“Before contacting you, I read all of your lovely reviews”—my clients are hearing that from patients every week nowadays. I’m not sure who actually taught us all to read and write reviews, but I have a sneaking suspicion that the source is Jeff Bezos at Amazon. We have fundamentally changed our buying habits as a result. Now, even the provider (if it’s Uber or Airbnb) can review us.

The thing is, we don’t believe advertisers any more. They would say that, wouldn’t they? That their product is good for us and is the best. Yeah, right. In fact, the only advertising that we can actually believe (most of the time) is price. “We are the cheapest” is a message that can easily be checked before you have experienced the product or service (but be careful of those hidden extras). The paradox of advertising is that if you were actually the best you wouldn’t need to advertise, which leaves us asking “what’s the catch”?

The new buying process is to note recommendations from family, friends or colleagues and then to double-check that recommendation by reading online reviews from other people. Observation followed by verification. That is why it has become imperative that you collect those reviews as part of a robust protocol in your business:

- Step 1: deliver great customer service
- Step 2: do great dentistry
- Step 3: conduct a strong post-treatment review
- Step 4: make it easy for patients to submit Google and Facebook reviews (the minimum number of aggregate reviews required is 100—so that Google’s algorithms can see you).

This is important, urgent, crucial. Reading reviews is now an essential stepping stone in the research and discovery process undertaken by potential new patients, whether they are looking for a dependable quality or an affordable price.

One hopes the patients looking for quality and experience have already been referred by another dentist or a family member, friend or colleague. They are reading extra reviews for reassurance that thereferrer was correct. Paradoxically, the “low price” patients want to make sure they aren’t being scammed by a rapid turnaround clinic that is compromising too much on customer service and clinical care.

The one-star review

Fairly often now, I am asked what to do with a one-star review. Chances are that you will get a one-star review at some stage; it happens to the best in my client base, so we can conclude that none of us are immune to this risk. I would advise you to quickly pass through the stages of disbelief, anger, frustration, bewilderment and remorse—and get on with dealing with it.

There are three options:

1. If it is a legitimate grievance and you agree that something went wrong at your end, acknowledge, apologise, thank, contextualise, make restitution—do that publicly.

   For example: Mr Smith, thank you for your review. Although it is painful to see and read a one-star review, we acknowledge that, on this occasion, we got it wrong and could have done a lot better.

   Here at XXX Dental, we care for over 2,000 patients, and the overwhelming majority of the time, we strive for excellence, but we are also human and can make occasional mistakes. When that happens, we always thank the individuals who bring this to our attention and then take steps to learn from the experience and adapt our systems. In this case, we will be doing YYY differently going forward. In order to rectify your situation, we would like to propose ZZZ solution and, if you would care to contact the practice directly, we will be happy to discuss this with you.

2. If it is a grievance with which you disagree (your version, or the version reported to you, is different), respond in private and offer a conversation.

   For example: Mr Smith, thank you for your review. It is very painful to see and read a one-star review, and on the very rare occasions on which that happens, we always look very carefully at the circumstances to see where we need to improve.

   What’s the catch?
Having researched the chain of events at our end, there seems to be some confusion as to what actually happened in your case and I want to get my facts absolutely correct before deciding on the next steps. Would it be possible to speak with you personally and confidentially about your perception of what happened please?

3. Then there is the person who writes one-star reviews as a hobby, looking for a way to draw attention to himself or herself or deal with issues of low self-esteem by having a pop at you. Sadly, social media has given these individuals a stage. Do not respond; don’t give it oxygen. You may not be able to remove the review, but you can contextualise it by having an overwhelming majority of five-stars. If you have five reviews and one of them is a one-star, the one-star might be right. If you have 99 five stars and one one-star, the public will make their own minds up.

That said, the public will read that one-star review first. An enterprising young dentist e-mailed me last week to tell me the story of the patient who had written an excellent and positive review and then posted it as a one-star because she got her ones and her fives mixed up. The dentist fiendishly suggested that we could all enlist a patient to make that mistake. I’m not so sure I’m happy with the integrity of that, although I admire his ingenuity.

Reviews are here to stay and are an essential part of your marketing collateral. It pays to keep a careful eye on them and to be ready to respond.

The challenge of getting the review

Getting patients to write reviews remains a challenge. Let me remind you of Dr Robert Richter, who spoke at last year’s Stars of Dentistry conference and shared with his audience that 100 patients visit his clinic every day and, on average, one writes a review. Manage your own expectations on this and those of your team—it takes a lot of asking to get a review.

Equally, make it as simple as possible for the patient to submit the review. I bought a new camera recently at Dixons Travel duty-free at Manchester Airport. My customer service experience was simply excellent: the chap serving me was enthusiastic, super-helpful and a pleasure to deal with (he even sprinted between terminals before my departure to secure the model I wanted). I was motivated to reward him with praise, but the resulting e-mail from Dixons required a visit to a website and around ten pages of questions to answer about my experience—you know, all those multiple-choice options, the kind of review that you get from a hotel chain. After giving a 10/10 on the first page, I was told that I was 8 per cent (?) of the way through the review process. With no time for that, I closed the page and went back to my e-mails.

So how do we get patients to take the time? The patient will write a lousy review to seek revenge for lousy customer service or clinical experience—you have been warned. If I had been disappointed at Dixons, I may well have been motivated to complete the laborious journey to claim my revenge.

Patients will write lovely reviews to reward you for looking after them provided you make it simple and quick for them. It’s a simple enough formula for you and your team to pop on to a staffroom noticeboard: “When we are lousy, patients will seek revenge. When we are lovely, they will offer reward. Ask for reviews. Make sure we get the right kind.”

about

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