The Complete Guide to Managing a Mental Health Clinic's Online Reputation

binaryfountain

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Introduction

Mental healthcare facilities depend on their reputation. Often, these services are paid for out of pocket, and patients and their families want to ensure they are going to get the best care possible. Traditionally, the care provider they selected was influenced by word of mouth from patient to patient, or family member to family member. It was also done through referrals from physicians.

No longer. Today, online reviews have become a viable alternative method for identifying mental healthcare facilities and determining which will deliver the best care. Not adapting to this changing landscape can lead to lost opportunities to improve the patient experience and build patient volume.

This guide provides a solid foundation for how to think about online reputation in this new era of online reviews. Here you will find a 360-degree review of what platforms you need to know about, how to use surveys and online reviews to help improve patient experience, and pitfalls to avoid as you become an expert in managing your online reputation.

How Today's Patients and Families Use Online Reviews in the Selection of Mental Health Service Providers

For patients with mental health issues, it has become increasingly crucial to make informed, accurate decisions when selecting a provider or facility. This is due to several factors, including mental healthcare insurance coverage today, and the difficulty in locating a nearby facility with a positive online reputation.

More and more, these patients and their families are turning to online reviews to learn about the good and bad experiences from other patients and family members before selecting a mental health service provider. It is essential for mental healthcare providers and their teams to understand this ongoing shift in how patients and their families choose between available facilities and providers.

The Mental Health Situation Today

In order to truly understand why patients and their family members are relying more and more on online reviews, we need to address the financial challenges patients and their family members face when it comes to mental healthcare services. A study published by Milliman and reported on by NPR in late 2017 found some startling statistics, including the following:

- *Behavioral care was up to six times more likely to be out of network.*

- *Insurers are likely to pay primary care providers more for the same type of care than mental healthcare providers.*

- *Many mental health and substance abuse professionals will not contract with insurers due to those low reimbursement rates.*

- *Those patients who are most vulnerable find it challenging to navigate a landscape in which there are few care providers and even fewer who accept insurance.*

- *Many patients are skipping on mental healthcare completely, due to their inability to pay the high cost associated with treatment.*

The bottom line is this: Patients and their families are often required to foot the bill for mental healthcare services, with no help from their insurer. Angela Kimball, director of advocacy and public policy at the National Alliance on Mental Illness, summed up the situation for NPR, "One of the most common reasons people give for not getting mental health treatment is the cost. The other is not being able to find care. It is hurting people in every corner of this nation." With more coming out of pocket, it has become even more important to select the best provider or facility to deliver care.

THE GROWING POWER OF ONLINE REVIEWS

The reliance on online reviews is not relegated solely to the mental health industry. It is affecting every industry, and that impact grows by the day. Consumers are using platforms like Google reviews and even Facebook to help them make informed decisions about the products they purchase, the businesses they patronize, and the service providers they hire.

HERE IS A QUICK LOOK AT THE SITUATION REGARDING ONLINE REVIEWS AS REPORTED BY FORBES IN LATE 2017:

84%
of consumers believe that online reviews are as trustworthy as a personal recommendation

74%
of consumers report feeling more trust for a business with positive online reviews

90%
of consumers report reading online reviews before buying a product or patronizing a business

BRIGHTLOCAL OFFERS ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS:

97%
of consumers looked online for local businesses in 2017

Facebook, Google & BBB.org
are the most trusted review sites

49%
of consumers need at least a four-star rating before they choose to use a business

The Impact of Online Reviews on Mental Health Service Providers

For mental health providers, the situation has become increasingly difficult. It is important for patients to be able to locate trustworthy, accurate information with which to compare service providers and facilities and arrive at an informed decision. However, negative reviews can cause immense damage to a provider's reputation and may not even have been fully deserved.

Mental health service providers must take action – *it is imperative that you monitor the conversation online surrounding your organization. It is just as important that you take part in that conversation and use online reviews as a means to improve service delivery and the overall patient experience. With that being said, it is just as important that you understand your audience, which we will discuss in the next chapter.*

Mental Health Services Have Two Audiences to Consider – Patients and Their Families

The mental health sector is unique in a number of ways. One of those is the fact that service providers have not one, but two audiences with whom they must communicate with – the patient and their caregiver(s), who typically is a family member.

Why Two Audiences?

Why do mental health services have two audiences to consider?

Many patients struggling with mental health conditions rely on advice and guidance from a family member or other caregiver. In some instances, the family member is the one making decisions on behalf of the patient.

Further adding to layers of involvement, there may be two or more family members involved. They can get very engaged in the care process. They might disagree about the quality of service, or about the need for a particular treatment or medication. Other, more distant, family members might be involved in the decision-making process. And each one them can leave an online review based on their perceptions of the care delivered.

For mental health professionals, this leads to a complicated situation. You must provide outstanding patient care and communication and deliver a positive patient experience. However, those must be communicated not only to the patient him or herself, but also to their caregivers.

It becomes even more complicated when online reviews are considered. Who is reading the review – the patient or the caregiver? Who left the review – the patient or the parent? Who will the underlying message of the review impact the most – the patient or the parent? How accurate is the information if a parent was only nominally present during treatment left the review?

As you can see, there is a great deal for mental health service providers to consider, and it is clear that taking an active role in monitoring and managing online reviews is necessary.

Mental Health Faces Unique Challenges That Impact Reputation Management

We have already discussed the fact that many mental health services are lacking coverage from insurance plans, leaving consumers to pay more out of pocket. This has a number of negative consequences, not only for patients themselves and their families, but for mental health service providers.

The Need for Accurate, Clear Communication

Mental health services may or may not be covered by insurance companies. Some services may have a limited amount of coverage, while others may not be covered at all, which places significant pressure on patients and their families. The financial pressures create a situation that must be handled correctly to ensure patients are able to receive the care that they need, the compassion they deserve, and the transparency that is so often lacking in this industry.

A 2016 study found that a significant percentage of the American population lacked a basic understanding of key terms within their health insurance policy and its related coverage items, including mental health. Jennifer Fitzgerald, CEO of the company that conducted the study, explained, "The most significant result is a very high bill that you weren't expecting. If you do not understand how a deductible works, how coinsurance works…[when] you come in for a procedure or a lab test, those are the kinds of things that can result in a bill for $1,000 or $2,000."

It is imperative for mental health service providers to foster clear, accurate communication at each step along the patient's path, from the initial online research and comparison stage to appointment setting, patient intake, service delivery, repeat appointment setting, and billing.

Patients must understand from the outset what percentage of the bill they will be responsible for paying, what percentage the insurer will pay (if any), whether there were any discounts applied by the mental health facility and more. With this level of clarity, patients will be able to discern between those services with insurance coverage, and those involving self-pay. This can also help to mitigate negative reviews based on a misunderstanding of the patient's billing.

Embracing Ratings and Reviews

Navigating the Emerging Landscape for Mental Health Service Providers

The ways consumers use review sites continues to evolve, particularly when it comes to patients' willingness to share health-related information online. Key points for healthcare providers to understand include the following that clearly illustrate the need to actively monitor online reviews and engage with patients and their families in new ways:

51% of Americans say they share their personal healthcare experiences via social media, online ratings and review sites.

95% of respondents find online ratings and reviews "somewhat" to "very" reliable.

72% of patients use online reviews as their first step in finding a new provider.

Now, compare those rising statistics with the fact that fewer Americans have access to mental health services. As mentioned by Mental Health America, even in Maine, which has the best access of any state in the country, 41.4% of those diagnosed with a mental illness do not receive treatment. Severe depression in youth has increased to 8.2% of the population, with almost 2 million young people who experienced major episodes failing to receive treatment.

What Benefits Will You See?

By embracing online reviews and ratings, you can achieve a number of essential goals, including improving the patient experience. In a study published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine, author Howard S. Gordon notes, "The University of Utah Healthcare system claims that their own efforts to survey all their patients and to publish all patient comments online have led to steady gains in quality metrics, a reduction in costs, and substantial improvements in patient ratings."

As you can see, there is no returning to the days before online reviews. Mental health service providers must embrace ratings and reviews, must understand the impact of those ratings on their patients and caregivers, and how to engage with them.

It has now become essential that mental health service providers not only actively monitor the online conversation surrounding their practices and engage with reviewers, but that they build a healthy online presence.

Increasing Your Online Presence

The key to taking control of the online conversation surrounding your mental health practice is to build a more robust online presence. Of course, that can be challenging in its own right. What does it involve? What steps should you take? What resources are needed? We will explore those topics and others in this chapter.

Building a Presence

Chances are good that your facility has a website – that is an essential ingredient for success today and cannot be omitted. However, a website is only one ingredient of many necessary to build a thriving practice.

With that being said, you also need to ensure you are active on other platforms and channels not owned by your organization.

Your patients and their families expect your healthcare organization to be found where they spend the most time, and that usually means social media sites, today.

Choosing the Right Platforms

Now that we have touched on online presence, we need to say a word or two about the platforms that you use. Facebook, for instance. Not all platforms are created equal, and some are better for engagement than others are. There are myriad options available when it comes to online platforms. Those that tend to be popular with consumers are as follows:

Facebook

One element of Facebook's ongoing evolution is the ability for users to recommend—or not recommend—businesses and leave reviews on the pages belonging to those businesses. Facebook sums up the value or quality of a business with an overall star rating (1-5).

Google

Google's push toward highlighting local search results has led to a number of changes, including the rise of Google My Business, where customers/clients/patients are able to leave a review, as well as a star rating to describe their overall experience.

There are many other review sites out there – dozens dedicated to reviews within the medical field alone. Facebook is pretty much a "must" today, and Google's value cannot be downplayed, particularly with the search giant's ongoing push to surface local results, especially for users searching on mobile devices.

Actively Measuring and Managing

Increasing your online presence not only requires that you build a website and establish a social media presence, but that you commit the time and energy necessary to actively measure and manage these marketing channels. It is also necessary to look at the time and money spent here as investing in marketing – too many practice owners (and other business owners, for that matter) fail to make this essential connection.

Actively monitor and engage with reviews left by patients or their family members. We will discuss the overall process in the next chapter.

Participating in the Online Reviews Process

As mentioned in the previous section, it is not enough to just have a presence on social media and other platforms where reviews can be left. It is vital that you engage with those reviewers, but you must do so correctly, or you risk further damage to your practice's reputation.

Assigning Ownership

First, designate a staff member to handle the responsibility of managing online reviews. Active monitoring is vital, but it can be time consuming. It may mean adding more payroll hours and additional duties to what is most likely an already-overworked staff. The right partner can help automate these tasks to reduce costs and labor involved, while also delivering vital insights.

If the review is negative and you are attempting to mitigate that, then you will need to respond to the reviewer. The time spent doing this must be balanced with other responsibilities within your practice, of course.

Responding to Reviews

While responding to online reviews and ratings is important, you must do so the right way. Anything less when it comes to a negative review and you could cause damage to your reputation. There are a couple of reasons for this. One of those, of course, is to help address the patient's or caregiver's issue. The other is to show other potential patients that you care about your patients' and caregivers' experience.

As a note, all reviews should receive some sort of response from you (as long as the platform supports this). For positive reviews, a heartfelt thank you is often more than enough, but making it more personal, without violating HIPAA regulations, can make you seem more patient-oriented. You should respond to all reviews within two business days, and all replies should be professional.

It is also important that you reply to negative reviews, and that you do so in a positive, constructive and brief way. This can be a challenge, particularly if the review was especially nasty. However, it can be done by following a few basic steps.

First, accept responsibility no matter what. Apologize, and then thank the reviewer for taking the time to reach out. Next, offer to help resolve the issue. Then provide them with a way to communicate with you offline (phone number, email address, etc.). With the right approach, you can defuse tense situations and limit the fallout of a negative review. In some instances, the reviewer may even be willing to change their review.

Weed Out the Fake Reviews

Online reviews are overwhelmingly authentic, but not all reviews are true. False information as well as situations that have been blown out of proportion can make their way into online reviews. It is your responsibility to weed out those reviews that are false, or that were left by someone other than a patient (a disgruntled ex-employee, for instance).

Evaluate the review before you take any steps. If the name of the reviewer is published, cross reference it with patients to ensure that the person leaving the review is genuine or is referencing an incident that actually occurred.

Learning from the Information Provided

It might seem that service recovery is the primary purpose of managing online reviews. It is important, yes. However, it is not the only goal. You also need to learn from the feedback provided. Your patient or a member of their family took the time to make you aware of how your practice, staff, or facility fell short of their expectations. You need to act on that information to improve the patient experience.

Improving the Patient Experience

The objective of actively managing and monitoring online reviews is to improve your reputation, and build a better practice by addressing the patient's and caregiver's feedback about the care experience. How do you use the information provided within a review to do that, though? It is actually not all that complicated. Really, you simply need to create a feedback loop.

Create a Culture of Improvement within the Practice

It is also necessary that you create a culture of patient experience improvement within your mental health practice. This creates the foundation on which patient feedback is valued. If your staff members see reviews as nothing more than baseless complaints that have no real value, then you will struggle to progress.

Every team member must be on board with the idea that reviews, including negative ones, are opportunities for improvement, rather than things that should only be endured and then ignored. A culture of improvement within your practice ensures a continuous drive toward innovative solutions to real patient problems and a better overall patient experience.

See the Reality Behind Negative Comments

Integral to creating a culture of improvement within your mental health practice is the ability to discern the sentiment behind negative comments. It is important to remember that patients and their family members will review an experience from their point of view, with little understanding of the underlying reasons for the less than ideal situation they experienced.

For instance, if a patient complains about long wait times in the waiting room, it may have little to do with the speed of treatment, and more to do with the time of day and the backlog of patients your office is dealing with. A patient who complains about the cost of the treatments they received is more likely displeased with the fact that their insurance did not cover more (or any) of the cost of their treatment.

You must drill down to discover the sentiment underlying the patient's complaint. In some cases, the true cause will be completely different from the nature of the issue mentioned in the review. Only by discovering the truth can you move on to changing things.

Address the Real Issues

Finally, you need to address those issues revealed by patient reviews. Taking a proactive stance toward constant practice improvement and innovation can ensure that you are able to actually change a patient's experience for the better, and that you are able to make your patients aware of your efforts in this area.

Unearthing Actionable Insights

You will need to use patient-provided information to create actionable insights that detail steps to take toward practice improvement. This can be quite challenging and will involve understanding the sentiment within a negative review or complaint, and then connecting that reason with an element of the practice that can be improved to foster a better patient outcome.

Create a Patient Survey

A great way to draw actionable information out of your patients and their family members has nothing whatsoever to do with online reviews, and everything to do with providing them with a means to voice their thoughts before they even leave the office. A patient survey can provide you with an immense amount of vital, invaluable information, well before a patient takes to the Internet to voice their displeasure about a less than ideal experience.

A patient survey can be as in-depth as you want, but it should be structured in the right way. It is important that you avoid yes or no questions, as these yield very little in the way of actionable information. A better option is to use questions that allow the patient to rate their experience or your practice on a scale from 1 to 10, and then provide space for them to explain their answer below the question.

As a note, you can choose to offer them an iPad in the office to complete the survey, or you can opt to send it via email. Perhaps the best choice is to allow the patient or the family to decide. Many of them will not have the time when checking out, so delayed email delivery may be the best choice for them. Others will happily complete the survey right in the office before leaving.

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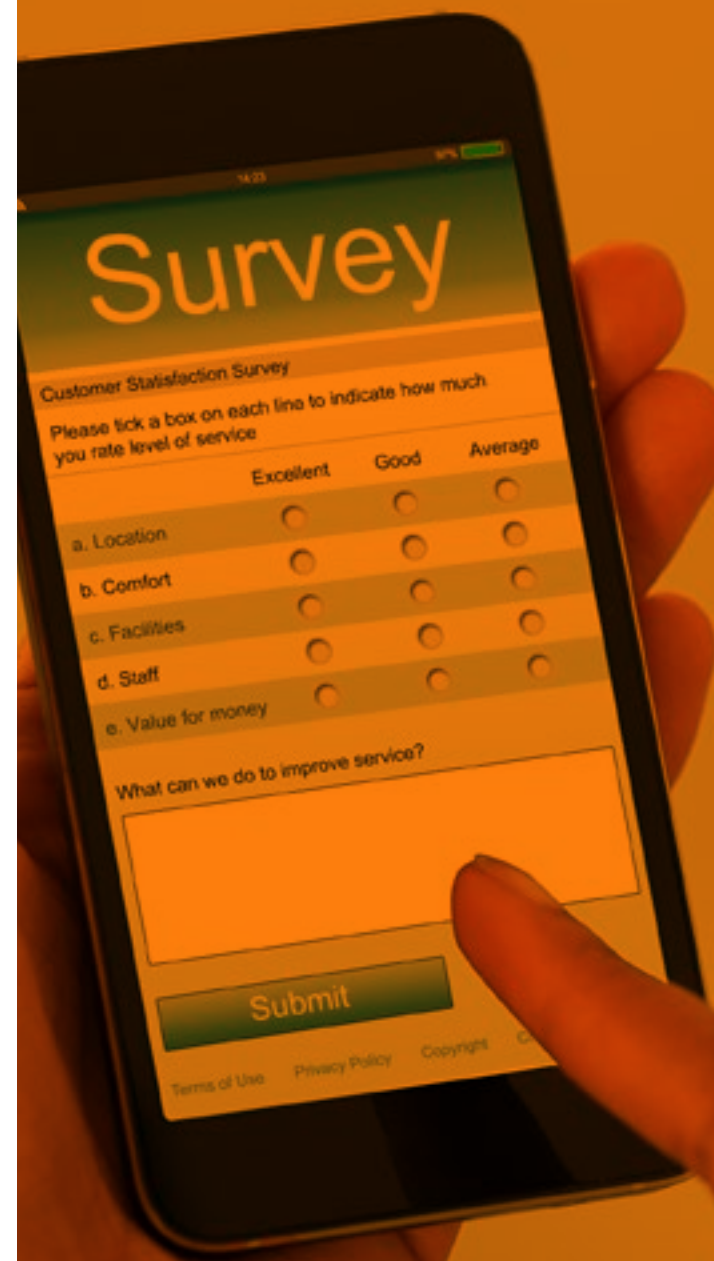
Putting It All Together

The final step is putting everything together. This is about more than just making necessary changes and adjustments or innovating to deliver an improved overall experience. Those actions need to be communicated to your patients in a wide range of ways, including in responses to reviews, as well as practice newsletters, published on your practice's website, through email updates, and in other ways, as well.

512 Likes

250

355 Likes

753 Likes

Who Is
Binary Fountain?

It has never been more crucial for mental health service providers to take control of the online conversation surrounding their brand – their reputation depends on it. However, it can be immensely challenging, and managing online reviews and ratings can be a fulltime job. A trusted partner can make all the difference.

At Binary Fountain, we offer an industry-leading platform that can help manage your reputation by automating time-consuming tasks involving online ratings and reviews and surveys, and provides deep patient analytics that can deliver insights so that your team can innovate and make improvements.

If you are ready to take control of your brand and the online conversation, while also delivering an improved patient experience, we invite you to contact us to learn more.

For more information, visit us online:

https://www.binaryfountain.com

binaryfountain

1660 INTERNATIONAL DRIVE
SUITE 225
MCLEAN, VA 22102
1-800-549-9552

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