

Muzzling the Cyberbullies

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BACKGROUND

One in five veterinarians report experiencing this first hand or witnessing it in a colleague. I can certainly say I've never met a veterinarian who didn't have some stress about their reviews from time to time. We deal with stress best when we come at it from a place of knowledge, so let's talk about online bullying. While bullying can take many forms, 75% of these attacks are related to negative reviews on Google, Yelp and Facebook.

FACTS ABOUT REVIEWS

- Distribution for many products tends to be bimodal with 1 star or 5 star reviews and little in between. This makes sense because people are more likely to leave a review after an extreme experience.
- A study by the Harvard review showed that 20% of Yelp reviews are fake

IMPACT

- These attacks understandable bring up a lot of negative feelings. 48% of veterinarians who had experienced this considered a career change. It's important to talk about wellbeing, and practice self-care while this is happening.
- These attacks usually blow over quickly. When handled well, it's rare for these things to go on for more than few days. Remind yourself, this too shall pass.
- 59% report no loss of revenue after the incident. Those that did report a loss reported less than 10%

KNOW YOUR PLATFORMS

Actions are always the most effective when they specific. When you are interfacing with a company about an attack, it's important to understand their platform and the rules that they are trying to enforce. I've found the most effective method of reporting reviews is to remain calm, be clear and concise about your concerns and address specifically which of their rules you think it violates.

- Google
 - Claim your business at <https://www.google.com/business/>
 - Google's Review Content Policy
 - Spam and fake content: fake content, content posted multiple times
 - Off-Topic: Any review that strays from discussing an experience with a specific location is subject to removal.
 - Restricted content: There are laws governing things about communication regarding things like alcohol, gambling, tobacco, guns, health and medical devices, regulated pharmaceuticals, adult services, and financial services.
 - Illegal content
 - Sexually explicit content
 - Offensive content: They will remove content that is obscene or profane, including offensive language and gestures.
 - Dangerous & Derogatory Content
 - Impersonation
 - Conflict of Interest
- Yelp
 - Claim your business at biz.yelp.com/Yelp-Business
 - Yelp's Review Content Policy
 - Inappropriate content: Colorful language and imagery is fine, but there's no need for threats, harassment, lewdness, hate speech, and other displays of bigotry.
 - Conflicts of interest: Your contributions should be unbiased and objective. For example, you shouldn't write reviews of your own business or employer, your friends' or relatives' business, your peers or competitors in your industry, or

businesses in your networking group. Business owners [should not ask customers to write reviews](#).

- Promotional content: Unless you're using your Business Owners Account to add content to your business's profile page, we generally frown upon promotional content. Let's keep the site useful for consumers and not overrun with commercial noise from every user.
 - Relevance: Please make sure your contributions are relevant and appropriate to the forum. For example, reviews aren't the place for rants about a business's employment practices, political ideologies, extraordinary circumstances, or other matters that don't address the core of the consumer experience.
 - Privacy: Don't publicize other people's private information. Please don't post close-up photos or videos of other patrons without their permission, and please don't post other people's full names unless you're referring to service providers who are commonly identified by or commonly share their own full names.
 - Intellectual property: Don't swipe content from other sites or users. You're a smart cookie, so write your own reviews and take your own photos and videos, please!
 - Demanding payment: Beyond simply asking for a refund to remedy a bad experience, you should not use removing or posting your review as a way to extract payment from a business, regardless of whether you've been a customer.
- Facebook
 - Page moderation: You can automatically filter certain words from your page on facebook.
 - Profanity filter: You can automatically filter profanity from your page.
 - Disabling reviews: This is the only site where this is an option, but it has its pros and cons.
 - Facebook Community Standards: These are rather extensive, and can be reviewed at <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/introduction>
 - Violence and criminal behavior
 - Safety
 - Objectionable content
 - Integrity and authenticity
 - Respecting intellectual property
 - Content-related requests

GENERAL STRATEGIES

- Prevention
 - An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Remember your customer service skills. If an apology in the moment is appropriate, swallow your pride and do it. Work on conflict resolution in the moment. Fix small problems before they become big problems.
 - Give your clients a clear avenue for feedback that isn't an online source. At one of my practices we have two employees that call every client we've seen and check in. This is helpful in a number of ways. We often clarify instructions that the clients misunderstood, and it gives us an opportunity to find out what clients left silently unhappy and we have a second change to address their concerns.
- Be Aware
 - Set a routine where you regularly check your pages. This should happen weekly in normal circumstances, many times a day during an event.
 - Set up alerts so you can know when your practice or your doctors are mentioned online <https://www.google.com/alerts>
 - Active reputation management: There are scraping sites that will search for mentions of your company across multiple social media sites such as <http://www.socialmention.com/>
- Take it Offline
 - Crisis resolution in the online space is very difficult, whenever possible take these conversations offline. If you can identify the client, call them, and try to get to a resolution quicker.
- Keep Patient Confidentiality

- While veterinarians don't have "HIPAA", many states have privacy language in their practice acts. You can check your state's rules here: <https://www.avma.org/Advocacy/StateAndLocal/Pages/sr-confidentiality-patient-records.aspx>
 - Telling your side of the story rarely ends up with the compassionate response we are trying to generate. Be very careful here.
- Don't Invite Controversy
 - Do you feel strongly about something? Do you want to discuss a controversial subject on your business page? It's wise to think again. While it's great to stand up for what we believe in, when we express strong opinions, we invite strong opposition. People will sometimes express that opposition in less direct ways than open communication.
- Be Mindful of What You Post
 - Especially in times of crisis, it's important to be mindful of what you post during this time. You don't want to seem tone deaf. If you have scheduled posts, turn them off. Also turn off any auto responses you may have set up.
 - That being said, sometimes a distraction can drown out the trolls. Tread carefully here.
- Have a Team Strategy
 - Before crisis sets in, identify a point person who handles situations like this (usually a practice owner, medical director or hospital manager).
 - Update your team regularly during a crisis. Be especially clear with people who answer the phone and your practice email. Scripts can be helpful here.
 - Have a policy in place for how these things are handled.
 - The 3 C's of Crisis Communication: Competent, Confident, Compassionate
 - Avoid point for point arguments. Try instead to address the problem holistically.
 - In severe incidents, keep hardcopies/screenshots
- Do Not Go Dark
 - It's tempting to want to take down your page or ban the attacker. If you do that you are losing the little control you have in this situation. If you are being attacked on your page, you at least know about it, and it's somewhat contained. If you remove that avenue, it may go to a broader audience.
 - If you keep it on your own page, often your loyal clients will come to your defense. If they are doing this- let them, but don't engage/like/comment on what they say as it can be seen as you teaming up against the attackers.
- Good Reviews
 - The best way to get put in your rear-view mirror is to overshadow it with good reviews.
 - Be careful of review farming. Yelp particularly has systems in place to prevent this, and it could result in your good reviews getting filtered.

TYPES OF ATTACKS

- Honest Reviews: While they certainly don't feel awesome, not every negative review we receive is an attack. Some are merely negative feedback. Sometimes it's even valid. Take an unemotional look at the content and try to see it from the client's perspective. Do they have a fair critique?
- Misunderstandings: Much like honest reviews, sometimes there is in fact just a simple misunderstanding. Someone misheard a price or misunderstood an instruction. Look for this. A quick apology for miscommunication and a clarification offline can make these go away.
- Trolls: A troll is a person who intentionally antagonizes others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content. This is a cruel game. Don't play. Trolls thrive on eliciting negative emotional responses. Engagement drives their behavior. Don't feed the trolls.
- Review Bombing: This is the practice of 1 star review campaigns. This is not allowed by any review site, and should be reported as a term of service violation. Unfortunately, it is not a quick process to get a review, so it's also wise to post a measured response on your page. Let your clients defend you, but do not engage the attackers directly.

- Social Media Posts
 - Don't drive engagement. Don't. Commenting, sharing, reacting all makes these things more viral
 - Realize there are two audiences when you engage, the original poster and the general public. You are unlikely to change the original posters mind, instead you are trying to reach the audience to show that you are a rational, reasonable and decent person.
 - Respond on your page. Write your response, wait 10 minutes, then read it again before you post it. Apologize if appropriate. State your values. Do not engage in point for point arguments. Do not blame or villainize- this fans the flame of argument. Remember the 3 C's of Crisis Communication: Competent, Confident, Compassionate.
- Threats
 - It's fairly common practice to threaten board complaints and legal action in reviews. Few actually follow up. In fact, the AVMA cites that only 7% will follow up with a board complaint after its made.
 - If threats are egregious, viral or prolonged, contact your resources: lawyers, reputation management and/or PR firms. AVMA members get 30 minutes of free reputation counseling via a professional crisis management firm. They have a hotline that is available 24/7 at 626-531-1140.
 - Threats of physical violence should immediately be reported to the authorities.

References and Suggested Resources

- AVMA Cyberbullying Resources:
<https://www.avma.org/PracticeManagement/Administration/reputation/Pages/cyberbullying.aspx>
- Mike Falconer's Blog Series on "Weaponized Reviews"
 - <https://mikefalconer.net/2017/08/05/weaponized-reviews-a-survival-guide-part-one/>