

The Importance of Monitoring Online Patient Comments

Alan A. Ayers, MBA, MAcc

Content Advisor and Board of Directors, Urgent Care Association of America

Associate Editor, *The Journal of Urgent Care Medicine*

Vice President, Concentra Urgent Care

Service-oriented businesses such as hotels and restaurants have long clued into the fact that online feedback can make or break their brands. Urgent care centers are no different—word-of-mouth via social media and Internet review sites can positively or negatively affect an urgent care center's bottom line.

In the past, a patient who experienced a remarkably good or bad visit to a doctor's office may have told a handful of friends and family members about it. Today, in the interconnected world of social media—that same patient may post online feedback that is read by thousands of potential “virtual friends,” who use the feedback not only in their decision whether to use a provider, but also to shape their expectations as to what that provider visit will entail.

Best of Yelp: Chicago - Urgent Care

[See More](#)

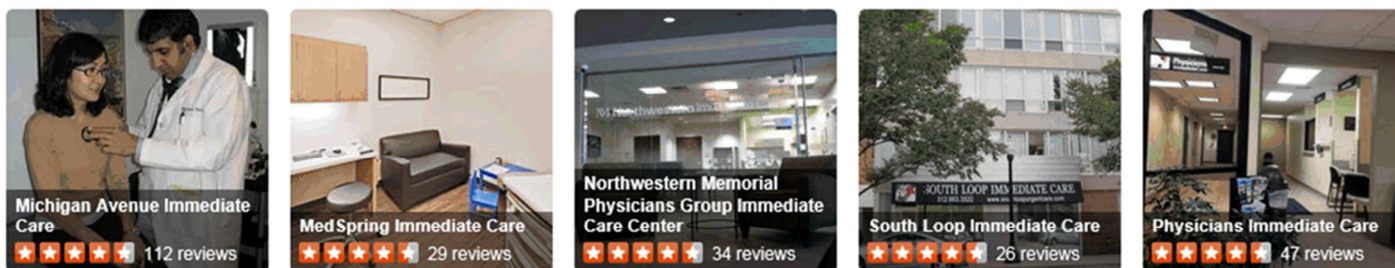


Figure 1.0: Consumers using the website Yelp! can compare patient reviews of competing urgent care centers.

The Case for Social Media

Like other “retail” and “service-oriented” businesses, the success or failure of an urgent care center is determined by its positive brand association in the community, repeat business from loyal patients, and referrals from past patients and other medical providers. This concept of “word of mouth” is nothing new, but the Internet has certainly accelerated the diffusion of good and bad experiences across increasingly larger audiences.

For consumers seeking care for an immediate medical need, the Internet has replaced traditional, less interactive, and less dense information sources (such as the Yellow Pages). “According to a consumer choice survey from Ad-ology Research, social media played a role in the choice of a facility for nearly 40% of recent hospital or urgent-care center patients, with more than half of 25-35 year-olds reporting they were influenced by it” (Ryan & Sisko, 2012). As illustrated in Figure 1.0, patients given a choice of competing urgent care centers are likely to choose the one with the most favorable online reviews. Likewise, negative comments can adversely impact an urgent care center's revenue by deterring potential patients.

Even when patients choose to use an urgent care center despite its negative reviews, those reviews still shape patient expectations as to what a visit to the center will entail. When negative feedback has conditioned a patient to expect something wrong with a center's service, he or she will be much more likely to find something wrong. Thus, negative online feedback begets negative online feedback.

Social Media and Quality Assurance

Prospective patients are not only using the Internet to locate urgent care centers in their communities, they are also reading online reviews posted by people who have visited particular centers to help them decide which center will best meet their needs.

Google, Facebook, Yelp, HealthGrades, RateMDs, Twitter and other websites are used by patients to post reviews of their experiences at urgent care centers across the country. These reviews, which are picked up by major Internet search engines, provide a wealth of information regarding patient satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with a specific doctor or with the center. Quality of clinical care delivered, the friendliness of the staff, length and communication of wait times, facility accessibility and cleanliness, billing accuracy and other issues are all there for the whole world to read.

Thus, there is no reason for an urgent care center owner/operator to be unaware of the online reputation of his or her business. Ignoring online feedback, especially negative feedback, is foolhardy and is akin to burying your head in the sand. The wise urgent care operator thus takes online feedback to heart—constantly monitoring sites and correcting service deficiencies so as to attain better ratings from future patients.

Utilizing Online Feedback to Grow Your Business

How can you harness the power of social media for the benefit of your urgent care center? One way is to monitor and address feedback in a timely and considerate manner:

- **Assign one or more persons to monitor relevant social media sites for reviews** and comments about the center and its physicians. The person you assign should be Internet and social media-savvy and should search all the relevant physician rating sites on a scheduled basis (depending on the center's volume and location this may be daily but certainly no less frequently than once a week).
- **Ensure HIPAA compliance.** The person you assign to monitor and respond to online feedback should be aware of HIPAA regulations. Never reveal personal information about a patient or his or her condition online. The same rules regarding patient privacy that govern office practices also apply to social media. Clear procedures/practices should be drawn up and the staff member(s) you assign to monitor social media should be trained accordingly. Obtain legal advice as needed.
- **Positive feedback can be utilized in marketing campaigns.** It can also be used as positive reinforcement for staff (i.e. to demonstrate the ways in which the center has excelled in pleasing patients). Any information utilized for marketing purposes must be scrubbed of any personally identifying information.
- **Address negative feedback in a timely manner, but do not address feedback online.** Unlike other businesses, health care businesses are held to a higher standard in regards to patient privacy. Instead, call the person making the negative comment personally to discuss their experience. Address them respectfully, ask what could have been done to make their experience a better one and thank them for their feedback. Do not take negative comments personally—use them to make positive changes in your business.
- **Use negative feedback to improve service delivery.** Staff should be made aware of negative comments—not to make them feel bad, but rather, to demonstrate what patients disliked and to illustrate how the staff may better please patients in the future. Again, comments should be scrubbed so as not to identify the patient or the staff member mentioned (if applicable). Negative feedback is best leveraged in a plan of corrective action that entails staff training and process improvement.

- **Never be tempted to post fake positive reviews.** Many review sites such as Yelp have software that filters reviews and suspicious reviews will not be published. Plus, patients can see through reviews that seem shallow or insincere. Likewise, criticizing rivals is illegal and could open up your business to legal sanctions.

Prioritize Customer Service

The best way to grow your urgent care center is to treat every patient as a potential online reviewer—someone who has the power to build or disparage your business reputation. Given that “one in five Americans uses social media websites as a source of healthcare information” and that “social networks are weaving themselves ever more intricately into the fabric of the digital experience, opening a world of new opportunity for business and technology” (Science and Environment, 2011), urgent care centers must adapt to the new reality of the Internet as the powerful tool it has become.

Sources:

- Ryan, C & Sisko, J. (2012). Social media vital signs: How urgent care centers can connect, interact and build relationships with patients. *The Journal of Urgent Care Medicine*. <http://jucom.com/read/casereport.php?casereport=31>
- Science and Environment, Dec 28, 2011. Social networking is the most popular online activity. http://www.thenewage.co.za/38836-1021-53-Social_networking_is_the_most_popular_online_activity