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Coping with online criticism

Many practice owners worry about bad reviews and how they might affect their business. But in the age of smartphones, there's more opportunity than ever for clients to leave feedback. For this reason, it's important to understand how to handle negative comments and how your response affects how other pet owners view your practice.

According to the Office for National Statistics (2016), the number of people using the internet to find information about goods and services is on the rise. In 2016, it was the second most common online activity behind e-mail, with 76 per cent of all adults using reviews to help them make decisions. In 2007, this figure was estimated to be just 58 per cent.

Whether you like them or not, online reviews are an essential part of veterinary practice – people will seek them out, and they will trust them. In fact, a recent survey carried out by online marketing specialist, BrightLocal, found that 88 per cent of consumers trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation. So, how can you encourage clients to leave feedback and how do you respond to negative reviews?

The benefits

Online reviews give practice owners the opportunity to develop a relationship with their clients. Many people will review your practice online who might not otherwise tell you what they think. Some reviews may suggest improvements or raise concerns related to your practice, so they provide a good opportunity to resolve issues and strengthen your business.

It's also highly likely that clients who raise concerns online would still complain about your practice to other people, even if they didn't leave a review. At the very least, seeing their complaint online gives you a chance to address the concern and respond in public.

Last, but by no means least, reviews can influence



where your practice appears in search engine results. Some search engines take into account how many times your practice gets mentioned. If mentioned frequently, your practice is likely to appear higher in search results than one that isn't reviewed that much.

Keep your cool

No matter how good you think your practice is, it will receive the occasional negative review and, while it can make you feel upset or angry, it's important to take a step back before writing your response. Read the review several times to make sure you understand what the client is saying – first as the owner of the practice and second as though you are the client.

Try to understand your client's feelings, even if you don't agree with what they are saying. It's also wise to remember that bad reviews can be beneficial – some people are suspicious of businesses that have nothing but positive feedback.

Research the incident

When faced with a negative review, start by researching the incident. Speak to your

team to obtain their side of the story and chat with the author in private to glean more information. If the negative review is on social media, you should respond in public and ask the writer to contact you via private message or e-mail. Introduce yourself to the client, thank them for using your business and apologise for the fact their experience didn't meet their expectations.

If necessary, ask the client for more details, or make an offer to rectify their concern. Sometimes you simply need to improve a procedure. For example: "We've created a cat-friendly area now so that our feline patients have somewhere to relax away from our canine patients." In other circumstances, you might want to offer some sort of compensation – for example, "We would like to offer you 25 per cent off your next purchase from our pet shop to make up for the delay in seeing Fido."

Respond in public

Once you have communicated with the client in private, respond to their original message in public by acknowledging the problem



*Suggested Personal & Professional Development (PPD)



and outlining what you have done to resolve it. This will show to other clients that you are responsive with feedback. Try and reply to the review as soon as possible, because this shows how attentive and receptive you are. It also demonstrates that you are efficient in handling specific issues and client concerns.

When putting together your response, mention how sorry you are to hear of the client's concern, clear up any misunderstandings and show that you're committed to resolving any problems they may encounter with your practice. Remember to stay polite and professional at all times – a negative response is likely to do even more damage to your practice.

For example, to respond to a client who is unhappy about the cost of treatment you might want to say: "Thank you for providing this feedback. As I explained over the telephone, we strive to give clients and their pets the best veterinary care and high-quality medicines. We hope that Buster is now on the road to recovery and if you have any concerns please don't hesitate to call our team at [telephone number]."

Alternatively, to respond to a client who was unable to make an appointment, you could say: "Many thanks for your comments. As I explained in my e-mail, our telephone lines were down on the morning you tried to book an appointment, which is why you were unable to speak to our receptionist. I'm pleased to say that our systems are now back up and running and we are looking forward to seeing Poppy for her check-up next week."

Reply to positive reviews

Replying to positive – as well as negative – reviews shows clients that you are interested in what they have to say. Your client has

enjoyed your service, so take this opportunity to bolster your reputation. Start by thanking the client for taking the time to share his or her positive experience. As with bad reviews, remain polite and professional at all times, but don't be afraid to show some personality.

For example: "Thank you for sharing your great experience. We're delighted to hear that you enjoyed your visit to Elmtree Veterinary Centre. Our ultimate goal is to provide pets with the best possible veterinary care. On behalf of all vets and staff, thank you for trusting us with the care of Dexter and we look forward to seeing you again soon."

Share feedback

Good reviews boost morale and increase employee satisfaction. No matter how you choose to share them – either via an all-users e-mail or displayed in the staff room – sharing positive feedback is a great way to let staff know they are doing a good job. Sharing good reviews also drowns out any negativity that comes from bad reviews and helps to establish a standard – they show staff what you, as a practice manager, believe they should be aiming for.

If you decide to publicise your reviews – be that on your website or through practice literature – try to include the client's name and location, as this gives them more credibility.

Encourage online reviews

One of the best ways to counter a negative review is to encourage a host of positive ones. People generally only leave reviews for something they love or hate, so tap into the 'silent majority' by requesting feedback. Include links to review sites on appointment reminders or ask clients to review the practice as they pay for their pet's treatment. You could even ask

your web hosts to set up an e-mail that goes out to clients after each appointment.

Make it easy for your clients to review your practice by linking to a survey on your website or register your practice on popular review sites, such as Yelp and Google My Business. You might also want to give your customers an incentive for leaving a review – 10 per cent off the cost of their pet's next visit maybe? This reward must apply to all reviewers, however, and not just those who leave positive feedback.

Social media is also a great way to engage with your clients. Why not start a conversation among your Twitter or Facebook followers by asking them a simple question such as: "How do you think we could improve our waiting room?" If going down this route, make sure that you assign somebody to take care of the responses.

What should you do with the information?

Once you have dealt with a negative review, it's time to decide whether the issue is ongoing or whether it is a 'one-off'. For example, if you receive feedback that your receptionists are rude, then you should take action to rectify the problem. However, if the majority of reviews comment on how friendly they are – and just one person complains – then it might be an isolated issue. By looking out for trends and addressing client concerns, you will keep existing clients happy and bring new ones through your door. ■

What shouldn't you do?

- post reviews yourself or ask friends and family
- pay a third party to write a review
- publicise only good reviews on your website
- offer owners discounts or incentives to leave a positive review.

Reference

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