



E-reputation:
a guide to promoting
and protecting your
practice online

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“And don’t look so surprised, Doc, I Googled you after my GP suggested you - everybody Googles everybody these days, don’t they?”

(Stephen King, Just after Sunset, ‘N’s Story’, 2008)

FOREWORD

We live in a hyperconnected world in which the internet has become the true locus of “word of mouth”, whether global, national or local. The internet is a motorway along which information, opinion, rumour and fake news run at top speed.

At the same time, consumers are increasingly consulting internet ratings before selecting a product, service or professional. They are also publishing online reviews in increasing numbers.

In the area of healthcare, some of the most sought-after information by internet users is information on dental practices.

Nowadays, dental professionals need to treat their e-reputation as one of their practice’s key performance indicators.

WHAT IS YOUR E-REPUTATION?

In the traditional sense, a reputation can be defined as the trace of the actual, or alleged, actions of a person or legal entity in other people’s opinion.

An e-reputation is the digital image, supplied by the internet, of a person or business.

An e-reputation is therefore built from the information available on the web.

A person’s or business’s e-reputation is the result of information they have broadcast themselves, but also – and especially – of content published by other people, i.e. internet users.

Content disseminated by third parties is difficult to control at source. However, it can damage the reputation and activities of a professional and their business.

Keep in mind that freedom of speech enables any person living in a democratic country to freely express their ideas, opinions or perception of reality, even if they are unfounded and irrelevant. However, it has its limits which, if overstepped, can be sanctioned by law.

The publication of negative content is not in itself illegal. To deal with such content, you need to deploy a number of strategies that will limit any damage to your e-reputation.

E-reputation management and control does not only concern national or multinational companies or VIPs. It also concerns small and medium-sized businesses, independent entrepreneurs and the self-employed.

A MAJOR ISSUE FOR DENTAL PRACTICES

The e-reputation of a dentist and dental practice is largely the work of third parties, usually patients.

At this point, you should note that the word “reputation” is derived from the Latin *reputatio*, “assessment”, and the digital reputation of a dental practice is indeed largely based on the assessments of its digitally savvy patients.

Although a practitioner’s qualifications, know-how, the quality of care and the technology used remain essential, an e-reputation depends mostly on patient ratings.

Your e-reputation will have a favourable or unfavourable effect on the opinion, and therefore the choices, of internet users. Hence the potential impact of a dental practice’s e-reputation on its activity and success.

In the digital age, it has become important to control one’s e-reputation, without, of course, infringing one’s professional ethics.

The purpose of this guide is therefore to help dental practitioners manage and preserve their e-reputation and that of their practice.

This white paper is published by Septodont, a company at the forefront of pharmaceutical dentistry; developing, manufacturing and distributing a wide range of high quality dental products all over the world.

We hope that this guide will enable you to boost your dental practice activity, performance and profitability.

CHAPTER I

ARE YOU A SKILLED
PRACTITIONER?
WHAT DOES GOOGLE
SAY ABOUT YOU?

ARE YOU A SKILLED PRACTITIONER? WHAT DOES GOOGLE SAY ABOUT YOU?

Up to 15 or 20 years ago, people usually resorted to word-of-mouth to find a good dentist. Nowadays, word-of-mouth is digital. People frequently use the internet to choose a healthcare professional, especially a dentist.

In the healthcare sector, internet users consult online reviews regularly, and online feedback concerning healthcare professionals is also increasingly in demand.

Dental surgeons, all specialisations and qualifications included, and general practitioners are the healthcare professionals most investigated on search engines.

According to a 2020 study made in the U.S.A.:

**90% of patients consult online feedback
to assess healthcare professionals**

**71% of patients use online feedback
as the first stage in the choice
of a new healthcare professional**

Master Patient Experience Survey 2020 (Kisa Hedges & Collin Couey)

MORE AND MORE FEEDBACK IS BEING PUBLISHED ON THE INTERNET CONCERNING HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Over the past decade, referencing sites and recommendation platforms which encourage users to rate professionals and services have mushroomed: think Google my Business, Trustpilot, Yelp, RateMDs, etc.

The most common rating system is a scale of one to five stars.

These sites also allow patients to publish opinions and comments concerning healthcare professionals. They are invited to share their patient experience (which some call a 'customer experience') with other internet users.

Recommendation platforms are extremely common in some countries such as the U.S., and request that patients rate various predefined criteria such as punctuality, pleasantness, information supplied by the practitioner, duration of the appointment, excess fees if applicable, etc.

Some practitioners may see this as cause for concern and a potential sign of consumer drift. Indeed, a dental practice cannot be considered to be a business activity comparable to catering or leisure services.

GOOGLE, GOOGLE ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FAIREST OF US ALL?

On the search-engine market, Google holds a quasi-monopolistic position. It accounts for no less than 91% of all internet searches (computer, tablet and smartphone).

Its referencing service *Google My Business* supplies internet users with fairly detailed information on businesses, including dental practices. This information is associated with customer/patient ratings and the influence of the data and ratings published via *Google My Business* is steadily increasing.

These days, therefore, Google is the one who supplies a (digital) image of you as a skilled, competent and pleasant practitioner – or a ghastly tooth puller. Indeed, nuance is sometimes wanting in patient ratings.

Whilst comments can be well argued and even well documented, they are usually written by dissatisfied patients - or even unscrupulous competitors - and the seeming quality of their arguments gives their comments great credibility with internet users.

After reading multiple ratings of dental practices, practitioners may come to feel that the criteria applied by internet users are often of secondary importance compared with essential criteria such as accuracy of diagnosis, the choice of the most appropriate course of treatment and/or the quality of that treatment.

Of course, posted ratings are not what determines the intrinsic competence of any particular dentist or the actual quality of the care supplied at a particular practice. They usually reflect a personal opinion which may be more or less flattering, and constitute lived experience rather than reality.

However, you absolutely should not neglect the potential impact of such ratings on your reputation and on the activity of your practice.

Chapter highlights

Dental surgeons are among the healthcare professionals most investigated on the internet.

Google accounts for over 90% of searches.

The data from referencing service Google My Business and the ratings published by internet users are currently the main factor in the e-reputation, and, ultimately, the choice of a dental practice by patients.

CHAPTER II

THE E-REPUTATION OF
YOUR DENTAL PRACTICE:
DILIGENTLY PERFORMING
YOUR DAILY PRACTICE
WHILST IGNORING WHAT
PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU
IS **NOT** A GOOD IDEA!

“There’ll always be a few dissatisfied patients, it comes with the territory.”

“Patients usually aren’t able to genuinely assess the quality of treatment & care.”

“Most patients are satisfied.”

Well, are they?

**What do your patients
really think – and what do
they say – once they’ve
left your office?**

LETTING RIP ON THE NET

Nowadays, the internet lets anyone express their – good or bad – impressions, disappointment, anger and so on.

The use of aliases on social networks gives people a measure of anonymity meaning they needn't hold back.

This means that the opinions, comments and blog entries published on the web can be very black-and-white and completely lacking in nuance. They can be brutal or expressed in bad faith, and can generate a feeling of incomprehension, injustice and belittlement.

The internet is a huge resonance chamber. One well-referenced comment on Google can skew the perceptions of many of the people seeking information about a dental practice online. Furthermore, published web content is potentially there forever.

Bad buzz and rumour usually begin on social networks before spreading to other media such as expert blogs, the online press and the traditional press and media (radio, TV).

THE BIG BAD BUZZ...

A dental practice or dental professional may be targeted by an angry patient, by a disgruntled employee (or ex-employee) or a competitor, who (often in stealth) takes to the keyboard with the deliberate intention of damaging the reputation of the practitioner or their practice.

Of course, a moment of professional carelessness can also generate genuine bad reviews.

The viral potential of social networks and video-sharing platforms can generate a large audience for reputational attacks which then morph into a big bad buzz. In some cases, bad buzz can cost you a great deal, in both the real and figurative sense.

IT'S A POINT OF VIEW

Patients are usually not trained to assess the accuracy of a diagnosis, the relevance of a treatment, the precision of a surgical gesture or the quality of a prosthetic.

The judgments made by patients concerning dental practices are often based on criteria such as pain management and other issues which may appear to be secondary to the healthcare supplier.

It depends on your point of view, but it would be a mistake to ignore the patient's lived experience, their feelings and perceptions.

This is because patient satisfaction – the satisfaction that may well be expressed on the internet – depends on a number of very different factors experienced during dental care.

HOW PATIENTS ASSESS THEIR DENTAL PRACTICE

Among the criteria that chiefly affect patient judgement and perception are:

- pain management (anaesthetic, post-op pain, etc.)
- the practitioner's ability to "save a tooth" rather than devitalize or extract it and potentially insert an implant
- the welcome, the demeanour of the dentist and their staff
- the cleanliness, comfort and relaxing atmosphere of the practice
- the dentist's punctuality
- healthcare staff hygiene
- the time needed to get an emergency appointment or advice
- the clarity of the information supplied concerning care and aftercare
- the ability to listen to patients and respond pleasantly to their questions
- transparency concerning quotations and the cost of care or prosthetics
- payment facilities.

Remember: these factors may not be explicitly cited in negative internet reviews.

The expression of experienced pain is a typical example. Often, patients experience pain during dental treatment and don't say so openly. They will prefer to say (or write) that the anaesthetic didn't work fast enough or wasn't effective enough, and may possibly refer to the dentist's clumsiness or even incompetence in terms that may be discourteous. You sometimes have to read between the lines in order to understand the reasons for dissatisfaction that underpin the comments in online reviews.

THE EXTENSION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The internet has a genuine impact on business performance, especially SMEs. Customer ratings can unquestionably and very significantly affect the dynamics of a business.

Patients, especially young people, are very present on social networks, which they are adept at using and interpreting.

They are (over-)informed and highly susceptible to recommendations and reviews from other internet users.

Moreover, more and more patients are comparing and generating competition between dental practices, especially in the area of cosmetic care, which is often not fully covered by social security or health insurance companies.

Due to the progress of prevention and oral hygiene, cosmetic care now accounts for a significant part of the turnover of many dental practices in North America and Europe.

Independent dental practices are also subject to competition from group practices and DSOs (Dental Service Organisations) set up by health insurance companies, finance groups or investment funds.

Hence the importance of e-reputation and the potential repercussions of patient ratings on the turnover and economic performance of dental practices.

A dental practice is a business as well as a healthcare facility. This means its activity must enable it to be durable and meet increasing charges and operating costs. It needs to be economically profitable.

YOUR E-REPUTATION IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY

When managing a business's e-reputation – especially that of a dental practice – it is advisable not to focus only on risks.

Your e-reputation also – and especially – needs to be managed as a positive and as a performance indicator.

A good e-reputation is an opportunity to:

- treat new patients, who may require expensive care
- protect and even improve your turnover despite the competition
- cut your no-show rate and limit medical nomadism
- recruit partners
- increase the market value of the practice should you wish to sell it
- enhance the value of your activity in the opinion of any financial partners.

Remember: a good e-reputation generally enables you to increase your visibility online as Google's algorithm takes ratings into account when displaying search results.

A good e-reputation will also cushion you against a potential reputational incident in the future.

Dental professionals need to pay ongoing attention to their practice's e-reputation. It is highly advisable to set up reputation monitoring in order to respond swiftly to any negativity.

Chapter highlights

The internet and social media make a formidable public platform and audience available to dissatisfied patients.

There is a connection between the turnover of a practice and its e-reputation.

You should consider your e-reputation to be not only a potential risk, but also an opportunity to build up your practice and develop its economic performance.

CHAPTER III

MONITORING YOUR DIGITAL REPUTATION

Online and particularly on social media, information circulates at warp speed. Reliable info, rumour, fake news and defamatory statements are all amplified by social media, which turbo charge interactions and inflate audiences.

An internet user can share information, photographs and videos on social media with a simple smartphone. A dissatisfied patient, journalist or dishonest competitor can all too easily disseminate content that damages your reputation and the activity of your dental practice.

Within a few days or even hours, your reputation and that of your practice can be compromised.

With this in mind, it is advisable that dental practices put in place a monitoring and alert service to detect potentially damaging online content automatically.

This can be done in-house or by a specialist company offering reputation monitoring services.

PERFORM A REPUTATIONAL SURVEY

The protection and enhancement of your e-reputation begins with a situational analysis. You need a survey of your e-reputation and the public's perception that is both quantitative and qualitative.

The following questions therefore need to be answered:

- How visible is my dental practice online?
- How is my practice perceived?

A large practice or clinic (SME) may use a specialist company to have a full e-reputation audit performed. However, an in-house assessment will be enough for most dental practices (small partnerships or one-person businesses).

You can begin by listing the sites on which you express yourself or – more generally – are present:

- your dental practice website
- your Facebook or other social media account(s)
- entries on *Google My Business*, *Yellow Pages*, etc.
- blogs and forums dedicated to oral and dental care
- sharing platforms such as YouTube
- online medical appointment management platforms
- etc.

Then, perform a web search using the following keywords: your name associated with the word “dentist” and/or the name of your dental practice.

To fine-tune your search, you can add a term that applies to your practice: orthodontics, implants, the location of your practice etc.

Of course, you should use a search engine, and especially the most influential of them all: Google. Remember to perform your search from a private browser window so that your results are not affected by your own search histories.

You should also perform the same search within the integrated search engine of the largest and most influential social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Your search will yield a survey of what is being said about you on social media and patient/consumer rating sites.

What kind of information are they finding? Is the information visible on the web true to reality? Is it consistent with the information you have put on your own website or the platform that manages your appointments?

REGULAR MONITORING FOR A SWIFT RESPONSE

Once you have performed your online survey, you can set up a regular reputation analysis.

The monitoring process for a dental practice doesn't need to be complex or require financial resources or man hours. However, it does need to be regular and frequent so that negative content can be detected swiftly. A well-organised monitoring process will enable you to promptly deal with less favourable content and limit its impact. Usually, all you need to do is program [Google Alerts](#).

Your e-reputation monitoring process in seven steps

1. If you're on social media, check your accounts regularly (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.).
2. Monitor what people are saying about you on social media by using integrated search engines.
3. Keep an eye on blogs, forums and sharing platforms by using Google to make searches using terms such as "dentist + your name" or "name of your dental practice". Remember to include videos and images.
4. Make a list of oral and dental healthcare blogs so as to keep them in view. Subscribe to their social media, RSS feeds* or newsletters.
5. Check general (Trustpilot, Yelp, etc.) and specialist (RateMDs, etc.) rating sites. Create your own account on these sites in order to be able to speak up if need be.
6. Set up Google Alerts or an equivalent system such as Social Mention, TalkWalker, etc.
7. You need to check regularly. If you don't have the time or in-house resources to monitor your e-reputation, you can always use a service.

* An **RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed** is an information-watch tool, a feed of free content from a website (titles of articles, summaries and links to full online texts).

A final word of advice: remember not to act in haste!

Whether it is a vicious comment from a dissatisfied patient, a smear issued by a competitor or a defamatory post, negative content must be recorded and analysed so as to determine the measures you need to take (see chapters 5 and 6).

This type of content is very often found on referencing services such as *Google My Business* (see chapter 4), Yellow Pages, etc., as well as on consumer/patient rating sites such as Yelp, Trustpilot, RateMDs, etc.

However, a comprehensive reputation watch is not limited to negative content disseminated on the internet. It should also serve to detect the warning signs of a potential reputational crisis.

DETECTING WEAK SIGNALS

You need to differentiate between strong and weak signals.

Strong signals take the form of content that unequivocally implicates the practice or its staff. They may be comments, articles or videos disseminated via popular social media (Twitter, YouTube, etc.) in which a dentist or dental practice is clearly identified and presented in an unfavourable light.

Weak signals are “early warning signs”, i.e. information that may lead people to believe that an event damaging to the practice’s reputation may occur in the shorter term. Weak signals therefore have predictive value.

A weak signal may have one or more of the following characteristics:

- partial or ambivalent information
- limited interest
- unverified source
- isolated publication
- etc.

The interest of a weak signal often lies in what is unsaid or is implied.

Some instances of weak signals:

- a negative comment on a forum which refers more or less implicitly to a dental practice without actually naming the practice or dentist.
- a phone or email exchange with a dissatisfied patient, who if they remain dissatisfied may decide to share the reasons for their dissatisfaction on social media (even if they have not threatened to do so).
- a comment made by the patient in the presence of the practice assistant or office manager: *“God, that hurt, the anaesthetic didn’t work at all...”*

Dental surgeons and all practice employees need to pay as much attention as possible to all factors which may generate dissatisfaction.

E-reputation monitoring needs to be performed with care and insight. You need to be able to detect weak signals that may be warning signs of a reputational crisis which might affect the practice's reputation.

Looking for, and detecting, weak signals cannot be the responsibility of a single person. All staff need to be involved.

SETTING UP QUALITY INDICATORS

Negative or unflattering content published online is never pleasant to hear or read. However, reasoned criticism deserves attention. With a little insight and perspective, the comments of internet users may point the way to potential improvements that will enhance the attractiveness and performance of your practice.

For this purpose, it may be advisable to set up quality indicators, the level of which varies according to the comments found on social media.

Chapter highlights

To preserve and defend the reputation of a dental practice, you absolutely need to set up a monitoring process.

When setting up an alert, however simple, you need to perform a reputational survey beforehand.

A monitoring process could help you find ways to improve your dental practice.

CHAPTER IV

YOUR E-REPUTATION: PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

A dental practice with a solid e-reputation management strategy has a better chance of preventing a reputational crisis and limiting its fallout.

E-reputation management should not be an emergency system that is triggered by a major negative event. It should be included in the dental practice's overall communication strategy and requires frequent attention.

An effective e-reputation strategy requires that you be actively present on the internet and take patient feedback into account. On average, SMEs that take customer reviews into account earn more money than those that don't.

Remember that customer/patient ratings are word-of-mouth 2.0! You need to be proactive in managing your e-reputation.

BROADCAST RELIABLE INFORMATION

Don't let people publish anything they like about your dental practice. If there is a risk that inaccurate information may spread, take action.

Check the information available via online appointment services or referencing sites such as Yellow Pages, and if necessary have it regularly updated.

Disseminate your own information, which must be reliable, useful and updated whenever necessary: the exact location of your practice, opening hours, access routes, etc. You can also communicate about your skills, but remember to comply with the digital communication regulations issued by the healthcare authorities and your own professional body, depending on the country in which you practise.

If you have a website, you can increase its visibility by publishing original, interesting, informative and educational content. Make sure it is your own content as the Google algorithm can impose penalties for plagiarism or duplicate content.

GOOGLE MY BUSINESS AND YOUR E-REPUTATION

Google My Business (GMB) is a free referencing service. It supplies geolocation on Google Maps and increases the visibility of businesses on Google.

Reminder: Google is the world's most popular search engine (except in China, Russia and South Korea), with a market share in excess of 90%.

GMB is mainly intended for businesses physically used by the public, including, of course, dental practices. It enables internet users who are searching for professionals to access an entry with basic information: address, itinerary, opening hours, phone number, link to the business's website, etc. This entry is displayed to the right of the Google search results page, and is also present on Google Maps.

Businesses listed by Google are generally considered to be more reliable than those that aren't.

If your practice isn't yet referenced on GMB, you can create an entry here: <https://www.google.com/business/>

If your practice already has an entry (which means Google has used public information to create the entry), you can request the administration rights so as to manage the entry information yourself.

GMB also enables you to access simple statistical tools that help you measure and analyse the ways in which internet users search for you.

However, the most interesting feature of GMB, in terms of your e-reputation, is that you can collect patient reviews and respond to them. Pay special attention to feedback from your patients, and, whenever possible, respond to them, whether it is positive or negative.

Reviews are a good way of finding out how your patients perceive your practice and the quality of care they received. Responding to feedback shows that you are interested in your patients and earns internet users' trust.

Remember that dissatisfied internet users tend to express themselves more often than satisfied ones!

When checking your practice's ratings, don't assume that an average of 5 stars out of 5 is the best. On the contrary, a 5/5 rating is generally considered to be suspect. In terms of performance, the best rating is 4 to 4.5 out of 5.

ENCOURAGE PATIENTS TO PUBLISH REVIEWS

Studies also show that the number of reviews published has a greater impact on the turnovers of SMEs than the average number of stars achieved through the rating system.

A good rating based on 3 reviews will obviously not be as reliable as a rating calculated from 100 reviews.

The date of a review also matters. Reviews published within the last 90 days are considered more reliable by users. A larger number of recent reviews will therefore increase your visibility and credibility.

Remember to regularly encourage your patients to publish (positive) reviews. A regular patient who is very satisfied with the care they receive can become an excellent ambassador for your practice. They may also defend you if they see you being attacked online.

Keep it low-key though. A dental practice may be a business, but cannot be viewed in the same light as a commercial enterprise that uses sales-based methods to encourage people to publish favourable reviews.

You can gently and tactfully suggest that your patients leave a review of your practice but they must not feel under pressure. For instance, you could display a notice in your waiting room along the lines of *“We are interested in your opinion. If you like, you can connect to Google Maps and share your opinion of our practice”* or have a similar message printed on the appointment slips you hand out to your patients so they remember the date and time of their next appointment.

Again, avoid the hard-sell approach and make sure you are always compliant with medical ethics and/or the regulations of your professional bodies.

RESPONDING TO POSITIVE REVIEWS

[Responses to negative reviews will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6]

Without being too effusive, thank patients who have taken the time to publish a positive review of your dental practice.

When a patient you know well and with whom you get on well publishes a positive or very positive review, make sure your message doesn't reflect too much closeness. This may be taken as a sign of complicity and raise doubts as to the truthfulness of their review.

Take care not to mention the name of a patient you have recognised if they are using an alias.

Don't use your responses to advertise your practice. Avoid all sales-oriented behaviour as this may cause you to lose credibility.

Chapter highlights

Managing your e-reputation is an almost daily task which forms an integral part of your practice's overall communication strategy.

Taking patient reviews into account – whether they are positive or negative – is essential. Responding to them is a sign that you take them seriously and increases your credibility with internet users.

Checking the available online information relating to your practice and the regular publication of reviews are measures intended to limit the risk and consequences of a reputational crisis.

CHAPTER V

MANAGING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK ON THE INTERNET

After discussing positive reviews, we now turn to the far more complex issue of negative reviews.

Negative review management is an essential tool for the preservation of your dental practice's e-reputation.

When responding to negative comments on the internet, you need to be discerning, measured, empathetic and courteous – although you may display a certain amount of firmness if required.

Always keep in mind that the internet is a marketplace, a huge public venue. Your online behaviour and comments will be scrutinised by the online community.

DON'T CONFUSE PROMPTNESS WITH HASTE

You need to be responsive to negative comments, but never act in haste. An inappropriate response may damage your reputation far more than the original review.

It is always best to take a step back and not respond under the influence of indignation or anger.

Of course it's very unpleasant to be on the receiving end of (sometimes undeserved) criticism. Remember, however, that people are entitled to their opinion. On the internet, as on other media, people have the right to express their views, even if they are minority views. This applies as long as the limits set by law are not breached. These may vary according to the country or state in which you practise.

It's not easy to achieve the “perfect” response to other people, in the sense that you are being judged or assessed by people who may not share your values, knowledge, education or culture. In general, when on the internet, you are not being assessed by your peers, but by third parties who may not even be your patients!

ALWAYS – OR ALMOST ALWAYS – REPLY TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

You need to cultivate a measured attitude. If you are wondering why such and such a patient has left a negative review, first tell yourself that this patient – who has taken the time to express the reasons for their dissatisfaction – may not have had the courage to do so to your face. It may be that this person is (more or less clumsily) pointing out an opportunity for improvement. Negative reviews published in good faith are deserving of attention and of a response.

Internet users also frequently consider that responding to comments shows that a business or professional pays attention to their customers.

So, you should definitely respond to negative reviews that might dent the reputation of your practice. Silence means consent.

WHERE? WHO? WHEN? WHAT? WHY?

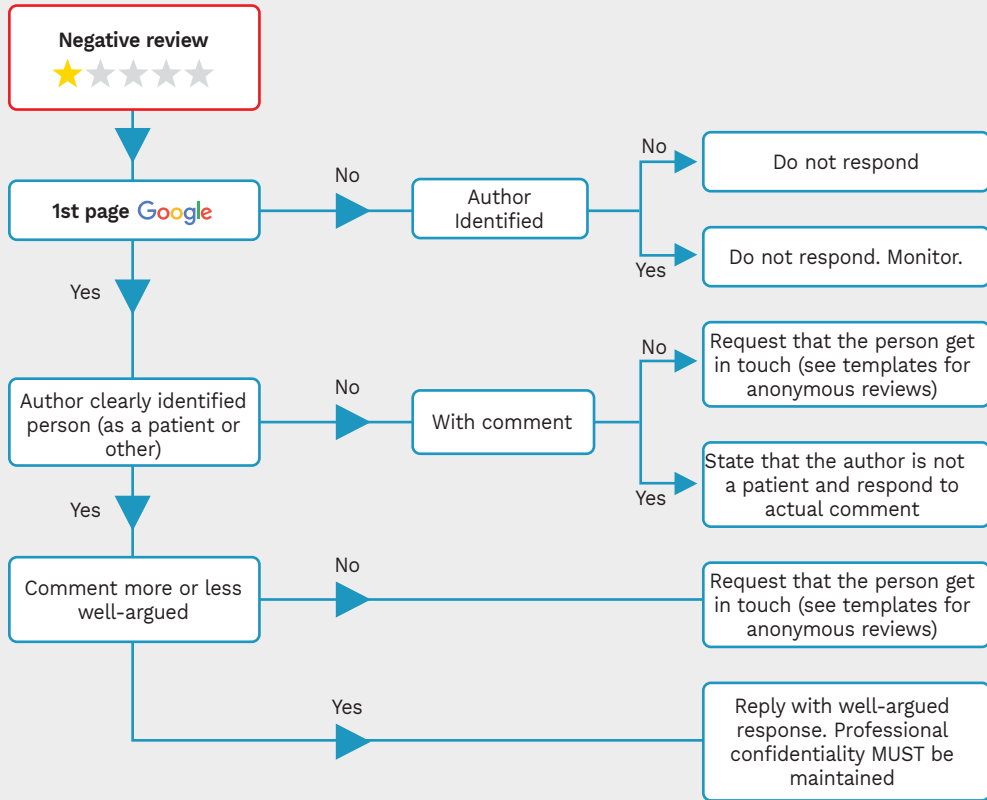
When you encounter text, photos or videos on the internet that may damage your image or that of your practice, the first thing to do is take a screen grab and copy the content URL (the web address of the site or page on which the content is published). This will enable you to keep a record of the negative content you have found, and the date on which it was published.

In order to determine your course of action, you will need to analyse this content:

- Does the link to the website on which the negative content is published appear on the first page of Google? The vast majority of users pay very little attention to subsequent pages. Which is why people say that the best place to hide a body is page 2 of Google!
- Is the author of the review a patient? A colleague or another healthcare professional, a journalist, a blogger, an influencer? Or simply an anonymous person?
- Was the review posted recently?
- Was the review posted on a general site, a consumer forum with a large audience, or a more restricted professional or expert website? Be aware: a dedicated expert website constitutes a significant risk to your image whatever the size of its audience.
- Does the reviewer have grounds, is it well argued?
- Can the content reasonably jeopardise the activity of your dental practice? A criticism of the colour of the walls in your waiting-room will probably have no effect. Criticism of prosthetic quality or pain management will obviously have far more impact.
- Do the text, photos or videos published online infringe the limits of freedom of expression?

Once you have made your analysis, you will be able to devise an appropriate response.

SIMPLIFIED DECISION TREE



If you have recognised the author of a negative review (usually a patient), you can, of course, contact them (by phone or email) so that they can state their grievances more specifically. If applicable, you may be able to suggest a solution to the problem and ask the person to delete their comment, which is now pointless. However, since there is no guarantee that the negative post will be deleted, and since it can be seen by internet users in the meantime, always consider an online response.

To respond to an online review, all you generally need to do is create a personal account on the website on which the review was published. Some sites, however, do not enable online responses.

In some countries (e.g. European Union), the law grants a right of reply to any person named or identified by an online communication service. This online right of reply may be an effective way of protecting your e-reputation and that of your practice.

RESPONDING ONLINE

When you respond to an online comment, your tone should be earnest, informative and factual. You must also maintain professional confidentiality.

The facts you cite must be unimpeachable. You don't have to tell all, but what you do say must be absolutely true.

Your wording should not be inflammatory, if you add fuel to the flames, the author may respond directly to your own comment.

Be empathetic without being condescending. Never be aloof, disdainful or aggressive. If necessary, be firm, but remain courteous at all times.

When responding to a negative review, remember the internet is a public venue. Your response will be scrutinised by other users.

In a way, you are responding not only to the author of the negative comment, but to all internet users who may read the criticisms aimed at you.

People are often advised to begin by thanking the person who left a review of their practice. This is indeed worth doing when someone has taken the time to write a constructive and well-argued criticism or make a relevant suggestion. But is there any point in thanking someone who has (possibly in bad faith) belittled or insulted you? Would you do that in a face-to-face conversation? Of course not. It might come across as irony, hypocrisy or subservience. Gratitude is an option, but it is certainly not obligatory.

Make it clear that you have understood the nature of the problem and the extent of its unpleasantness. Perceptions of unpleasantness can be subjective. However, avoid giving the impression that you are trivialising a complaint made in good faith.

If the criticism and the unpleasantness described are well founded, you will need to explain their cause, as well as any measures taken to remedy the problem – while always, of course, remembering to maintain professional confidentiality.

A (necessary) apology is not a sign of weakness but a mark of respect.

If, on the contrary, the review is completely unjustified, you should express surprise, astonishment, and even indignation in the face of misleading statements.

You can be quite crisp in a riposte to a bad review, provided the person is obviously speaking in bad faith or their review is clearly unfounded or dishonest. Internet users who take an interest in comments like to see dishonest people being unmasked. But take care not to belittle or ridicule the other person.

See response templates to anonymous reviews (Annex I)

See response templates to non-anonymous reviews (Annex II)

MAINTAIN MEDICAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENTIALITY

It can be difficult for healthcare professionals to respond to online critics without breaching professional confidentiality.

Medical confidentiality needs to be maintained even if a review has been published anonymously, as its author may be identified by the content of their review or of your response, but also by information held by the website publisher or platform data.

If you feel the full response you would like to make may breach medical confidentiality, say so in your message and suggest meeting on the phone or in person.

You can also request that an internet user contact you directly by phone or email when the review is unclear or you need further information in order to make a relevant response.

As with your responses to positive reviews, you should also take care to comply with the restrictions imposed on advertising and digital communication by healthcare professionals in the country where you practise.

Chapter highlights

Managing negative online reviews is an essential component of the e-reputation of a dental practice.

When dealing with negative content, you need to be both responsive and insightful.

An inappropriate response to an unfavourable comment may have damaging effects.

Internet users generally consider that responses to negative reviews are a sign that the healthcare professional takes their patients seriously and is interested in them.

CHAPTER VI

RESPONDING TO ABUSIVE OR UNLAWFUL REVIEWS AND CONTENT

People often speak very freely indeed on the internet and social media. Aliases give them a measure of anonymity and many users take advantage of this fact to address third parties inappropriately, in a manner they probably would not do face to face.

In theory, the publication of negative content concerning a third party is not illegal. However, freedom of expression has its limits, even on the internet. These limits may vary according to the country or state in which you practise.

Some reviews or content disseminated on the web may therefore breach free-speech laws and hence be unlawful communications. You are then in a position to take legal action.

WHAT ARE UNLAWFUL COMMUNICATIONS?

Abuse, defamation, smears, incitement to hatred, discrimination or violence, infringement of privacy or of the right of personal portrayal, may constitute breaches of free-speech laws. Remember that the legal definitions of the various types of unlawful communication may vary according to the country in which you practise.

The jurisprudence shows that the boundary between a lawful opinion and unlawful content may be unclear, especially to a layman. For this reason, you should contact a solicitor or legal specialist to determine whether legal recourse is possible. Your professional insurance may also include legal assistance and a guarantee appropriate to this type of situation.

In any case, it is for the courts to decide, according to the context, whether or not the limits of free speech have been breached.

REPORT ABUSIVE CONTENT TO THE WEBSITE PUBLISHER OR HOSTING PROVIDER

Prior to or in addition to legal action – which can be slow and costly, you can also raise the issue of the liability of the website publisher and/or hosting provider.

Liability for online dissemination of unlawful content (abuse, defamation, broadcasting of images and videos in breach of copyright, etc.) primarily rests with the author. However, it can often be difficult to identify the author of abusive or unlawful content on the internet, as they may be concealing their identity by means of an alias or a false identity.

For this reason, and depending on your country's legislation, it is often possible to hold internet service suppliers such as publishers and hosting providers to account.

- A publisher is a person or company that publishes pages on the internet. They select content (text, images, videos) and make them available to the public. In view of their active role, they are supposed to control the content broadcast on

their website. Bloggers are considered to be both the authors and publishers of the content published on their blogs.

- Hosting providers are technical service suppliers (usually companies) that supply publishers with storage space on servers.

Website publishers usually operate a reporting system for abusive or otherwise unlawful content. You can report reviews or content that you consider to be abusive or unlawful to publishers yourself. You can also do so to the hosting provider, who is also obliged to act on all reports of unlawful content.

- Google has a reporting procedure. Reported content is reviewed by dedicated teams that determine whether access to the incriminated content should be restricted or blocked, or whether the content simply needs to be deleted.
- Video-sharing platforms YouTube and DailyMotion also have detection and reporting systems for unlawful content.

Whether or not content is unlawful is subject to debate. In the absence of a court ruling, it is up to the publisher or hosting provider to assess the extent to which reported content is or is not unlawful. If they agree that your report is justified, they will delete the content.

Chapter highlights

If you are targeted by abusive and unlawful content (abuse, defamation, discriminatory content, etc.) published on the internet, you can take the matter to court.

However, before taking legal action, which can be lengthy and costly, you can also hold to account the publisher or hosting provider of the website on which the content has been published. Should they agree that the reported content is obviously unlawful, they may delete it.

SUMMARY

In our hyperconnected world, the e-reputation of healthcare professionals and their practice has become an important consideration for business success and profitability.

The internet and social networks are increasingly being used as sources of information. When searching for information on a product, service or professional, the first reaction of most consumers is now to perform a Google search. This search engine accounts for over 90% of web searches.

More and more patients explore the internet before choosing a dental practice. The information they have gathered serves as a basis for their first – and often only – impression concerning a practitioner and their practice.

The data from referencing service Google My Business and internet reviews are the main factors in the e-reputation and ultimately the choice of a dental practice by patients.

Although the ability of patients to assess a healthcare professional is debatable, the fact is that the reputation of a dental professional and dental practice is largely determined by internet users.

Dentals surgeons are among the professionals most likely to be affected by their reputation on the internet. There is a partial correlation between the activity and turnover of a practice and its digital reputation.

E-reputation management should form an integral part of a dental practice's overall communication strategy. The monitoring of the information circulating on the web and the regular publication of positive reviews are preventive measures that will limit risks and mitigate the consequences of a potential reputational crisis.

It is essential that you take notice of patient reviews. Internet users view responses to patient opinions as evidence that you take them seriously and are credible.

A well-controlled e-reputation is an opportunity to showcase your skills as a dentist and improve the economic performance of your dental practice.

ANNEXES

I. RESPONSE TEMPLATES TO ANONYMOUS REVIEWS

An anonymous review is a review, the author of which is unidentifiable (e.g. “titi75”, “jdoe007”) and the content of which is too general and lacking in argument and could apply to any dental practice or even any professional in the Yellow Pages (a dry cleaner, a garage, etc.).

Examples: “Terrible! Avoid at all costs!”, “Ghastly tooth-puller! Run!”

Insofar as the review is anonymous (no patient is identified) and its credibility is not corroborated by any reasonable assertions, it can be wise to have the response signed by an assistant or secretary rather than the actual dental surgeon. This enables the practitioner to distance themselves from the negative content and instil doubt in the minds of internet users as to the truth of a negative review. It is reasonable to assume that if this were a “real” patient complaining about a “real” issue, the matter would be dealt with by the actual dental surgeon rather than delegated.

Remember: do not make up an assistant if you don’t have one, everything in your response must be true.

The following suggested responses should be adjusted according to the review to which you are responding.

Satisfaction rating	Anonymous rating + No comment
*	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, We attach the greatest importance to the quality of the care we give our patients. Constructive criticism can be a starting point for improvement, which is why we would appreciate your contacting us (dedicated email address, phone number) to let us know the reasons for your rating. Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)</p>
**	<p>Same as for *</p>
***	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, Thank you for taking the time to share your opinion of our dental practice. If you would like to share the reasons for your rating, we would appreciate it. (redirection to a dedicated resource such as an email address or website). Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice</p>
****	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, Thank you for sharing your positive review. Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)</p>
*****	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, Thank you very much for sharing such a positive review. Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)</p>

Satisfaction rating	Anonymous rating + Abusive or unlawful comment
*	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, Your rating is offensive and (some of) your wording is unlawful / is not consistent with the values of our practice/profession. Please change/moderate or delete this comment. We shall otherwise have to request that it be deleted/advice from our legal department, solicitor, etc. (Kind) regards, <i>Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)</i></p>
**	Same as for *
***	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, (Thank you for sharing your opinion) [<i>the wording of the thanks should depend on the unlawful content</i>] We are unable to condone (some of) your wording, which (is unlawful / is not consistent with the values of our practice/profession). Please change/moderate or delete this comment. We shall otherwise have to request that it be deleted/advice from our legal department, solicitor, etc. (Kind) regards, <i>Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)</i></p>
****	<p>Dear "alias", / Hello, (Thank you for sharing your opinion) [<i>the wording of the thanks should depend on the unlawful content</i>] We are unable to condone (some of) your wording, which (is unlawful / is not consistent with the values of our practice/profession). Please change/moderate or delete this comment. We shall otherwise have to request that it be deleted/advice from our legal department, etc. (Kind) regards, <i>Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)</i></p>
*****	Same as for ****

Satisfaction rating	Anonymous rating + Incomprehensible comment
*	Dear "alias", / Hello, Would you mind rewording/explaining/translating your comment as we did not understand it? Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)
**	Same as for *
***	Dear "alias", / Hello, Thank you for taking the time to share your opinion. Would you mind rewording/explaining/translating your comment as we did not understand it? Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)
****	Dear "alias", / Hello, Thank you for sharing your positive opinion with Internet users (even if we do not quite understand the wording) <i>[If you have a doubt concerning the exact meaning of the comment, don't risk validating a statement that may be interpreted differently by other users and trigger unwanted debate. By writing "we do not quite understand the wording", you are distancing yourself from ambiguous wording while accepting the compliment. This means you are thanking the poster for the rating and not the comment.]</i> Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)
*****	Dear "alias", / Hello, Thank you very much for sharing your very positive opinion with internet users (even if we do not quite understand the wording) <i>[If you have a doubt concerning the exact meaning of the comment, don't risk validating a statement that may be interpreted differently by other users and trigger unwanted debate. By writing "we do not quite understand the wording", you are distancing yourself from ambiguous wording while accepting the compliment. This means you are thanking the poster for the rating and not the comment.]</i> Kind regards, Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice (or Dr Jo Smith)

II. RESPONSE TEMPLATES TO NON-ANONYMOUS REVIEWS

A rating is considered to be non-anonymous if you have identified its author by their name or alias or if the content of the comment suggests that the author is probably or possibly a patient.

The following suggested responses should be adjusted according to the review to which you are responding. They should also be varied so that you don't systematically publish a "boilerplate response" which may be interpreted by internet users as a lack of involvement on the part of the practice team.

Satisfaction rating	Author (patient) recognised + No comment
*	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X, We attach the greatest importance to the quality of the care we give our patients. Constructive criticism can be a starting point for improvement, which is why we would appreciate your contacting us (dedicated email address, phone number) to let us know the reasons for your rating. Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (or Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>
**	Same as for *
***	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X, Thank you for taking the time to share your opinion. If you would like to share the reasons for your rating, we would appreciate... <i>(redirection to a dedicated resource such as an email address or website).</i> Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (or Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>
****	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X, Thank you for sharing your positive opinion with other users. Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (or Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>
*****	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X, Thank you very much for sharing your very positive opinion with internet users. Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (or Gale, Office Manager, Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>

Satisfaction rating	Customer recognised + Comment
*	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X [in some cases, Dear “alias”] or Hello,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am / We are sorry to hear that you are not satisfied. - I/We endeavour to pay the greatest attention to the quality of your care and experience. - To fully understand the reasons for your comment, may I request that you contact me (by phone or email)? - You obviously had a very unpleasant experience [empathy]. - I can understand your point of view, but... - Your perception of events is not quite consistent with reality. Actually, [Counter-arguments. Be careful to maintain professional confidentiality] ... - I cannot answer your comment in any detail as that would compromise medical/professional confidentiality. For this reason, may I request that we talk... - In order to..., I have ... [solutions proposed or already implemented] - In view of the fact that your comment is defamatory, please change or delete it... <p>(Kind) regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>
**	Same as *
***	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X [in some cases, Dear “alias”] or Hello,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thank you for taking the time to share your opinion. - We very much appreciate the fact that you praised [add any positive points made by the customer] <p>Concerning [problem point(s)], I... [suggested solutions or measures already implemented] [be sure to maintain medical confidentiality]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May I request that you contact me... [to supply the reason for any negative points otherwise than on social networks] <p>Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>

Satisfaction rating	Customer recognised + Comment
****	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X, Thank you for sharing your positive opinion with internet users. Indeed, I attach a great deal of importance to... [point praised by the customer] Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>
*****	<p>Dear Mr/Ms X, Thank you very much for sharing your very positive opinion with other users. [Depending on the comment]: The team at the practice will be thrilled to hear of this. Indeed, we attach a great deal of importance to... [point(s) praised by the customer] Kind regards, <i>Dr Jo Smith (Valley Dental Practice)</i></p>

Septodont

58 rue du Pont de Créteil - 94100 Saint-Maur-des-Fossés - France

www.septodont.com

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