



Rep to protect

Aesthetic PR expert **Julia Kendrick** outlines how to keep your business reputation above the fray when it comes to issues, scandals and negative comments

One of the biggest concerns for aesthetic businesses is how to deal effectively with issues and negative reviews or comments, which can present tough challenges. Knowing how and when to respond is critical, as you may cause more damage with a heavy-handed, ill-informed or defensive approach. Similarly, you should know your rights when it comes to defending your business from defamation and false claims. So how should you proceed with your own issues management – especially if you don't have a

dedicated PR agency or internal communications team to handle things? This article provides a broad overview of how you can take control of negative situations, with effective tips and techniques to keep your reputation intact.

"IT WASN'T US"

The aesthetics industry is no stranger to controversy and seemingly every week there is a tabloid story designed to make the reader's jaws drop. Ironically, it may not even be a direct issue affecting you or your clinic that sees

bothered to define or prepare your position properly. When it comes to broader industry issues, it is still your responsibility to stand up and be counted: don't rely on anybody else doing this for you, whether manufacturers or even competitor clinics. Once you have gathered the facts and formulated your positioning, post a statement on your website updating on the situation and your proposed actions to address the issue, and create updates across all your social media channels to direct audiences to the main statement.

SET CLEAR PROTOCOLS

Forewarned is fore-armed: most of the day to day 'issues' will be no surprise to you – such as an adverse event being posted online, a customer complaint, or a product fault. Make sure you have clear protocols ahead of time for each of these 'common' issues and that your staff and PR/digital teams have been trained on exactly what to do and when – including AE reporting to the MHRA and manufacturer, how to communicate with the customer and so on. The more you can prepare in advance about your response cascade, and be clear about who will be responsible for delivering each step, the less likely you will be caught out and incur reputational damage while you scramble your team.

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BE AWARE OF THE DIGITAL SPOTLIGHT

In this digital age where our deeds are immortalised in Google forevermore, it can be hugely detrimental to have negative reviews or comments posted online. Ignoring these in the hope that 'they will be buried by Google eventually' is foolhardy: the way you deal with negative comments says much more about your professionalism and is out there for all to see. Not only will your response be seen by a much larger audience, the timeliness of your reaction will also be judged. This can be especially difficult if you need time to gather the full facts and information about a situation, but the key to success is regular communication about what you are doing. Do not be tempted to leave radio silence while you work things out behind the scenes, intending to reveal all when you're good and ready: this will likely result in a further build-up of frustration and anger if people feel their complaint or issue is being ignored. If possible, I would always advocate putting in place an initial response to enable you to take a complaint or issue offline and deal with it directly – rather than having everything play out on public platforms where matters can escalate quickly and remain visible to Google in perpetuity.

DON'T FEED THE TROLLS

When it comes to negative or abusive comments, there is a fine line between addressing (potentially) valid complaints and allowing people to express their opinion of your goods and services. If untrue or abusive comments are made which damage the reputation of your business, or individuals within your company, you have several options:

- **On your owned platforms (website, social channels):** Remove the remarks and highlight that you have a zero tolerance policy for online abuse and such content will be subject to immediate removal. >

you firefighting: broader issues which affect the wider industry tend to tar everyone with the same brush, and can just as easily land on your doorstep. Take the PIP scandal for example: the criminal actions of one negligent breast implant manufacturer cast all manufacturers under suspicion. In this scenario, it would have been foolhardy for any manufacturer to simply adopt the "it wasn't us" stance: the severity and panic caused demanded a much more holistic approach, with reputable companies keen to cooperate with the regulatory and governmental bodies charged with untangling the situation. Without a doubt, the worst thing you can do in the event of a serious issue is nothing – this simply looks like you are inept or uncaring and will decimate that hard-earned reputation. The phrase "no comment" is a TV cliché which makes it look like you haven't



- **Public platforms:** You can request that the operating company remove them, or provide you with the identities of the individuals involved so you can respond appropriately. You can also put your positioning statement on the same forum – making clear your [position](#).

~~Always respond using the same channels as the initial comment/complaint.~~ If disparaging comments damage a businesses' reputation to the point where actual or probably financial loss is incurred, then the party has grounds to sue for defamation per the 2013 Defamation Act. I would counsel caution when going down the legal route – this can be like using a hammer to crack a nut and could draw much more unwanted attention. The last thing you need is media coverage of a court case which repeats all the abusive commentary (seeding this in the minds of your audience) rather than just shutting it down and moving forwards.

THE A.C.E. METHOD

There are a plethora of issues management guides and processes available out there – ranging from three to ten steps long. A quick and handy process I have used with clients in the past is the A.C.E. method which stands for Acknowledge, Clarify, Engage and it works like this:

1. **Acknowledge** the complaint or issue: "We are sorry that you were disappointed with X" or "We have heard the breaking news today about Y"

Importantly, this does not mean agreeing or disagreeing with the complaint or issue at this point, you are merely putting in place that first important marker to show your audiences that you have heard them and are doing

something about it. Ensure you always communicate using the same channels through which the original issue or complaint arose – be that your website, Twitter, Facebook and so forth.

2. **Clarify** what has happened, what you're doing about it and get out a key message.

In order to address any issue it is vital to have all the facts, so ~~firstly~~ make it clear that this is your first priority. A good tactic at this point is to also weave in one of your key messages (relevant to the situation) to reinforce your position – even in the midst of a negative scenario, for example:

- "We are committed to the highest standards of quality in all that we do and would like to understand more about this incident in order to assist you"
- "We are currently working to ensure we have all the information needed to respond quickly and efficiently to this issue and are dedicated to providing the highest level of support to our customers"

3. **Engage** the complainant or your broader audience directly with your proposed solution or next steps – ideally taking the issue offline.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to effective issues management and protecting your reputation, 90% of success is down to preparation and your ability to respond rapidly. By planning as much as possible in advance and ensuring your team are also trained and prepared, you will maximise your ability to address issues before they escalate and reduce ~~the~~ potential negative impact on your reputation. **AM**



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