral and care coordination processes with more detailed documentation and, whenever possible, direct communication between offices.



10. Ask for Feedback

After you've provided compassionate, patient-focused care, most patients would be happy to write you a positive online review. You just have to ask.

Publicly hosted online review sites like Google and Yelp do have some rules that govern review solicitation—for example, you can't selectively solicit reviews just from happy customers, and you can't pay for reviews or run a contest to generate them. However, you are encouraged to ask all customers to leave impartial online feedback.

For medical practices, social media expert Angela Hemans, CEO of Hemans Marketing Media in Atlanta, suggests focusing your efforts on Google, Facebook and HealthGrades. Step one, if you haven't already done so, is to claim and manage your profiles on those sites. Google My Business and HealthGrades may already have profiles started for your practice, and you can easily follow prompts to “claim” or “verify” your listings, which will give you access to ensure descriptions, specialties and other details are all correct. On Facebook, as you know, you will set up your own page from scratch.

Next, let patients know where to go to leave their online reviews. You can hand patients a pre-printed card during the check-out procedure that refers them to the correct online location. Or, text and chat platforms can send messages to patients with links to surveys or review sites.

But focus on one site at a time with each patient, Hemans advises: “Give them one location to leave the review. If you give them all the locations, they'll pick none.”

Finally, reviews are valuable for use on your own website as well as on the public review sites. If you're collecting your own feedback via a survey platform, be sure to include an opt-in check box to get permission to use the feedback for marketing purposes. You'll need patients' permission to use comments from review sites, too, even though they are public, so be sure you have consent before proceeding.



11. Monitor and Respond to Reviews

Patients want to feel heard, so it's essential that medical practices respond to reviews so that patients are assured that the office is listening.

This can be tricky in healthcare, however, because medical practices must adhere strictly to HIPAA regulations that protect patient health information. Responses must be neutral, neither confirming nor denying any aspect of a patient's personal health history or status as a patient at your office.¹⁵

In other words, you absolutely *cannot* respond with: "We're glad to hear that Dr. Jones resolved your psoriasis."

Instead, you must respond with something like: "We love to hear about positive experiences. Thank you for sharing feedback with us!"

Sometimes patients themselves will reveal considerable personal information in an online review. In those cases, it's best not to respond at all.

Bottom line, HIPAA violations are serious, and can result in substantial fines, so you may need some back-up. Your affiliated hospitals will most certainly have experts in this area who are available to provide guidance and training for your staff.

HIPAA aside, negative reviews present challenges, too. Don't be afraid of a few negative comments—patients expect to see both positive and negative comments, and if they don't see any negative, they'll discount the positive. Plus, there's much to be learned from all types of feedback, and some of it will enable offices to deliver even better care going forward.

When serious negative reviews do appear, Hemans suggests leaving a response that invites the patient to call in to resolve the issue offline, or if you know the identity of the patient, reaching out directly to offer assistance. Often, patients will take down negative reviews after the problem is addressed.



12. Provide Compassionate Follow-Up

Before you rush to ask patients how they feel about your service, don't forget to ask them how they *feel*. After a stressful office visit or an intense procedure, the value of a follow-up call or text message cannot be underestimated.

Studies have correlated follow-up calls with higher patient satisfaction scores,¹⁶ but that's only a small consideration. More importantly, follow-up calls or text messages open the door for patients to ask questions or seek help if they need it. This keeps patients not only happier, but healthier, too.



About Patient Pass

Patient Pass is a secure, HIPAA-compliant messaging system. Patients can send and receive messages via smartphone, while your team can quickly respond from their desktop computers. Get back to your patients fast – and amaze them with your clinic's service.

For more information, visit patientpass.com.



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