

10 Tips for Handling Negative Comments and Reviews on Social Media

A Guide for Veterinarians & Veterinary Practices

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Introduction

In case you've been asleep for the last few years, let me catch you up: There's this thing called social media, and people are all over it. They use it to take pictures of their feet in scenic locations, watch grandkids grow up, and argue with strangers. It's truly the greatest invention since the wheel. It can, however, have its downsides.

Because anyone can use it to say anything, social media can allow people to post things about you and your work. Good things *and* bad things. In fact, veterinary clients can spread their impressions of your clinic to hundreds or even thousands of people in seconds — and the reach is even further if they use a review platform like Google or Yelp.

Have you ever been the subject of a negative review or online comment? (Don't worry. We've all been there.) It doesn't feel good, does it? If we accept the fact that no matter how hard we try we simply can't please everyone, then it stands to reason that all of us will make a pet owner unhappy sometime. So how do we deal with it when it inevitably happens?

If you've ever felt like you've been under attack online, you need to know how to respond in a way that protects yourself, your reputation, and your practice. In this short e-book, I'll show you how — by walking you through 10 clear steps to dealing gracefully with negative posts and comments on social media, unfavorable online reviews, and general unpleasantness aimed at your clinic.



10 STEPS TO HANDLING UNPLEASANT REVIEWS

As much as I hate to admit it, negative comments and posts are not uncharted territory for me. I have more than 150,000 fans and followers on social media, so I get **a lot** of feedback, both positive and negative. And I spend lots of time communicating with pet owners online, educating them about pet health and trying to help them understand why veterinary teams do what they do. As such, I occasionally encounter people who do not agree with me, feel negatively about veterinarians in general, or just don't like my "stupid face." Like I said... best invention since the wheel. I've found that there are 10 steps I consistently use when dealing with negativity online. I hope they'll help you if you're ever facing online criticism. Here they are:

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR DEFENSES

As a professional in the public arena, the best defense is a good defense. Note that I'm not saying "be defensive." I'm saying we should avoid taking the offensive whenever possible. (Would you really want to be known as the clinic that publicly attacks pet owners online, anyway?) Fortunately, there are two things we can do preemptively to blunt the impact of online attacks before they ever happen.

Practice With Integrity

This is the part you have the most control over. Integrity is your shield. It's your get-out-of-jail card, your knight in shining armor, and your parachute all rolled into one. In fact, whether or not we're talking about online scrutiny, this is a good general first rule for all veterinary practices: Make practicing with integrity a central focus of all you do and never let it waiver.

Now, please note that I did NOT say "Practice Perfect Medicine" or "Never Make Mistakes" or even "Always Be Your Best Self." It's impossible to be 100% flawless. Fortunately, rational people understand this and can be made sympathetic to people who make mistakes. Sympathy for people who do not act with integrity however, is much harder (if not impossible) to attain.



When people lash out online, they often position themselves as either the victim of a wrongdoing or as a whistle-blower who is looking out for others. If you or your practice acts unethically or without integrity, there is no effective response to critics who use these tactics, because those people are correct.

If you consistently act ethically, critics may still come at you from these positions, but you will have greater confidence in handling the situation calmly, because you'll know you've acted with integrity from the beginning. You'll sleep soundly at night, too.

Load Up The Positive

In researching this topic, I looked at hundreds of bad reviews for veterinary clinics. The ones that look the worst, by far, are the ones that stand alone. Let me give you a simple example with 3 clinics.

Clinic A has 3 excellent reviews, 1 mediocre review, and 1 horrible review.
Clinic B has 6 excellent reviews, 2 mediocre reviews, and 1 horrible review.
Clinic C has 27 excellent reviews, 9 mediocre reviews, and 1 horrible review.

Which clinic do you feel is the best? Most of us would choose clinic C because it looks like lots of people love this place. We would probably bypass clinic A, because 20% of their reviews are very bad.

Here's the point of this example: these could all be the same practice. Let's imagine a practice that delivers an excellent experience to clients 75% of the time and an OK experience 25% of the time. Then one day, someone gets really, really upset and writes a scathing review. That's the story for Clinic A, B, and C. The **only** difference is that clinic C did a better job of making sure their regular, not-angry clients left reviews too.

Good reviews dilute bad reviews.
Don't wait until you get a bad review to start collecting great ones. Ask clients to review you on popular sites like Google, Yelp, or Facebook.

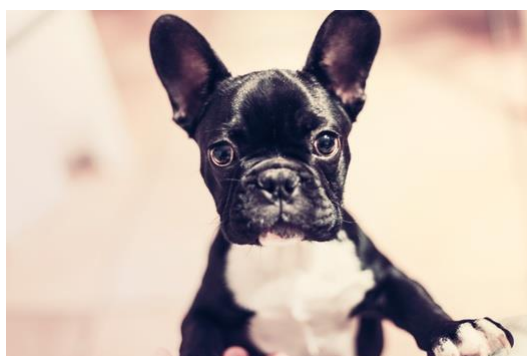




STEP 2: TRIAGE

In the veterinary world, there are four types of people who post negative things about veterinarians and vet clinics. Here they are:

Crazies



Please know that when I use the term “crazy,” I am not referring to people struggling with real mental illness. I’m talking about folks who are attacking you or your clinic irrationally and completely without cause. They have never met you, purchased anything from you, or spoken to you on the phone. They probably do not

live within 500 miles of you, and their criticism has absolutely no merit. Their points are not sensible, constructive, helpful, or representative of any reasonable percentage of the public.

Examples of comments crazies might leave include:

“I’ve never been to this clinic and I’m never going to! Veterinarians are only trying to get your money! I bet they charge you to park in the parking lot!! I HATE VETS!”

or

“I can see from photos that this vet sells _____ DOG FOOD! She is obviously getting kickbacks from that crappy company and that’s why she sells that poison food! I would never go to her. YOU SHOULDN’T EITHER!!!

In both of these examples, we can see that the individual is obviously passionate about his position, but since the attacks are not rational, there is no good way to defend yourself and no reason to engage.

Trolls

Trolls are very similar to crazies, except for one difference: they’re not crazy. Trolls are people who simply want to be mean or aggravating. They want to hurt your feelings and/or make you angry. They want you to respond, to argue, and to fight with them. That’s their entire motivation.



The defining characteristic of trolls is that their comments are unwarranted and aggressive. Trolls have probably not met you or conducted business with you. Their goal is to shock and to provoke a reaction.

Examples of comments trolls might leave include:

“Look at the picture of this vet clinic. What a dump.”

Or

“Everyone who agrees with this article is an idiot.”

Or

“Just saw the staff photo. Looks like the whole place should be on a diet.”

As you can see, these comments are simply mean. There’s nothing constructive about them. Trolls are worse — at least in my mind — than crazies, because crazies are often at least *trying* to do something they believe is good, whereas trolls just want to be jerks.

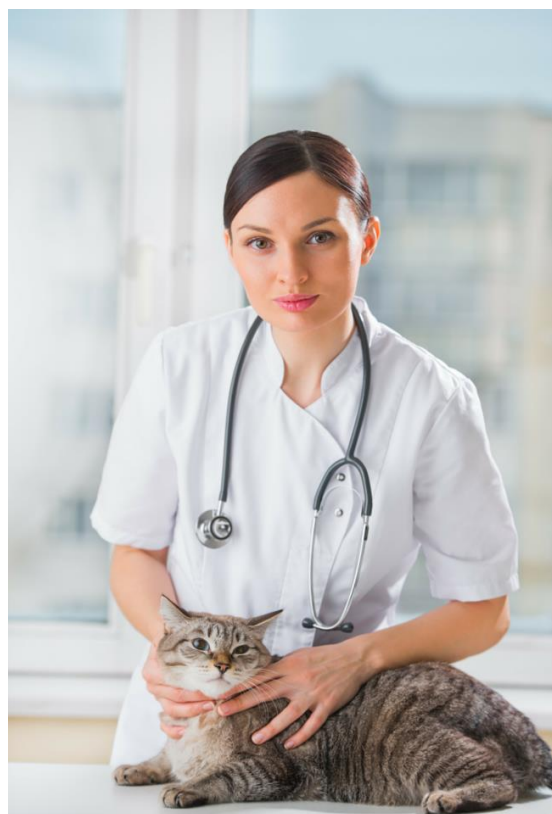
Critics

Unlike crazies and trolls, critics can actually be helpful.

Critics are people who may not have ever come into your clinic, and they may not know you, but they have made a comment or suggestion that has merit. They may not have said it in the nicest way, but they have still put forward a valid piece of feedback.

Examples of comments critics leave include:

“That nurse needs to let go of that cat’s neck!”





“Are you nuts? I would never let anyone take my dog next to a busy road like that with just a leash on. He’d slip right out!”

Now, neither of these comments make you initially think “THANK YOU!” However, they both raise very valid points. Maybe the cat is being restrained improperly. Maybe the dog is not safe next to the road. Or, perhaps these images aren’t representative of our usual practices, and we need to be aware that we’ve posted something that doesn’t accurately reflect what we do. In either case, this feedback is valuable and likely points out something we could be more careful about.

For most of us, it’s hard to accept information from critics online. We immediately feel defensive and look for ways to discount what they are saying. At the very least, we wonder why the person giving the criticism wasn’t *nicer* about it.

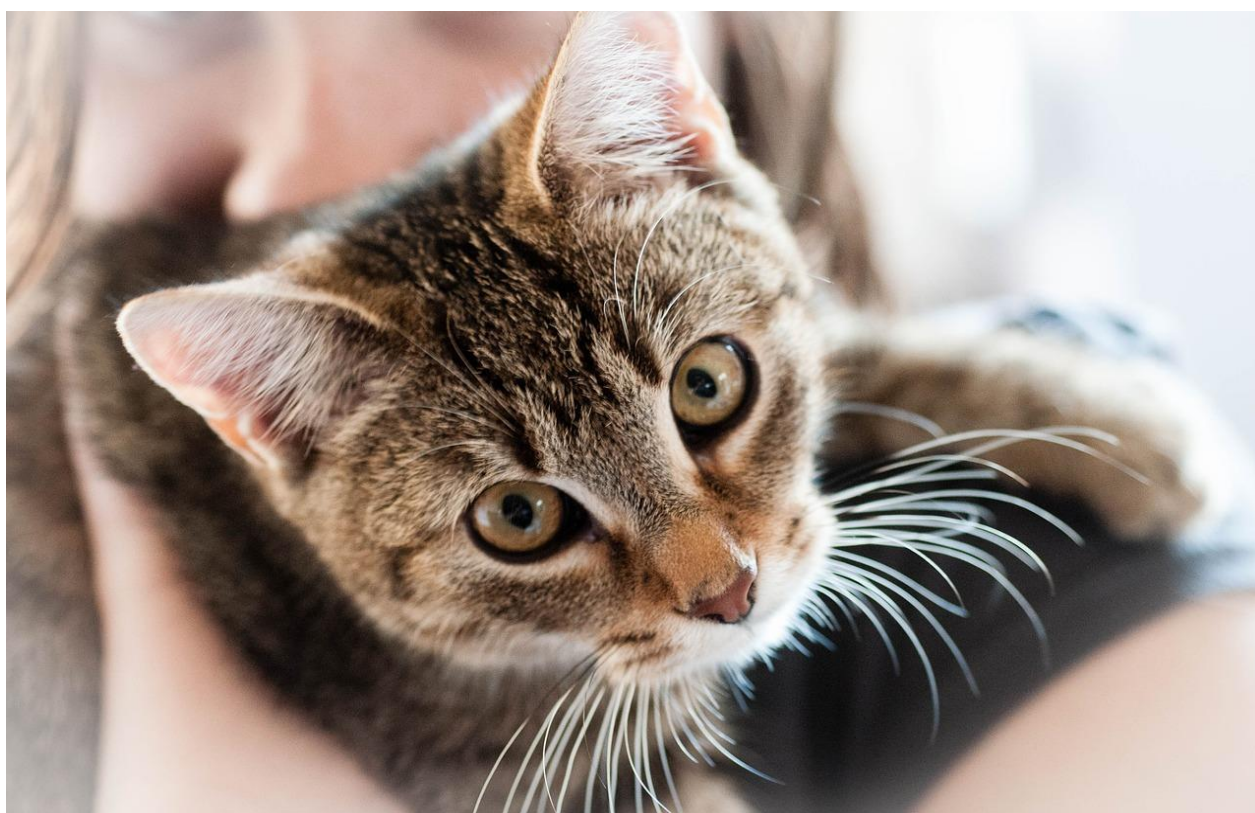
The truth is that the way someone delivers feedback doesn’t change the feedback’s validity. If someone is criticizing us on a substantial, meaningful basis — no matter their manners or their word choice — that’s a good thing. Criticism shows us where and how to improve. People pay consultants, focus groups, life coaches, and therapists big money for insights like this, and your critic just gave it to you for free.



Clients

This is the most important group by far, because these are the people who have actually been to your clinic, met you, and used your services. They have entrusted their pets to you and given you their money in the past and have the potential to do so again. Also, because these people actually have experience with your work, other clients are likely to listen when they talk. You should, too.

Some clients who complain online have been legitimately wronged (everyone makes mistakes, and maybe this was one of those cases), and others haven't been. Regardless, these are the people who can do the most good for our practice by sharing their thoughts and referring their friends. They can also do the most damage by leaving and steering others away. Their feedback matters a great deal, and we must handle it in a way that shows we understand that.





If the person leaving the comment falls into the crazies category, it's easy to know what to do: Nothing.

As my good friend, Dr. Jessica Vogelsang from Pawcurious.com says, "Never engage crazy."

Write that down. Please. Consider having it tattooed on your body in a place where you will see it when you need to. This simple piece of advice will save you countless headaches.

If you can delete the comment or post, do. If you can't, then do not respond. All that you will do is draw attention to the post, validate this person's position, and encourage them by giving them a target at which to aim their crazy.

Is it hard to walk away without responding? Definitely. But no good can come from dipping your toe into crazy waters. The wonderful thing about crazy is that it always reveals itself. The people reading a crazy comment or review recognize it as such. The more this person writes, the more obvious their empty criticism becomes.

Treat trolls the same way you treat crazies.

The most important thing you can do is follow the common Internet advice: "Don't feed the trolls." Do not give them the attention they want. Don't give them your time, emotional energy, or thoughts. Delete these comments, block these people from your page, and move on. If you can't remove the post or review, then take comfort in the fact that everyone who is not a troll will see this person as a jerk. Keep your chin up and move on with your life.



If the person posting falls into the **critic** or **client** categories, move on to step 3



STEP 3: TAKE A BREAK

At this point, we have decided that the person making the comment or post is not spouting irrationality or attacking you purely for the sake of being mean. Now, and only now, will we take a post or comment seriously and give it our time and energy. Take some deep breaths. Do not respond yet. Take a few more breaths. Still do not respond. I know you feel like your honor or the honor of your practice must be defended **immediately** — and that feeling is perfectly natural — but wait.

Contrary to how we feel, people **are not** racing to read what the upset person wrote on your Facebook page, on Yelp, or on Google Reviews. Some people may stumble upon it in the next few hours, but that's a small price to pay when you consider the potential consequences of a hastily made response. The moment you engage with someone criticizing you or your practice online, a few things are likely to happen.

The person will be notified that you have responded and they may respond in turn. You are now engaged in a public conversation you may not be quite ready to have.

You will immediately draw attention to what this person has written. For example, Facebook generally does not draw attention to things others write on your practice page. However, if you comment on something someone posted, Facebook will often raise the item up in its newsfeed, thus drawing attention to it.

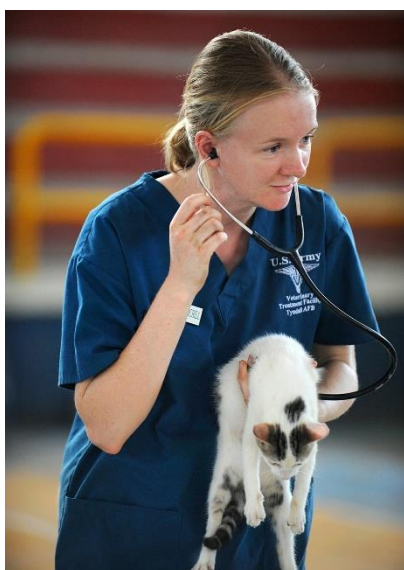
By engaging with this person, you are adding to their credibility. The fact that you felt their statement or review required a response means that you took it seriously, so perhaps others should as well. (This is why it's so important not to engage crazies or trolls.)

Your reply will be judged critically by readers to determine whether it supports or refutes the negative statements **and what is implied about your character** in the original post.



Do not post a reply until you are absolutely ready to handle these realities. In most cases, it takes a few hours to calm down and get past the emotional tidal wave that hits when we discover people are criticizing us so publicly. My recommendation is to wait, if possible, until the next morning to move forward so you have time to get past that first wave of emotion and act in a calm, strategic manner.

STEP 4: LISTEN



At this point, we have decided that the person making the comment or post is not spouting irrationality or attacking you purely for the sake of being mean. Now, and only now, will we take a post or comment seriously and give it our time and energy. Take some deep breaths. Do not respond yet. Take a few more breaths. Still do not respond. I know you feel like your honor or the honor of your practice must be defended **immediately** — and that feeling is perfectly natural — but wait.

STEP 5: DECIDE IF IT'S VALID

As the old saying goes, “The customer is always right. Unless they’re not.” In most cases, we can learn something from these reviews and comments. In some cases, however, we can’t. The majority of comments pet owners make about us online indicate one of three things:

1) We made an error in our ethics, medicine, service, or communications.

Examples of this look like:

“The vet left a gauze pad inside my dog during surgery! She almost died!”

Hopefully, you don’t learn of this particular problem for the first time online. Regardless, the error is real, as is the opportunity for improvement in the future.



2) We played some role in creating a perception in the person's mind that we made an error in our ethics, medicine, service, or communications, and this person feels wronged.

Examples of this look like:

"When I got to the front, I was shocked to see my bill was \$140 more than I was told it would be!"

In this case, we may not have done anything wrong medically or ethically, and everything we did was probably warranted. We acted with integrity, but failed to *communicate effectively* that the total cost was changing. This person wasn't taken advantage of, but her perception is obviously different. We can use this situation to improve client communication.

3) This person has had an emotional experience and they are coping with it by shifting some amount of blame or grief from themselves to us.

They often feel wronged because their sense of fairness or *how the world "should" be* has been violated. Many times, these are people frustrated with the realities of modern veterinary medicine, and there is little or nothing you can do.

Examples of this look like:

"My dog needed surgery and these greedy vets wouldn't do it for the \$50 I had! I had to put her to sleep. They are HEARTLESS!"

This person has obviously just had a very emotional, upsetting experience and they are hurting. They could be experiencing feelings ranging from anger to sorrow to regret to guilt. It's likely the veterinary clinic did everything possible to help, but could not overcome the financial realities of the situation. The practice may have acted ethically and with compassion. If so, this feedback may not influence your practice's policies (since the client was not really wronged, although they are nonetheless upset with the outcome).



STEP 6: REJECT SHAME

The biggest hurdle to using feedback is feeling ashamed. No one likes to make mistakes, even if they're minor. We especially do not like to make mistakes and then have them angrily pointed out online, in front of others.

It's much easier to assume a defensive posture or to match anger with anger than it is to admit, even to ourselves, that we made an error and can improve. Still, this admission is critical if we are going to grow professionally.

Everyone makes errors. It's part of being human. Don't let shame prohibit you from accepting valid feedback, even if it's given in an angry way.

STEP 7: RESPOND PUBLICLY

At this point, we've decided the comment in question came from a client or critic (and not a crazy person or troll); we've calmed down after the initial surge of emotions; determined that the complaint is *or appears* valid; and learned what we can from the feedback that has been given. If this a situation where a response is warranted, now's the time to do it.

Responding humanizes us to those who see the original post and to the person who wrote it. It shows we care, take serving pets and people very seriously, and want to make things right. These are powerful messages, and the lack of a response may indicate we feel the opposite.

- When we respond, **the #1 rule is: DON'T GET DEFENSIVE.** This is an extremely difficult rule to follow (even if we have waited an entire day to calm down), but it is critical. The tone and message must convey a sense of humility, that we are doing our absolute best. It needs to show that we respect and want to serve our clients. If our message and/or tone give the impression that we are irritated, embarrassed, or upset, it might appear to prove the original negative comment right. Worse still, it may precipitate a public argument with the complaining person, and anyone who has seen a business argue with a passionate and displeased customer knows how ugly that can get.



Open with thanks.

Sending clear signals of respect to the person writing and to those reading is important. Regardless of whether you agree with what was written, it's good to show that you value the person who wrote it. They may not return our respect, but that does not change how you should represent yourself and your clinic publicly.



Some specific phrases that might be helpful include:

- “Thank you for bringing this to our attention.”
- “Thank you for your honest feedback about your experience.”
- “Thank you for taking the time to write.”

Apologize.

If a complaint is legitimate, apologize. Even if it's not, I'd still err on the side of issuing some sort of an apology, at least for the person's distress.

Numerous studies have shown that upset customers want the company they are dealing with to admit that a mistake was made. We know it's what people want to hear, so why don't we do it? Well, it's because we fear apologies are an admission of guilt.

This certainly doesn't have to be the case. Quite often, we are well served by apologizing for the person's experience and/or emotions.

Phrases that might be helpful include:

- “We are so sorry for the stress this has caused.”
- “We never like to hear that people had a bad experience, and we are very sorry to hear that your visit was unpleasant.”
- “I am sorry to hear this happened.”
- “We are so sorry for the miscommunication.”



Make it about the pets and owners.

When we respond, we want to focus on our commitment to pets and their owners. People writing and reading complaints probably don't care much about the struggles of our staff members. By focusing our conversation on the pets and people we serve, we can show compassion and justify our actions.

- “We are committed to taking the best care of pets we possibly can, and we regularly see sick pets and pets in emergency situations. Some of these patients take longer than we would like to be treated, and that causes other pet owners to have to wait. This was the case during your extended wait time. We are so sorry for the inconvenience, and can only promise that if it were your pet that needed urgent care, we would make sure that she received it even if others had to wait. Thank you for your understanding.”
- “Talking about money and what things will cost is an unfortunate part of practicing medicine. It is not ethical for us to lead pet owners into tests and treatments without making sure they understand what things will cost. It is our goal to make sure pet owners know what they are agreeing to so we can work with them to get their pets the best care possible.”

Show credibility.

Credibility boils down to: what happened, why, and what are you doing to prevent it from happening again. This is a critically important step in dealing with complaining customers whether they are online or in person.

- “We are so sorry that you were seated in an examination room without your arrival being communicated to the veterinarian. The veterinary technician who took you to the room was called in to help with an emergency and did not pass the message along. While her focus on helping pets in need is vital, this is not an acceptable situation and we sincerely apologize. We held a staff meeting to discuss how we can make sure this doesn't happen again, and we will be installing a flag system on our examination room doors so that everyone will know if a room is occupied from now on.”



Be concise.

Use as few words as possible to achieve your objective. Say thank you, apologize, explain what happened, why, and what you will do about it, and then be done. Volumes upon volumes of text laying out your life story and/or the history of veterinary medicine will not change the outcome or peoples' perceptions.

STEP 8: RESPOND PRIVATELY

If the person who made this negative comment is a client of yours, indicate in your response that you would like to talk with them to see what can be done. State that you will be reaching out to them, and then pick up the phone. Tell them that you saw their review or post and replied to it, and you would like to talk through everything if that's possible.

Approach this call as an exercise in listening. Take notes and mention that you are doing so. Restate key points that the client believes are important so he will know that you are hearing him and that you understand.

After the client is finished talking, reply and see what you can do to make things right. (Do not ask the client to take the post or review down.)





STEP 9: LET IT GO

After posting the least defensive response you can put together, let it go. You have had your chance and said your peace. If the person responds in a positive, productive manner, great. If the person does not respond or responds angrily re-stating their position, I recommend discontinuing the public discussion. You may re-state your willingness to talk off-line, but do not allow yourself to be drawn into a public argument for the world to see.

While we would love to believe following the steps laid out here will convert angry clients or vocal critics into raving fans, that outcome is rare. The more common outcome, and the one we can realistically hope for, is humanizing ourselves in front of the public audience and showing our compassion and desire to serve. We may also hope to convert the angry or vocal critic into a significantly less angry or less vocal critic. Once we have taken our best shot at these goals, it's time to move on.

STEP 10: FOCUS ON THE NEXT REVIEW

After posting the least defensive response you can put together, let it go. You have had your chance and said your peace. If the person responds in a positive, productive manner, great. If the person does not respond or responds angrily re-stating their position, I recommend discontinuing the public discussion. You may re-state your willingness to talk off-line, but do not allow yourself to be drawn into a public argument for the world to see.

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Conclusion

With this 10-step process at the ready, I hope you feel more confident, relaxed, and able to deal with any online negativity that might come your way. It all comes down to this: Never stop acting with integrity; never stop generating genuinely positive reviews; and never stop trying to improve yourself and your practice.



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading! I hope that if you're ever in one of the situations described here, you can put this advice to good use. If you have found this free book valuable, please encourage others to download it from my website www.DrAndyRoark.com and to sign up for my newsletter. It's full of tips and information designed to make life easier for anyone in veterinary practice.

Also, I am committed to helping veterinarians and veterinary teams be successful in practice, avoid burnout, and make their careers what they want them to be. If you think I could help you or your team, please let your local, regional, or state VMA know you'd like to hear me speak. (There are generous sponsors who will usually support these trips if I am invited.) I'd love to meet your team!

DR. ANDY ROARK



Dr. Andy Roark is a practicing veterinarian, international speaker, author and media personality. He is an award-winning columnist for DVM360, and has a regular column on Vetstreet.com. Dr. Roark's popular Facebook page has over 150,000 fans, he is the host of the weekly YouTube show Cone of Shame, and his humorous educational videos have been viewed over a million times.

Dr. Roark has received the Outstanding Young Alumni Award from the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine, and has been named Practice Management Speaker of the Year at NAVC, one of the world's largest veterinary conferences. His improv comedy team recently won Alchemy Comedy's 2015 March Madness tournament, and in 2013 and 2015, practices where Dr. Roark works were named as finalists in the American Animal Hospital Association's Practice of the Year Contest.



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