Online reviews: Does Google really forget?

Naz Haque, Dental Focus

How is your relationship with Google? Do you love or hate it? Does it display negative information about your dental practice? With right to be forgotten legislation, relief from career-damaging reviews now seems to be at hand, but does Google really forget?

In May, the EU Court of Justice found in favour of a Spanish citizen who sued Google for listing information about him that he asserted was no longer relevant. He alleged that this information was prejudicial to his selling a property. Fortunately for him, the court approved his appeal, contributing substantially to the right to be forgotten legislation.

For Google, this ruling opened the floodgate for requests for thousands of links to be removed from its search engine results page from residents in the EU. By July, it was estimated that the company had already received at least 70,000 such requests. Many applicants have made use of lawyers or search engine optimisation professionals, creating a niche for companies, which are charging the price of an implant per month to manage their clients’ online reputation on Google.

The company’s hands are tied in this matter. Regardless of its algorithms’ preference in ranking news and media sites, they have to follow this ruling. Recent threats of financial penalties in various European countries have softened Google’s resolve further, and there is a similar ongoing case in Japan. Is it possibly the end of the line?

For some dentists, this could be the long-awaited answer to their prayers. In an era in which online competition is omnipresent, the patient’s critical eyes, negative reviews can be very damaging to a business. In the past, a lifelong career could be destroyed by unsubstantiated hearsay online. A seasoned professional’s one error would previously always have been visible on Google, possibly damaging that person’s confidence, career and standing. I have numerous conversations about negative Facebook/Well/Google reviews on a weekly basis here at Dental Focus and receive a large volume of phone calls about how to be removed from Google for bad press.

What about data on dentists who have been investigated by the General Dental Council and cleared? Is not making this data available fair to them or do patients deserve to know the full story regardless of how much the dentist has invested in developing or redeeming himself or herself? If you were a prospective patient, would you perform a search and be put off by any negative findings?

No doubt, there is a minority who deserve to be highlighted on Google for all their wrong-doings. What is the position regarding having their names omitted?

In the first week of Google making available a means for search removal requests, 22 per cent (the greatest number by nation) of all applications came from the UK. When requesting removal from Google’s search engine results page, the user must not only list all links he or she wants to be removed, but also provide the reason that he or she wants to have such links removed. Invasion of privacy appears to be a popular reason.

Unfortunately, the company has also had numerous cases of fraudulent removal requests from impersonators trying to harm the competition. It seems that there is always good and bad practice, whatever the medium.

In order to manage this, Google states: “We will assess each individual request and attempt to balance the privacy rights of the individual with the public’s right to know and distribute information. When evaluating your request, we will look at whether the results include outdated information about you, as well as whether there’s a public interest in the information—for example, information about financial scams, professional malpractice, criminal convictions, or public misconduct of government officials.”

Will you be safe once a link has been removed from Google? There are sites such as hiddenfromgoogle.com that openly display all hidden results. Even if a result has been hidden, the bottom of the results page on Google states that some results have been removed. At times, it even provides a link to hiddenfromgoogle.com.

It appears that, even if something has been deleted, Google still knows everything about you. Everything on the Internet is recorded forever.