

# Let your patients do the talking: Best practices for using testimonials to promote your clinic brand

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Patient testimonials can significantly enhance a clinic's reputation and it is important to share them with the wider public. Wendy Lewis explains how you can put procedures in place to gather valuable marketing material from your patients



**When was the last time that you booked a hotel or made a restaurant reservation without checking it out on Tripadvisor or Toptable? Testimonials, ratings, and reviews are the new word-of-mouth. People want to hear from real people — other patients, customers, and clients. Testimonials can influence potential patients to choose your practice or to choose someone else.**

One of the challenges of marketing is the basic human instinct of skepticism, our inclination not to believe sales claims. This defence mechanism goes on high alert whenever we are hit with a marketing message. One reason for this reaction is that consumers are bombarded with hundreds to thousands of marketing messages at every turn. Billboards, television and radio adverts, magazines and papers, texts to our mobile devices, and even the back of taxis surround consumers in a never-ending stream of messages that say, 'CHOOSE ME'. It is only natural that people are forced to tune most of them out.

Another reason for our defences going up is that we have all had less than perfect experiences at some point and have lost trust. Consumers are programmed not to believe your claims. They need something more convincing than just words. They need someone who they can relate to and who can help them overcome their aversion to being sold. It is your responsibility to provide that person (or his/her words) who will soothe your prospect's anxieties and concerns. If you don't, and another clinic does, then you could lose a new patient.

One way to do this by having someone who is just like them, who once had the same problems they now have say to them, 'Hey, this is a great place. You can trust them. They are honest and will help you.'

Patients will tell their family and friends how you made them feel. Collecting patient testimonials is an effective way to fight back against negative or fake reviews. They are an effective and powerful tool in your clinic marketing arsenal. Used in the right way, they can influence a potential patient to choose your clinic over all of the others. Testimonials are essential because they are evidence of your ability as a physician and they provide prospective customers with an expectation for results. When a prospective patient identifies with a patient that has given a testimonial, it helps them recognize that the solutions to their problems lie with you. They also give you instant credibility. People are always more comfortable when they see a real person, with real results, and an honest opinion endorse your clinic. However, many patient testimonials are ineffective and fail to soothe prospective patients' anxieties. In fact, just like any other marketing message; they should sell your brand and your services.

## What belongs in a testimonial

Ideally, testimonials used in medical marketing should be well structured. First, allow your satisfied patient to describe their problem briefly, and then let them talk about how they felt about the healthcare you provided to them, and then let them brag about the result of your products or services. Always allow the patient providing you with a testimonial to write or tell you about their experience naturally. You never want to tell satisfied patients what to say, but you can certainly help them shape their testimonial by asking the right questions.

Testimonials should not make only claims or assertions, even if they are glowing. For example, 'Jones Medical Aesthetics Clinic was great!' is not all that compelling on its own. Similarly, blanket statements such as: 'I highly recommend Dr Jones', or 'Thank you for doing such great work!' are equally unsubstantial. Although these are all positive comments, they are missing an essential element of a great testimonial; they are not convincing to move someone to make a purchasing decision. They are just claims or assertions, which on their own do not really sell anything.

A better testimonial format should illustrate and prove any claims or assertions. For example, 'My experience at Jones Clinic was better than any clinic I have been to. The staff were friendly and genuinely cared about me. This was apparent from the warm reception and the excellent care I received. And I have beautiful skin again!' Doing it this way will help distinguish this message from the thousands of others that are merely assertions.

Whenever possible, try to get testimonials from patients signed with first and last names, along with their occupations or titles, and location. Of course, this is not a *fait accompli* in medical aesthetics, where patients want to remain anonymous to some degree. However, testimonials from a nameless person or initials only just does not ring true. In this age of increasing transparency, it makes it look and sound fake, even when it is the genuine article. Because the person reading it cannot identify with the writer, the effect may be lost. For example, 'Jane Doe, Estate Agent, Marlowe', or 'Lauren Smith, President of Smith & John Associates, Ltd', sounds more official and will thus have a greater impact.

In most cases, generalities or allusions to benefits are also not advised. For instance, instead of: 'Dr Jones is wonderful', try to get something like, 'Dr Jones was so reassuring. I used to dread needles but his bedside manner and competence made me feel at ease right away!' Or even more specific, such as, 'The cosmetic treatments I had with Dr Jones improved my appearance 100%. He made me look like a million! I have so much more confidence now.' Mentioning specific benefits received rather than generic assertions of benefits makes the testimonial come alive.

Think of what would persuade you to make a purchasing decision or to choose one hair stylist or interior designer over another. That language will be equally swaying to prospective patients for your clinic. The best testimonials basically state: 'I once had the same problem/concern you have. I was nervous about it just as you are. I was concerned over costs/pain/results/safety, just like you are. But I found a specific solution with these specific benefits, and as a result, I am very happy.'

The testimonial should serve to allay the readers' anxieties and concerns and present a solution that your clinic offers.

# How to get the right testimonials

You can't put words into your patients' mouths, but if you know how to approach them, you can get the kind of testimonials you need.

It is quite common for patients to make flattering comments about physicians, the staff, and the clinic. One way is for the clinic staff to keep their collective eyes and ears open for any patient who says something complimentary about their experience, outcomes, staff, doctor, or the clinic. When you hear such a statement, jump on the opportunity by saying: 'Thank you for the lovely compliment, Mrs Smith. Would it be possible for us to quote your kind words?' Mrs Smith may say that it is fine to quote her, or not. The next step is to make it official.

The chance to get a great testimonial is immediate, while the patient is still in the clinic. Testimonials are best taken as soon as the patient's treatment is over or when they come in for a follow up visit, since they may not recall their experience after an extended period of time. Don't circle back to Mrs Smith hours, days, or weeks later. The ideal moment may be lost forever. Write down what she said and ask her to sign-off on it. Keep a release form in rooms and at the front desk on hand for this purpose so patients can give their signature, allowing you to use their testimonial in your marketing materials or website.

If the opportunity presents itself, you may be able to ask if you could get a bit more information from her. Draft a simple and brief patient questionnaire to have on hand for just these occasions. Many clinics will give every patient who has a consultation or gets treated a questionnaire to fill out to get their insights. If the patient is willing, you may get the words you need from this exercise. This is an effective, yet ethical, method of generating positive comments about the practitioner and the clinic.

However, it is imperative not to attempt to use patient testimonials without the patient's express written permission. Show Mrs Smith the quote you have constructed from her patient questionnaire. Ask what she thinks, make any changes requested, and thank her profusely.

Another method practitioners use to get testimonials is to simply solicit them in an upfront and honest way. For example, 'We are preparing a new clinic brochure/website. You mentioned last week that you were pleased with the work we have done for you so far. I was wondering if you would be kind enough to let me use your comments in our brochure/on our website?' You may be surprised to learn that many people will be flattered to be asked.

The trick is to get more detailed information. In some cases, you may need to ask the right questions to elicit specific benefits.

If patients agree to give a glowing testimonial, it is appropriate to thank them in some small way after the fact. However, be careful never to bribe patients or make promises of free treatments, products, or gifts in advance. Offering patients any form of compensation should be avoided.

## Patient Questionnaire

- 1** How do you feel about your medical aesthetics work? How does this compare with medical aesthetics work you've had in the past?
- 2** How do you feel about the way you've been treated in our clinic? How does this compare with other clinics you have been to?
- 3** What concerns were you experiencing before you came in? How were they resolved? How do you now feel about the treatment you have had done?
- 4** How likely are you to recommend our clinic to a friend or family member?
- 5** Do you have any other comments about your medical aesthetics care or our clinic?

I hereby give permission to use my comments above for promotional purposes.

(patient's signature)

# The power of persuasion

Some patients will voluntarily offer to give testimonials. When this occurs, it is best to allow the patient to write their testimonial in their own words. For those patients who are pleased with your products and services, but don't offer to provide you with a testimonial, you can try asking them. Patients who are truly pleased with your clinic may be quite happy to offer up some kind words. There are a number of professional and polite ways to ask for testimonials.

To be safe and respect patients' right to privacy, try to obtain authorisation in writing to use the patient's name, profession, location, and of course, photographs. Make sure that your authorisation form highlights the use of the testimonial in your promotional materials and on your clinic website.

In some locations, such as New York State, the use of physician testimonials is against public policy. Check with your state board, local health authority, or malpractice carrier. Some locations have restrictions on how you can use testimonials; in some areas it is not legal to appear to promise specific results. If the patient is merely reporting what he or she experienced in your care, it is simply a personal description of your services. It may be best to use different terms other than 'testimonial'; you could substitute terms like acknowledgements, commentary, statements, experience, and quotes.

It is advisable to get testimonials signed and gain written approval for their use to protect yourself from patients who change their mind or refute ever giving their permission. Have patients sign a release document to grant their consent, have it witnessed, keep it on file, and give the patient a copy to take home for their records.

Patients aren't the only source you can tap into for testimonials. Testimonials from referring physicians or employers are also very effective in communicating your value to your prospective patients. These types of testimonials should focus on your professional experience, unique training and skill to bolster your image and brand.

The best places to use your testimonials are displayed prominently on your website, or in promotional material including brochures, flyers, handouts, blog posts, as well as on social media platforms. You can include them within the content of your site under a 'Testimonials' section and/or placed on specific pages relating to the procedures mentioned in the testimonial.

## In the clinic

Create a photo gallery, bound book, or presentation on a tablet for your waiting room and patient areas. Include patient testimonials along with photos of the person who wrote the testimonial positioned right next to it to lend impact to the words. Frame testimonials and post them throughout the clinic in patient areas for additional impact.

## E-blasts, mailings, newsletters, and handouts

When you mention a particular benefit of your clinic, incorporate a patient testimonial that also mentions the same benefit. This adds believability to what you're saying. Aim to accumulate a number of testimonials for each benefit of your practice. You can never have too many. Handwritten notes of gratitude ring true, but they have to be easy to read. Unless the patient has specifically granted permission to use his or her name, location, and any other specific details, delete names from written testimonials. It is a good idea to keep copies of written testimonials in the patient's chart for future reference.

## Website, YouTube, and social media

Testimonials can be obtained in writing and used with an accompanying photo to make them more user friendly. They may also be in an audio or video format, which also inspires even more confidence than just plain text. When prospective patients can actually see a live person talking about how he or she benefited from their experience in your clinic, it is very

### Sample templates

#### Sample disclaimer for website

'The individuals featured in these videos are all actual patients of Dr Jones. Please note that outcomes from cosmetic surgery procedures and aesthetic treatments may vary and the experiences shared in the testimonials are specific to each individual patient and may not be representative of the experience of others.'

#### Sample release form

I, [patient's name], authorize Dr Neil Jones and Jones Aesthetics to use my testimonial on his website, www.jonesclinic.co.uk or in any marketing or public relations activities. I waive the right of prior approval and hereby release Dr Jones and Jones Aesthetics from any and all claims for damages of any kind based on the use of my testimonial or information in the testimonial.

Signed,  
[patient's name]

persuasive. Video content does not have to be professional quality; in fact, patients who take their own videos can seem even more genuine.

## **Live testimonials**

Considering inviting some actual patients to attend open house seminars and talk about their experience. This can be very well received and may serve to take some of the fear out of the process. Guests have an opportunity to talk to someone who has had a procedure done and see their actual results. Also show their actual pre- and post-procedure photographs at the event, if the patient allows.

## **Reputation management**

Your reputation is the most important thing you have, and it cannot be replaced once it is tarnished. Reputations take years to build but can be compromised all too easily.

In the past, negative word-of-mouth was a major concern. But in this era of online communications and social media, your professional reputation can be attacked from multiple directions and a number of sources. An unhappy patient, or competitor in your area, or even a disgruntled employee can target your clinic online and wreak havoc on your reputation. Patients who have a grievance are faced with an expanding spectrum of ways to express their negative thoughts to thousands of viewers in just a few clicks. A satisfied patient, customer, or client may tell a handful of people about a positive experience. But someone who has had a negative experience can be far more vocal and may tell anyone who will listen.

The busier your clinic is, the more patients coming through the door, the chances of getting some negative reviews increases. It's a numbers game. Ultimately, the best way to counter-balance negative comments is by gaining positive comments in the form of heartfelt testimonials.