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Thriving Through Negativity

A breakthrough guide to online branding

By Tracy L. Drumm

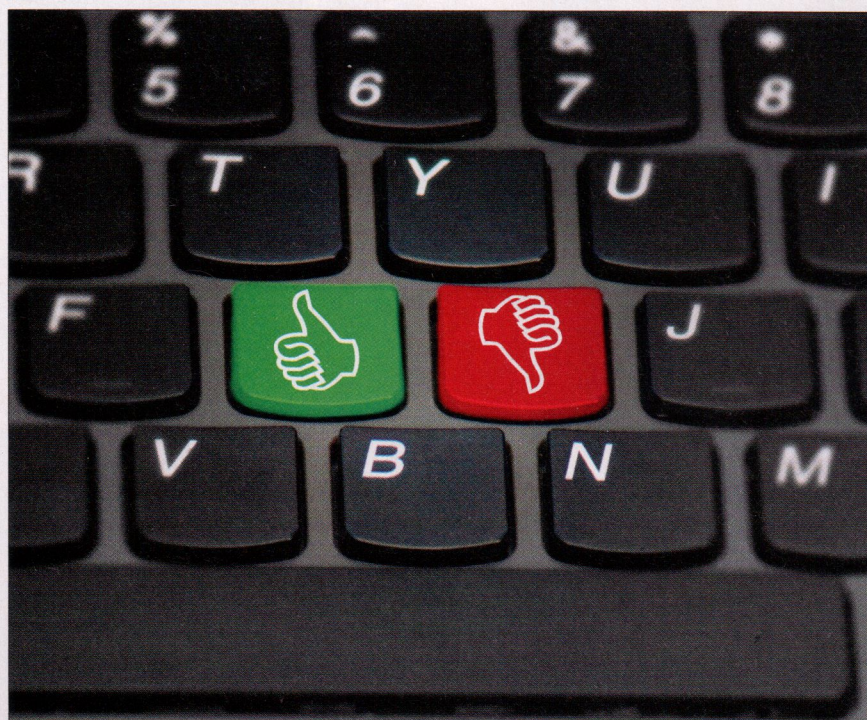
ften, life's most valuable lessons can be learned by flipping through the pages of a children's book. From sharing to selflessness, most bedtime tales by Mother Goose or Aesop deliver messages that have impact.

As we get older and become burdened with the minutiae of daily life, we may at times forget these basic principles. *Feathers* is the name of one such book I recall from childhood. For decades, the story has been adopted and translated among several cultures and narrates the journey of a child who is plagued with "loose lips"—a gossipmonger, as the book calls her. The little girl spread rumors and lies throughout her community and caused tremendous grief through her words. As punishment for this damaging gossip, the little girl was sent to the community leader to be chastised.

The wise, elderly leader instructed the child to go to the top of the tallest building and empty a feather pillow into the wind, letting each quill fly away. Afterward, the child was instructed to retrieve each feather that drifted into the wind. The girl attempted the task and returned defeated. She explained with frustration that it was impossible to collect all the feathers she had spread. The astute elder explained that gossip was like these feathers, now impossible to retrieve and forever circulating.

When looking online at the vast number of blogs, review boards, directories, and Facebook pages, I am reminded of this simple and meaningful story. I see "feathers" that have been tweeted, retweeted, posted, forwarded, and spread throughout the Internet. It is a vulnerable and frightening feeling to watch a false and damaging message about you as it infiltrates the virtual world.

In this new era of instantaneous and constant communication, how do you monitor and reclaim power to control



your image and hard-earned reputation? You fight back by spreading your own messages, and spreading feathers full of positive messages that will strengthen your brand.

For decades, the modality of communication in marketing has involved a unilateral process consisting of a one-way message from the sender to a receiver. Over the past 5 years, this method has become increasingly obsolete. It is no secret that the limitless space and power of the Internet has provided a voice for the masses and shaped a new standard for consumer interaction. Today's model of communication warrants you speak with your target market. Simply firing a one-way message is no longer effective.

Engaging your consumer in conversation is the new ideal. Vehicles like Facebook and industry-specific Web sites,

such as Realself.com and Makemeheal.com, have provided patients opportunities to vociferously share their opinions and experiences. Consumers are now empowered, becoming spokespeople and ambassadors for products and services of their choice. Along with their group of influencers, they have become critics, stars of commercials, and "everyday celebrities" within their own viral communities. They have a constant, qualified audience ready and eager to listen to their live feeds and respond to every post. Patrons of all businesses have a powerful platform like never before.

How do you dive in and navigate your way through the tumultuous waters of this virtual world? Perhaps more importantly, what should you do when you encounter a gossipmonger spreading feathers or a disgruntled patient determined to attack your

brand? The key is to prepare and adopt strategies to help you actually emerge from a negative online experience stronger than you were before.

CLAIM YOUR SPACE

Turning a blind eye to the Web will not stop or prevent your name from having an online presence. Whether or not you want it, you most likely already have an "e-brand." You just might not be aware of it or have control over it. This is a basic principle in marketing. Not managing your image leaves it up to others to determine your message.

Begin by determining for what you want to be known (rhinoplasty expert, mommy makeovers, revision specialist, etc), and aim to have all posts and online interaction build upon this image.

- Update profiles.
- Build a consistent message.
- Search through the patient's eye.

The first step to creating your "viral brand" is to set up or, in many cases, update the free Web-based profiles that already display your basic information. Many physician review sites will proactively start a profile on your behalf utilizing public information. Ensure the information is up-to-date and include your photograph, when applicable.

For example, Vitals.com, a Web site that "examines" physicians, lets you add information about awards and special recognitions, as well as share articles or publications that showcase your experience.

The ideal strategy for reputation management is to be proactive in your efforts, as opposed to reactive. A simple way to internalize this approach is to start thinking and searching online sites the way a patient would. Dive into the Web and explore local results for your specialty. The top directories that appear are the ones on which to have a voice. Choose a consistent message to deliver, and remember to add content over time.

DON'T STRIVE FOR APPEARING SPOTLESS

You are now sitting in front of the computer watching the cursor blink moments away from searching. What will the "Google first impression" be for

a potential patient when a scan that takes a mere .21 seconds brings up your name?

If a dreaded link to a patient's negative review appears, your first reaction might be to devise a plan to have the review removed from the Web site. However, general consensus from experts is that any attempts to silence the patient will not work.

- Do not try to have every negative post taken down.
- Adopt a 6-to-1, positive-to-negative strategy.

Ariel Perets, founder of Makemeheal.com, says this approach often backfires. "Doctors try and sue patients and serve a cease and desist order," he says. "The patient is told they can no longer use the physician's exact name on the site, but alludes to who he or she is."

Perets says that anyone reading the review will still know the name of the physician referenced in the Web review. The patient's follow-up posting may reveal how the physician's attorney has been in touch.

This unfortunate process becomes ammunition to be used against the physician and further portrays him as guilty. In some instances when physicians succeed in getting a post removed, the disgruntled patient may retaliate by starting a Web site completely focused on defaming their surgeon.

The side effects of you trying to eliminate a negative review look suspicious and may cause more damage than simply trying to engage with the patient who has a complaint.

Even though you can't necessarily get rid of unwanted posts, strategies exist to counter negative publicity.

The online world of reviews and referrals is merely a new segment of public relations. PR experts have been dealing with and overcoming less-than-desirable press for years. The fact is whether it be online, in print, or on the television news, you can't stop public opinion from being shared.

Additionally, experts believe a squeaky clean, spotless reputation isn't believable. Instead of striving for a perfect online brand, aim for one that is balanced and realistic—this will lend credibility to your

image. This strategy is a key part of PR and aims to have the good press drastically outweigh bad press. For every negative post that appears, the ideal strategy is to have six happy patients counter with a positive review—a common 6-to-1 PR strategy, in which the positive posts outweigh the damaging ones. The main goal is to have positive impressions bury negative ones.

Employing a proactive approach rather than a reactive one means preparing for war before you are attacked. Identify patient advocates to make positive reviews before you need them. Your loyal patients are perfect weapons against viral defamation. While you can't silence a disgruntled or body dysmorphic disorder patient, by accumulating positive testimonials in advance you will effectively drown their voice.

HOW TO RESPOND

There is a well-known example of JetBlue Airlines turning negative media attacks into a positive brand experience. The firm's CEO, David Neeleman, delivered what is cited as the ideal apology and execution of a reputation management strategy. After being stranded on the tarmac for 11 hours, outraged passengers hit the Web to spread disdain for JetBlue.

Neeleman chose not to ignore or even defend the company. Instead, he addressed angry customers through the same vehicle they were using to destroy his brand. He produced a video apology and posted it on YouTube. Using this as an opportunity to pledge a new "passenger bill of rights," he gave specific details of how the company would better their service as a result of this incident.

- Create a positive presence on the medium where you are being attacked.
- Dedicate a single person to be in charge of posting and monitoring.
- Set online and e-mail alerts.

Neeleman used the negative chatter as an opportunity to respond with a strong, hopeful message that reinforced his consumer commitment.

If attacked on a blog or discussion forum, you can take a similar approach and reconfirm your commitment to each

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patient. Essentially, announce a “patient bill of rights” while at the same time encouraging unhappy patients to contact your office to work together on a solution.

There is no need to engage in lengthy or combative discussions when encountering a negative post. Instead, acknowledge the comment to show potential patients you are compassionate and committed to their happiness. The key is to briefly engage without divulging confidential patient information and without reacting defensively.

Many practices struggle with whom in the office should be writing online reviews or postings in discussion forums. Most sites typically recommend the physician participate directly. If you do not have time or are not comfortable speaking through these channels, designate a staff member to represent the practice and communicate on your behalf. Having a presence from someone advocating your brand and responding to posts is better than not having a voice at all.

Part of a reputation strategy should address frequency of posting and timeliness of responding to comments. To ensure you are effectively monitoring activity for your online brand, set alerts for your name.

One approach is to set up multiple Google alerts, according to Wendy Lewis, president of Wendy Lewis & Co Ltd. She recommends including various ways consumers might spell your name and all possible combinations (such as Dr John Doe and John Doe, MD). Additionally, she suggests registering for Twitter alerts through twilert.com to find out who is tweeting about your brand.

Alerts can come to your e-mail, or a staff member can receive them and monitor the Web for conversations the alerts miss. If the staffer in charge of “babysitting the blogs” is familiar with the practice’s schedule, he or she might be able to identify unhappy patients (so that the patient’s concerns can be flagged and addressed with care at her next appointment).

HOW TO GET POSITIVE REVIEWS

Peer-to-peer reviews have become commonplace for every industry, and modern consumers trust and crave them.

Research shows that reviews greatly influence purchasing decisions and are here to stay. Explore this new model of communication, and find a voice for the Web that is right for your practice.

Tom Seery, founder of Realself.com—a Web site that has seen explosive growth and recognition from patients in recent years—says that physicians who effectively interact online with forum posts, blogs, and reviews can embrace these trends as a new way of marketing.

- Reviews are here to stay; use them to build your business.
- Have tools ready to make posting easy.
- Host a “posting party” or encourage patients to become “guest bloggers.”

When becoming active on discussion forums, there are a few basic rules to follow. First, don’t send your staff on the Web to write fake reviews or make false posts about a competitor.

Fake reviews are ineffective, Seery says, because bloggers tend to be sophisticated observers and can easily detect a fraudulent voice. Furthermore, he points out these actions may be illegal, as evidenced by the New York Attorney General in the recent case against Lifestyle Lift for “shill” reviews.

Second, make it easy for happy patients to get online. By providing tools for patients that make posting simple and systematic, you will enjoy an influx of positive reviews. The easier you can make it for them, the more likely patients will follow through.

Create flyers with a directory of sites where patients can leave feedback. Explain the quick and easy steps to leaving a testimonial. Having formal tools for patients to take home will serve as a reminder to them to jump online after leaving your office and write a review. This process will help your staff feel comfortable asking for patients to write online reviews. You can create tools yourself or order custom “posting packages” at www.ifmark.com.

Many practices host open houses, holiday parties, or promotional events at their offices. Consider throwing a patient event focused on strengthening your viral

brand. Invite top patient advocates to a VIP event. Have tools ready to give the attendees with instructions on where to leave feedback, or have laptops available during the party for guests to “friend” your site and set up profiles in various online communities. You can call it a posting party, Internet open house, or, if you have recently made changes to your site, a Web “relaunch” party.

Another initiative is to select patient advocates to become guest bloggers and write on behalf of your practice. Make it a privileged position, and empower them to post on your Web site and to join message boards as the “patient champion” of the week.

By providing specific opportunities in which patients can engage in on your behalf, you are essentially creating a community and encouraging your advocates to become active within this fruitful, virtual world.

CONCLUSION

Since the emergence of blogs and patient-ruled discussion forums, many physicians feel they have been navigating the rough waters of the Web without a compass. By becoming proactive and taking ownership of your online brand, you can turn the virtual world into a tremendous referral source and ally for your practice.

The goal is to transition Google, Facebook, and the forums from an enemy or casual friend into a strong business partner. Those who have successfully weathered the storm and found their way to smooth sailing have realized the new secret: Thriving in this industry relies on growing your practice via your patient’s voice and not just your own. ■

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On the Web!

See also “A Seven-Step Marketing and Branding Plan” by Candace Crowe in the October 2010 issue of PSP.

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