

The Dark Side of Social Media

The anonymous free-flow of ideas on Internet forums can leave physicians vulnerable to practice-damaging attacks.

The Internet has changed the way the world communicates and proven a powerful marketing tool for physicians and, specifically, medical aesthetic practices. Online blogs, social media sites like Facebook (www.facebook.com) and micro-blogging site Twitter (www.twitter.com) allow you to maintain contact with existing patients and establish your expertise with new prospects. Unfortunately, the rapid free-flow of ideas and the ability to communicate anonymously online can leave your practice vulnerable to disgruntled former employees, dissatisfied patients and even Internet trolls who find pleasure in inciting negativity. Successfully harnessing the promotional power of the Internet and online social media requires one also to grasp its perilous darker side: the ability to damage a business with a few, choice mouse-clicks.

By Joe Dysart



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Bruce Arnold, founder of Caslon Analytics (www.caslon.com.au), a Web marketing firm that counsels clients on managing business reputations online, notes that, no company or professional is safe from the dark side of social media. But medical practitioners can reduce the risks to their practices by developing a reputation management strategy to catch potentially damaging posts before they gain momentum.

Such monitoring is especially critical to medical aesthetic practices, since so many of your patients are within the demographics of individuals who most often visit social forums. They are educated, mid- to upper-income, highly articulate Web users who have well-founded opinions, and they are not afraid to express those opinions. Fortunately, there are a number of tools and service providers to help business owners guard their online image.

Do-It-Yourself Monitoring

One of the easiest ways to track what's being said about your business on the Internet is to regularly monitor the major online communities, mailing lists and blogs—all places where those looking to shape public opinion tend to congregate.

The first step in the process is to sign up for Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts), a service that enables you to track online mentions of your professional and/or practice name, including mentions on YouTube. You'll also want to sign up for an account on Twitter to monitor the posts there. Signing up for an account on Twitter will also prevent someone else—including a dissatisfied patient, competitor or former employee—from grabbing your brand name and masquerading as a company representative.

Meanwhile, you can track blog posts with the free blogwatch service Technorati (www.technorati.com), which has been around for several years—ever since the blog phenomenon went large. It does a great job of monitoring what's being said in the blogosphere and keeping track of newly created blogs. Boardtracker.com (www.boardtracker.com), a free service that monitors buzz on the countless discussion boards on the Web, is another essential do-it-yourself monitoring tool.

It's also a good idea to keep tabs on anything that may be cropping up about your business on podcasts. PodcastAlley (www.podcastalley.com) offers an excellent overview of what's going on in that space. Other free reputation management tools include BlogPulse (www.blogpulse.com) that tracks blog posts; Keotag (www.keotag.com) used to track keywords, including business names that are being used as info tags on the Web; SeekingAlpha (www.seekingalpha.com/tag/transcripts) tracks the postings of conference call transcripts on websites; Yahoo's Upcoming (www.upcoming.yahoo.com/) tracks notices of upcoming conferences by keyword; Google Trends (www.google.com/trends) tracks the most popular keyword searches on the Web; and Compete (www.searchanalytics.compete.com/site_referrals/) tracks the top website referrals for any keyword search.

Reputation Management Service Providers

If do-it-yourself daily monitoring becomes overwhelming, services like BlogSquirrel by CyberAlert (www.cyberalert.com/blogmonitoring.html) will automatically monitor blog postings containing your name, practice names and/or other keywords, and send you daily reports about those postings via email. The

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service offers you tools to ensure that you receive fewer alerts about posts you consider irrelevant. Plus, you can maintain a digital clip book with the service, which you and other appropriate staff members can refer to when necessary.

Webclipping.com (www.webclipping.com), a long-established service, will track what's being said about your business on the Internet, keep you apprised of competitors' activities, and send alerts about copyright or trademark abuses.

Nielsen Online (www.nielsen-online.com) monitors blogs as well as postings and activity throughout all social media forums, including discussion boards, YouTube, Facebook and the like. Nielsen Online also combines the auto-monitoring of blogs with human analysis to help companies avoid potential PR nightmares. One especially interesting feature: Its software is programmed to include analysis of "natural language," so you have the ability to track positive or negative posts about your business, even if those posts are rendered in poor grammar.

Factiva Insight: Reputation Intelligence (www.factiva.com/factivainsight/reputation) offers a more comprehensive look by monitoring what's going on with your brand across virtually all media. Offered as a joint venture of Dow Jones and Reuters, Factiva tracks company mentions in mainstream media, radio and TV, and in posts on websites, blogs and discussion groups. The firm also employs a "reputation analysis tool" that automatically sifts through all the mentions of your company and churns out reports about potential problem areas. Reputation Intelligence can also portray such public opinion data in graphical form for easier company-wide dissemination.

Addressing Negative Posts

Conducting patient surveys and/or providing a space on your website where patients can offer feedback on their experience with your practice are proactive steps you can take to

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protect your online reputation. If patients are directed to a feedback page or handed a survey to fill out, it gives them the opportunity to vent about long wait times, discourteous staff members or poor outcomes. The feedback goes directly to your office, where you and your staff can work to address their concerns. Given clear instruction on how to share complaints, angry patients are less likely to vent their frustrations to the world through online forums.

Proactive medical aesthetic practices may also want to start generating their own positive buzz on the Internet by contracting the services of an online review service provider. These firms provide turnkey solutions for business websites that enable users to post positive reviews of their experiences with your practice.

Genuosity's KudosWorks solution (www.kudosworks.com), for example, solicits positive testimonials from your customers via contact tools it places on your website and in your marketing emails. Satisfied patients are directed to a post-your-own-testimonial module, which includes tips on how to write a fan letter that is then posted on your website.

Another service provider in the keep-it-positive route space is Zuberance (www.zuberance.com). Taking a somewhat different approach, Zuberance specializes in building an entire cyber-community around your website. Zuberance's governing principal: devote your energy to providing as many online/offline tools to enable fans of your work to express themselves positively about your business, and the rest will take care of itself.

If, during your monitoring, you do encounter a negative or defamatory

post, take a deep breath and think carefully before you reach for an attorney, a weapon or your keyboard, says Arnold. "Some comments may be deeply painful but they are not necessarily defamatory," he says. "Even if they are defamatory, the best response from a professional will sometimes be to do nothing. A good rule of thumb in dealing with negative websites, posts in newsgroups, attacks on gripe sites or offensive blog comments is never to respond in anger."

Arnold recommends that you first examine how people are responding to the comment—is the comment being ignored or dismissed as yet another post from someone who lacks credibility?

"Oftentimes an online response will simply 'feed the troll,' if you deny the critic the oxygen of publicity, the comment will simply slip from sight with time," says Arnold. "If you believe that a post or series of posts is truly damaging, seek advice from an attorney. Laws vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but beware that the author(s) may have substantial legal protection."

An essential first step is to make a copy of what has been written. This is evidence that may be relied upon if you do end up court or if your lawyer sends the author a formal demand for an apology or requests that the website operator pull the criticism off the 'net. "Some business owners and practitioners have found success offering a cogent, measured response," says Arnold. "Using carefully chosen words that are professional in tone to correct errors of fact can implicitly erode the critic's credibility." ❏

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