



# MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER— REPUTATION MANAGEMENT IN 2021

*Marc-François Bradley*

**T**he past year’s turmoil has made online reputation management more important than ever. Nationwide, the patient experience has dramatically changed.

Who would have imagined conducting video visits in eyecare, asking patients to wait in their car, come unaccompanied, or wear a mask to their next appointment?

What hasn’t changed: the importance of listening to customers at all times and regardless of circumstance. Continue asking patients about their experience even if you fear the possible answer. This allows you to address grievances and encourage happy patients to tell their friends at the same time. COVID-19 and other practice challenges have raised a number of questions about online reputation management. What should you do about online reviews

when the patient experience has suddenly shifted?

As Warren Buffet said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it.”<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT IS ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT?

Popularized by Amazon, online reviews of products and services are written by past customers and viewed by prospective buyers. While insurance remains the primary driver in how a patient chooses a doctor, the online review has become the next most important criterion.

“Patients look at online reviews as a validation of their choice,” explains Julie Berntgen at Eye Care Associates, Bettendorf, Iowa.<sup>2</sup> A bad review discourages patients. No reviews will make patients hesitate. Good reviews

have become crucial. Hope Hillman, Marketing Director at Schein Ernst, Mishra, Eye in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania<sup>3</sup>, goes further: “A patient can’t form an opinion at all without reviews.”

Reputation management is the exercise of monitoring, addressing, and cultivating what patients are saying about your practice online. Chris Bird, at American Vision Partners, Phoenix, Arizona, explained: “You need to encourage patients with good experiences to write about it online to squash out the negative reviews.”

Bird’s organization attempts to respond to every negative review within 24 hours. It is important to know when a patient has had a bad experience and is writing about it online; it is even more important to encourage patients to go online to share their great experiences.

## *The benefits of online reputation management go well beyond building your brand and knowing how you are doing.*

“Introducing online reviews several years ago was one of the best marketing decisions we ever made,” Berntgen said.

### SHOULD ONLINE REVIEWS BE PAUSED WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS?

Does this still hold true when you know that the patient experience in your office is now very different, and arguably worse? Metering patients through the waiting area, asking them to stay in their cars, and speaking through masks are all new impositions.

Overwhelmingly, the evidence suggests that the importance of cultivating and managing an online reputation is independent from the experience you are creating. The experience, and online reputation management, are two different things.

Regardless of patients’ experiences, practices must watch what is being said online, address complaints, and encourage those with good experiences to go public. At the same time an organization needs to constantly look for ways to enhance the patient experience given the circumstances.

As it turns out, the experience of most practices shows that review scores have generally remained the same even with COVID-19 precautions in place. Patients who appreciated customer service before generally appreciate what practices have done to keep patients and staff safe. They understand the context and aren’t

penalizing practices with bad reviews for things outside their control. Berntgen explains that patients writing about a recent clinic experience (i.e., during the current pandemic) provides a nice way to reassure the prospective patient that the practice has taken sound measures to keep them safe.

“Pandemic or not, reputation management is a really big deal especially when it comes to health-care,” Bird emphasized.

### THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS WITH ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

There are three elements that are important for good reputation management: technology, staff, and process.

The right software will provide you with real-time monitoring of social media sites and alert you when a new bad review has surfaced. Such tools will also make it easy to prompt patients to provide reviews, direct patients to desired social media sites, and provide good reporting.

You need to have staff who understand the medium and are skilled at responding to patient complaints. Hillman underscores that the right staff for this role must “really be able to put themselves into the patients’ shoes” as it is too easy for staff to blame the patient when a patient encounters a sub-par experience. In some cases, providing a patient with context, an apology, and commitment for improvement may lead that patient

to removing or modifying a negative review.

Finally, you need process. While technology may notify you of a bad review, staff must be diligent about responding in a timely fashion and making time for it daily. The same goes for ensuring patients are getting asked about their experience. Often, this requires the front desk to be conscientious about getting patient email addresses or mobile phone numbers.

### BENEFITS

The benefits of online reputation management go well beyond building your brand and knowing how you are doing. Reviews will benefit your marketing efforts in other ways. You will get a boost in SEO, and reviews will give your marketing team fodder for social media posts. Having well-managed online reviews with a good score will help you attract new talent to your practice as prospective employees look at reviews, too. Patients, staff, and doctors alike want to be somewhere that others recommend. **AE**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frankel, M. (2019, Aug. 30). The 100 best Warren Buffett quotes. *The Motley Fool*. Retrieved from <https://www.fool.com/investing/best-warren-buffett-quotes.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.eyesurgeonspc.com/>

<sup>3</sup> [seegreat.net](http://seegreat.net)



*Marc-François Bradley  
(800.608.6017 ext. 101;  
mbradley@sophrona.com)  
is president of Sophrona,  
North Oaks, Minn.*