CONNECTIONS

Cyberbullying of Veterinarians

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cy·ber·bul·ly·ing
noun
The use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature.

The State of Cyberbullying

Almost 21% of the veterinarians responding to the AVMA's "2014 Cyberbullying in Veterinary Medicine Survey" (https://www.avma.org/PracticeManagement/Administration/reputation/Pages/cyberbullying.aspx) reported that they had been cyberbullied themselves or had colleagues who had been cyberbullied, with the frequency steadily increasing over the past five years. Table one illustrates the reasons for the attacks.

Some of the tactics used by cyberbullies against veterinarians included negative reviews, social media posts, and threats of financial, physical and/or emotional harm. Categorically, businesses online have also been sent repeated offensive messages, had false information posted about them, and have had personal and/or organizational names and online accounts "hijacked" and abused. Unlike the playground bullies that populate the school system, the anonymity of the Internet can encourage cyberbullies to commit acts they might not otherwise attempt in person. It affords "false courage" when the bully thinks he or she can't be identified. In fact, the veterinarians surveyed reported 46.2% of the attacks against them were made anonymously.

The impact? An astounding 47.5% of respondents said that they considered changing jobs or careers as a result of the cyberbullying attacks!

What platforms did cyberbullies use? Take a look at table 2 from the AVMA survey results

It's going to get worse. The Internet has empowered all of us to be international communicators, for better or worse, with cyberbullying epitomizing some of the worst.

Table 1

Reason for Cyberbullying Attack	Percentage
Dispute over outcome of veterinary care	52.3%
Dispute over charges for veterinary care/services	50.8%
Dispute over diagnosis or treatment (including disagreement with another veterinary practice)	50.8%
Care not provided due to financial or other reasons	33.8%
Dispute over animal adopted from or through a facility	6.2%
Other (including angry employee; dispute over animal bite reporting; staff infighting; client fired; personal matters; racial/ethnic/disability discrimination by client against veterinarian)	23.1%

Table 2

Platform Where Attacks Were Made	Percentage
Facebook	50.0%
Yelp	42.4%
Phone	22.7%
Media (news story—TV, internet or radio)	16.7%
Email	13.6%
In person	12.1%
Blog	9.1%
Twitter	4.5%
Other (including consumer websites; Google reviews; local business review websites; custom web page)	21.2%

And, online, critics can draw empathy and support from other ego- and power-driven netizens who will join in the attacks *even if they have had no direct contact or knowledge of the person or organization they're attacking.* In fact, the AVMA survey respondents reported that 28.1% of their cyberbullies had no direct relationships with them, their staff or their business.

Cyberbullying first garnered national attention when teens were victimized and, in some horrible cases, committed suicide as a result the shame and distress they felt. But now there is already one confirmed case of a veterinarian also taking her life for reasons at least partially associated with cyberbullying. And, on a more prosaic level, what cyberbullying can always do is harm your business' most important asset—its reputation.

Complicating matters is the sometimes very-fine line between cyberbullying and legitimate, assertive consumer action. We all, as consumers, have the right to speak up publicly when private efforts to resolve an issue with a service or product provider have failed. As someone who has taken such action, I can tell you it works to call out a business on Twitter or Facebook, although I always start out asking for help instead of being demanding. And I have escalated complaints as far as posting reviews on Yelp and Google when I've been ignored—a serious mistake on the part of any business, about which I'll write more later. Thus, you need to:

- Understand the difference between a legitimate complaint and cyberbullying and,

- Embrace the opportunity to address legitimate complaints—rapidly.

How to Prevent Cyberbullying

You may be surprised to hear that, after reverse-engineering a number of cyberbullying cases to which my firm has responded, we've concluded that cyberbullying can often be completely prevented. Here are some important elements of cyberbullying crisis prevention:

1. ***Prevention starts at your practice,*** where every employee should understand that he or she is a crisis manager for your organization *whether you want them to be or not.* An employee, in an off moment, may get cranky with a client—a client who knows how to express his/her dissatisfaction online. Maybe one who knows how to get friends or others to share a complaint more widely and, if it's well written, others who don't even know you jump on the virtual bandwagon. Or, others who have been unhappy with you for some reason see the message and add their own complaints. Suddenly, you have a crisis-level problem that started with a weak moment on the part of a staff member.

As part of your prevention efforts, you should have a social media policy in place that clearly lets every employee know what is or is not appropriate with regard to communicating about clients, patients and co-workers. Yes, everyone has First Amendment rights, but as an employer you have a right to dictate what an employee can say publicly about your business. And not just to preclude negativity by disgruntled employees, either. Some of the worst online mistakes we've seen have involved loyal and well-intentioned employees getting into heated debates with critics.

Even better, have that policy be part of an overall issues management plan, accompanied by training, which makes it clear how to respond to and what to say about the various types of issues/crises that came come up at any practice.

2. **Create a cushion of goodwill** *before a reputation* challenge ever happens. That means proactive public relations as a part of your normal business operation and expenses. If you're already recognized, known, and liked (online in particular), then when negative allegations come around users are less likely to give them credence and more likely to believe what you say about the situation.

Engage in real-time (or close to real-time) social media monitoring for mentions of your practice and its principal staff members across the most popular social media platforms, particularly Twitter, Facebook, and review sites. There are both paid and free methods of monitoring online comments and having reports sent directly to your email. Google Alerts (http://google.com/alerts) is certainly the best-known free method, but it doesn't catch everything. Supplement it with Hootsuite (http://hootsuite.com), a free app, and specifically assign monitoring responsibility to someone on your staff—or even an intern or your under-employed teenager. There are also upgraded/fee-paid versions of Hootsuite that you may opt to acquire.

How to Respond to Cyberbullying

1. **Act on negative comments as quickly as possible.** If you see a negative mention there, you should immediately reach out to whoever posted the comment and offer them an email address to which they could write and receive attention to their concern. Then closely examine whatever facts they present and if there was *any* wrongdoing on your part, make amends promptly and thoroughly. Responses should be compassionate, confident and competent, what I call the "3 C's of Crisis Communications." People who are upset with you won't listen to the facts very closely if you don't first acknowledge their feelings, hence the importance of compassion in all sensitive communications. You already know that as a veterinarian in terms of client communication – but sometimes that training can go out the window when you feel personally attacked.

An interesting thing often happens as a result of such rapid and compassionate response. Critics can become allies, posting again about how well you responded. Or, at least, posting that their issues have been resolved. You've made lemonade out of lemons.

2. **Avoid these mistakes!** Trading written punches with critics online and arguing the minutiae of the allegations ad infinitum are two common mistakes to avoid. Make your points and move on. If a critic is unresponsive to a compassionate approach, there's nothing more that you can do than continue to communicate with your more reasonable stakeholders. Remember there are always three broad audiences in such situations: your loyal fans and supporters, who may well speak out in your favor when you're criticized; your harsher critics, who will never be satisfied with your response; and, the fence sitters. Optimally, you want to turn fence sitters into loyal fans but, at a minimum, you want to avoid having them turn into critics.

Never "buy" reviews in any way; either by, for example, offering someone a discount to change their review or to post a positive review. If word of that gets out, not only will it garner criticism, but review sites such as Yelp will pretty much ensure that even your legitimately positive reviews don't get seen.

At Some Point Response to Cyberbullying Calls for Outside Help

There are subtleties to cyberbullying response that can require judgment calls by people who can bring years of related experience to the table. What are the pros and cons of deleting a Facebook post? How credible is any specific critic? Should you agree to a financial settlement with a critic even if you know you're in the right?

There are social media and public relations firms that have a lot of experience with issues and crisis management, and then there are some who merely *claim* such experience. There is an immense difference between traditional PR and social media, which is done to *promote* the value of your brand, and issues/crisis management PR and social media, which is done to *preserve* its value. Just as when retaining an attorney or any specialty consultant, check references very carefully.

Finally, the AVMA has some excellent information available at https://www.avma.org/PracticeManagement/Administration/reputation/Pages/default.aspx on the subject of managing your online reputation that are well worth using to educate yourself and your staff. ●

Jonathan Bernstein is president of Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc., http://bernsteincrisismanagement.com a national crisis management consultancy, and author of Manager's Guide to Crisis Management. His clients include the American Veterinary Medical Association.