The internet and social media have fundamentally changed the ways in which healthcare consumers gather information and provide feedback. More and more, patients are looking online to address their healthcare needs and to sound off about their experiences.

A recent survey showed that 84 percent of patients use online reviews to evaluate doctors, and 77 percent use these reviews as the first step in finding a new doctor.¹ These numbers underscore the significance of online reviews — both positive and negative — to healthcare organizations’ and practitioners’ reputations and viability.

For healthcare providers, the need to manage their online reputations is becoming more imperative as review sites — such as Yelp, ZocDoc, Vitals.com, Healthgrades, and more — increase in popularity. Although negative online reviews can present challenges, providers can implement a number of risk management strategies to address this issue.²

As part of your organization’s social media and communication policies, develop a strategy for interacting with patients online, including responding to both positive and negative online reviews.

Designate an appropriate individual to monitor the organization’s online presence as well as online reviews and comments for individual providers.

Explore the possibility of using online alerts and other technology solutions to manage the organization’s and providers’ online reputations.

Consider developing scripted language as a response mechanism for negative online reviews. The language should emphasize the organization’s commitment to high-quality patient care and satisfaction and should encourage individuals who have concerns to contact the office directly.

Be aware of state and federal privacy regulations, and ensure that anyone responding to online patient reviews understands the obligation to protect patient privacy and confidentiality.
In each circumstance, consider the best approach for handling the online review. Options might include (a) not responding at all, (b) responding online in a professional manner, or (c) contacting a known patient directly to address his/her concerns.

Avoid responses to negative reviews that sound defensive, make excuses, or criticize the patient in any way. Additionally, avoid engaging in online arguments or behavior that might be considered threatening.

Understand and reinforce the importance of treating all patients with courtesy and respect and exhibiting professionalism in both in-person and online interactions.

Consider online reviews a learning opportunity for both providers and staff. Review both positive and negative reviews and discuss how the organization can build on quality improvement processes.

Encourage trusted, satisfied patients to post online reviews. Reviews that discuss positive experiences with the organization and its providers will help counteract negative reviews.

Devise a plan for how your organization can use social media to build a positive online presence and share its mission. Doing so can help provide balance for potential negative feedback.

Consult legal counsel or consider contacting a review site’s webmaster if a patient posts information that is false/defamatory.