

# Word of Mouth in the Digital Age: Online Physician Ratings

Steve Gillies, BA; for KarenZupko & Associates, Inc.

People talk about their doctors. An orthopedic practice's growth and sustainability can depend on it. In addition to church events, supermarket checkout lines, youth soccer games, Parent Teacher Organization meetings, and conversations with neighbors, patients now have a powerful new venue to voice their opinions—the Internet. Online physician ratings offer the latest, cutting-edge twist on word-of-mouth marketing.

Much of the attention given to Web sites that offer online physician ratings focuses on the possibility of anonymous negative reviews. Indeed, these sites have the potential to cause physicians harm. "It does not matter that the people who write the online reviews may be loonies or idiots. Readers do not care and one bad review from a kook can severely damage your reputation," says Patrick Duffy of Customore, a marketing company based in Chicago.

However, Duffy also notes that these Web sites can be a powerful tool of promotion, especially if competitors are not willing to take the time to familiarize themselves with the many online forums patients use to get information about orthopedic surgeons. This gives the tech-savvy physician an advantage, particularly with Internet-using, post-baby boomer patients with solid jobs and good health plans.

Below, I have profiled the leading physician ratings Web sites and explained how to use these sites to gain an advantage as well as to minimize their potential negative effects.

## CONSUMER SITES

### Google

While not a ratings site per se, the Google search engine aggregates other review sites, usually putting reviews from HealthGrades first owing to a partnership between the companies. There is a bare-bones review function on Google that allows patients to give a physician an overall rating out of 5 stars and to enter comments. Because many ratings sites, such as Angie's List and HealthGrades, are pay services and Google has such a high online search volume, Duffy predicts

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Mr. Gillies is Research Analyst, KarenZupko & Associates, Inc., Chicago, Illinois.

Address correspondence to: Steve Gillies, KarenZupko & Associates, 625 N Michigan Ave, Suite 2225, Chicago, IL 60611 (tel, 312-642-5616 ext 160; fax, 312-642-5571; Web site, [www.karenzupko.com](http://www.karenzupko.com)).

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that Google's free online reviews will become the most important site to search for online physician ratings.

### HealthGrades

Already one of the largest physician ratings sites, HealthGrades, owing to its partnership with Google, has become a giant, with a reported 3 million users per month. At a cost of \$12.95, HealthGrades ([www.healthgrades.com](http://www.healthgrades.com)) provides a physician report that features training and experience, disciplinary actions and malpractice history, insurance plans, procedure costs, hospital affiliates, facility information, and a Google map to the physician's location.

In addition, there is a subjective rating component that allows users to rate practices as *poor*, *fair*, *good*, *very good*, or *excellent* on the following criteria: ease of scheduling, office environment, office staff friendliness, and wait time.

Patients then choose between *definitely not*, *mostly not*, *not sure*, *mostly yes*, and *definitely yes* in response to the following statements regarding the orthopedic surgeon:

1. Spends an appropriate amount of time.
2. Listens and answers questions.
3. Helps patients understand their medical conditions.
4. Patient trusts physician's decisions/recommendations in the patient's best interest.
5. Patient would recommend physician to family and friends.

Viewers can see the results of the practice ratings for free, but the physician ratings are available only with the purchase of the \$12.95 report.

One advantage of HealthGrades is that physicians can update their own physician profile for free. This ensures that correct information is available to prospective patients and allows physicians to make their listing stand out by uploading photographs and highlighting their awards and publications. Physicians receive a free copy of their report by updating their profile.

### Yelp

Half Yellow Pages and half Facebook, Yelp estimates that 18 million visitors use its services every month to write and read reviews about local restaurants, bars, salons, retail businesses, and other establishments ([www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)). Physicians' offices are a growing category, with close to a thousand entries in locations such as New York, San

Francisco, and Chicago. Overall ratings are given 1 to 5 stars, with lengthy commentary included. The popularity of Yelp makes these entries highly visible to users shopping for medical services on the Internet.

One major plus for physicians is a feature that allows physicians to privately respond to disgruntled patients by clicking on the rater's profile and opting to send a private message. Thus, the wayward patient may be brought back into the fold and even persuaded to alter or delete the negative comment. In April 2009, Yelp added a feature that allows physicians to publicly respond to negative comments.<sup>1</sup>

See [www.yelp.com/business](http://www.yelp.com/business) for some ideas on how to improve ratings on Yelp. Keep in mind, some accuse Yelp of not playing fair. On March 9, 2009, a *Chicago Tribune* story reported that some Chicago and San Francisco business owners claimed that Yelp manipulates reviews for advertisers on their site and sponsors of their Yelp Elite parties.<sup>2</sup>

### RateMDs

According to *Forbes* magazine,<sup>3</sup> RateMDs.com averages 1,000 new reviews per day, all free and totally anonymous. Doctors are listed on the site once a rater (not necessarily a patient) reviews the physician on a 5-point scale according to staff, punctuality, helpfulness, and knowledge. After the rating, users may enter additional comments. Negative comments are rarely removed, but it is possible to make corrections to a doctor's information and respond to negative comments after registering with the site.

### Doctor Scorecard

Unlike HealthGrades, DoctorScorecard has no subspecialty search field. DoctorScorecard ([www.doctorscorecard.com](http://www.doctorscorecard.com)) is also much less populated than HealthGrades or Yelp because, like RateMDs.com, no doctors are listed on the site until a patient enters and rates them.

Patients rate physicians and their practices subjectively based on nursing staff, office staff, cost, medical equipment, office waiting time, and appointment availability on a 10-point scale. Patients can then give the physicians a separate overall rating from 1 to 10. Patients can also leave lengthy comments detailing their negative or positive experiences.

For some ideas of how to improve a physician's status on DoctorScorecard.com, visit [www.doctorscorecard.com/doc-options.htm](http://www.doctorscorecard.com/doc-options.htm).

### Angie's List

Angie's List, a popular consumer rating site for everything from plumbers to dog groomers, has added physicians to the list of services they rate ([www.angieslist.com](http://www.angieslist.com)). Paying members rate doctors subjectively on a scale from A to F on price, quality, responsiveness, punctuality, and professionalism.

Like DoctorScorecard and RateMDs.com, no ratings exist until patients rate a doctor. Physicians can encourage patients that are Angie's List subscribers to rate them and thus increase their visibility. However, the process of invit-

ing patients to review a physician involves the physician giving Angie's List patient contact information, which is something that will undoubtedly raise Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) issues. Please visit [www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/index.html](http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/index.html) before releasing any patient's contact information.

### Consumers' CHECKBOOK

Consumer's CHECKBOOK is a non-profit group that recently made headlines when a Federal Appeals court rejected their bid to access Medicare billing records in order to rate individual doctors. Nevertheless, their Web site ([www.checkbook.org](http://www.checkbook.org)) claims they will undertake the task of examining Medicare's impact on physician choice with regards to experience, quality, outcomes, and compliance with care guidelines.

Additionally, Consumers' CHECKBOOK sells a *Consumers' Guide to Top Doctors*, both as a book and as an online database searchable by specialty and subspecialty, for \$19.95. To find out who the top doctors were around the country, they asked roughly 260,000 physicians to identify which specialists they would want to care for a loved one. The *Top Doctors* database contains the names of over 20,000 doctors who were mentioned most often in the survey results.

### INSURER-BACKED SITES

Insurance companies have noted consumers' desire to use the Internet to research and rate physicians and many have incorporated a consumer rating component into their plans. I describe below how leading insurers use the Internet to give and receive feedback about physicians.

#### WellPoint/Zagat

Insurer WellPoint has teamed with noted restaurant reviewer, Zagat, to rate doctors. The Zagat Health Survey currently provides services to WellPoint and Blue Cross Blue Shield members in Ohio, Connecticut, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and Sacramento, with more networks coming online soon.

The survey criteria focus on soft-side aspects of the consumer decision, such as availability, trust, communication, and office environment. Patients rate each category on a 30-point scale. When 10 patients rate a physician, the physician's rating information is activated and viewable online. Consumers also indicate whether or not they would recommend the physician and can leave comments. Network providers can access their own survey results online via a provider access Web site and can send corrections and updates to the insurer.

#### CIGNA Care Connections

Care Connections is available to CIGNA plan members on [www.mycigna.com](http://www.mycigna.com). Beneficiaries can perform symptom-based searches and get cost information based on CIGNA's claim experience at the local market level. Members can search for providers in their area and receive informa-

## NEGATIVE COMMENTS: A LEGAL PATH TO A MORE SENSIBLE SOLUTION?

Because the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) can severely limit a physician's ability to respond to negative comments, some physicians are opting for a preventative legal solution to combat negative reviews. Medical Justice, founded by neurosurgeon Jeffrey Segal, MD, provides waiver forms for patients to sign, agreeing not to post comments about the physician online.

Segal's company started in 2002 with the purpose of preventing physicians from being frivolously sued. Two and a half years ago, the company began helping physicians respond to the problems with doctor ratings when a client came to them in response to a negative review. Since this time, they have provided nondisclosure forms and monitoring services for more than 2,000 physicians, with orthopedic surgeons among their top 3 specialties.

tion on industry-defined metrics such as Group Board Certification, National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA), Physician Recognition Awards, and evidence-based medical standards. The site also includes a cost value rating measurement, which compares quality of care with cost of care for selected physicians on a scale that ranges from 1 to 3 stars, representing the lowest tier, the middle tier, and the top tier, respectively. Though the exact formula for the cost value rating is unknown, the NCQA serves as their independent ratings examiner.

### The Healthcare Scoop

Hosted by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, this Web site allows users from across the country to post comments, or what the site calls "a healthcare story" ([www.thehealthcarescoop.com/hcs/](http://www.thehealthcarescoop.com/hcs/)). Blue Cross Blue Shield does not filter or moderate the site, other than removing profanity or inappropriate content if alerted. Also, posters remain mostly anonymous behind pseudonyms. While comments tend to be positive by a ratio of 4 to 1, the chaotic nature of the site indicates that it should be more carefully monitored.

## 6 STEPS PHYSICIANS CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE THEIR RATINGS

**1. Pay attention to the patient experience.** Are patients facing long wait times at your practice? Do they feel that the front desk staff is friendly? Do they feel that physicians are attentive to their needs? While patients may receive high-quality care, if they are not happy with other aspects of their experience, it could lead to low ratings and poor word-of-mouth recommendations. The best advice is to establish a meaningful post-visit patient survey to capture the source of disgruntlement and diffuse it.

**2. Assign staff to become familiar with each ratings Web site and to browse new reviews.** Google has made this incredibly easy through Google Alerts. Sign up at [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts), enter your practice name as the search

The initial fee is \$495 with an estimated yearly renewal of \$350 per physician.

"The Internet is here to stay and ratings are inevitable. Our concern is that these sites use anecdotal commentary and subjective opinions as a surrogate for quality of care. The chasm between likability and quality of care is great," Dr. Segal says.<sup>4</sup>

Some media have characterized the signed patient consents as a "gag order." Dr. Segal disagrees: "In every other industry, if something is open to debate there are 2 sides to it. In this case, physicians can't respond due to HIPAA. What we're trying to do is provoke a national discussion and bring doctors to the table."<sup>4</sup> To learn more about Medical Justice's initiative to combat online negative reviews, please visit their Web site at: [www.medicaljustice.com/internet-libel-physicians.aspx](http://www.medicaljustice.com/internet-libel-physicians.aspx).

term, and Google will send an e-mail alert with an aggregate of the latest Web pages, news articles, and blog entries about your practice.

**3. List yourself.** Cannot find yourself or your practice listed on ratings Web sites? All of these sites allow you to list yourself or to encourage patients to list you.

**4. Actively respond to angry online comments.** Respond directly to negative comments, and when you do, remember to be reasonable and to let the patient know that you want to resolve the problem. You may win back an unhappy patient and show potential patients that you are reasonable and fair.

**5. Respond frequently.** Do not let an unhappy patient's comments go unanswered. The longer you let a negative comment or a bad rating stand without reply, the more potential patients it will drive from your practice.

**6. Promote your listings to satisfied patients.** Encourage them to rate you and to post comments on these physician ratings Web sites.

## AUTHOR'S DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author reports no actual or potential conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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