

Recovering your reputation after a cyberbullying event

Online attacks against a veterinary practice, school, company, or organization can potentially damage trust with current and prospective clients, students, or business partners. Cyberbullying can originate from multiple sources (employees, former employees, clients, or unknown cyber assailants) and can be sparked for several reasons. Each situation is unique, and the strategies deployed following such an event should be tailored appropriately to the circumstances.

For an incident that garners a substantial amount of news media coverage or social media attention, external communications consultants can help to minimize the fallout, recover reputation faster, and ease the burdens on you and your staff members. Depending upon the nature of the issue and potential for long-term reputational harm, you may want to engage a local public relations firm with crisis communications and reputation recovery expertise.

However, in most cases, outside support most likely isn't necessary. Learn about the following strategies and tactics to deploy in the days, weeks, and months afterward to recover reputation and solidify trust in your practice.

Legal notes

- Be aware of any potential legal or ethical impact related to client confidentiality provisions, or other restrictions on the release of client or patient information. A client may waive confidentiality of their information if they share details about their animal's care with the media or on social media, but check your state practice act to be sure.
- If a cyberbullying event involves an employment issue or employee work conditions at the practice, please consult with your legal counsel.

What to do immediately following the incident (1 to 3 days after):



Conduct a post-crisis evaluation

This is the time for critical analysis of what happened, how it happened, how well it was handled, and what could have been done differently. Learn from the situation and begin developing tailored strategies to reduce the chances of a similar event occurring in the future.

Reputation and credibility are influenced not only by actions that may have contributed to the cyberbullying incident, but also by how you respond after an incident to strengthen and/or rebuild trust and confidence with key stakeholders, such as existing clients and your local community.

For instance, if new policies, procedures, or staff training are instituted that will help ensure a crisis of this nature never happens again, it may be appropriate to share with clients and/or community members the steps the clinic is taking to address the core issue that caused the event. In the days following the event, these measures can help to build trust and communicate assurances that appropriate actions are being taken.

Identify and prioritize key audiences for recovery communications

Strategically determine who should be part of your recovery communications outreach by answering these questions:

- Which audiences, or different groups of people, might be influenced or impacted by this situation? Create a list of any and all audiences that may have seen the cyberbullying content or heard about the accusations being made against you, your team, or your practice.
- How widespread is the potential reputational damage? Was it isolated to your clients, did the local community become aware of it, or was it broad and widespread (for example, the incident went viral and attracted news media coverage, etc.)?

Once you have your list of audiences, consider how likely it is that each audience is aware of the accusations made and how that information might influence their trust in your clinic, school, company, or other veterinary organization. The more likely it is that the audience is aware of the incident and likely to be influenced by it, the higher the reputational risk.

If the reputational risk is high, that audience should immediately receive post-crisis communications to ensure they have all the relevant factual information from your organization's perspective and understand how the organization is responding and remedying the situation.

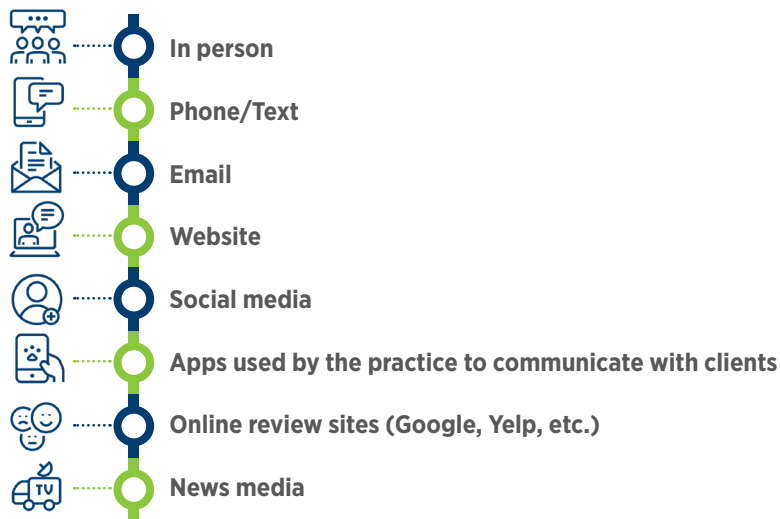
If the reputational risk is low, then a more conservative wait-and-see approach may be appropriate to avoid escalating the impact of the attack and giving others a reason to question their trust and confidence in your clinic, school, or other veterinary entity.

(Please note that anything shared with external audiences could potentially end up in the media, so use caution as you determine what information to share and the tone of your messages.)

Examples of audiences:



Examples of communication channels:



Tailor communications to affected audiences

Once you know which audiences are top priorities for communication, you can begin deciding what to say to each one.



Internal/Staff

A cyberattack can deeply affect the morale and sense of safety for staff. This audience should be prioritized for communications during and following a crisis. It's important that staff understand how the clinic is responding, including sharing:

- **Key messages** on what happened and how you're responding
- **Direction on what they should say or do** if confronted about the situation either at or outside of the clinic by clients, friends, media, etc.
- **Guidance on use of social media.** Suggest what they should or should not do. If well-meaning staff respond to negative online reviews or social media comments or posts, despite their best intentions to defend the practice, it can escalate the situation, further eroding public trust.
- **Reminders of any wellbeing support they may have access to as an employee.** The AVMA has [wellbeing resources](#) that are available to veterinary teams.



Clients

Loyal clients are the lifeblood of veterinary practices. Their trust and continued support are vital. In the days following a crisis, if clients' confidence may be compromised because of the incident, consider proactively reaching out to them with a statement that includes:

- **What happened/facts** related to the situation
- **The clinic's perspective**
- **A reminder of your dedication, compassion, expertise, and commitment** to their pets' well-being

Avoid repeating false or negative accusations, as repeating inaccuracies can perpetuate them further. Convey compassion, confidence, and credibility. If a mistake was made, own it, and share how the situation is being remedied so it never happens again. Avoid casting blame or coming across as defensive.

This can be done through one, many or all of the channels available to you, including the practice's social media pages, website, email, text message, or other communications channels currently used to engage clients.

Be prepared to respond to client calls, replies via email, or social media comments and messages. To solidify their continued trust, be ready and responsive to them if they reach out with questions. It might be helpful to prepare a document with anticipated questions and answers and to have team members who are answering phones ready with this document of talking points, so they feel confident to respond calmly and accurately.



Social media followers and prospective clients



Current and prospective clients may visit your social media channels. Online reviews influence prospective customer choices. It may be appropriate to post a statement on your social media channels immediately following the event. If the clinic decides that a proactive social media post addressing the situation is not warranted, ensure that any planned social media posts do not come across as flippant, lighthearted or tone-deaf. At such times, it is appropriate to “go dark” or simply not post updated content until an issue loses prominence.

- **Monitor your social channels closely.** Address questions and respond to any inaccurate statements with facts for clarity. Be responsive and “like” or reply to fans who express trust and confidence in the clinic. Avoid casting blame or repeating the negative. If users are violating your social media guidelines (being abusive, perpetuating lies, trolling/spamming your page, etc.), hide or block them. But be careful that you do not hide, block, or delete legitimate comments (even if they may be critical) or questions that are an honest attempt to understand what is happening. Engage with commenters in an open, approachable manner, but avoid repeated back-and-forth responses to those who are abusive, trolling or who refuse to accept your replies as honest. In those instances, it’s appropriate to say that you’ve tried to respond with honesty and openness, then bow out of the conversation.
- **Monitor business review sites closely.** Respond to reviews—good and bad. By responding compassionately to a negative review and requesting a conversation with a reviewer to understand their concern or complaint and working to remedy it, often reviewers may change their review, or update it to reflect that appropriate actions were taken to remedy the problem. It also helps build trust with a wider audience as people see you’ve been responsive to their concerns.

One-star reviews can be very damaging to businesses. Investigate all negative reviews. Peer review sites such as Google and Yelp now halt ratings/reviews for businesses that have been negatively thrust into news or social media—but don’t count on them to do so. Monitor the sites, and if you can prove that a reviewer is not a client or patient of the clinic, or is lying, their feedback is likely in violation of the sites’ community guidelines, and you can request to have those reviews removed.

Click to learn how to remove reviews from your profile:

[Google](#)

[Yelp](#)



News media

Proactive outreach to news media in the days or weeks following a crisis may be an important avenue to recover reputation. If the clinic is wrongfully accused of something, or if news media covered a story about an adverse event at the clinic, or some other event or allegation against a staff member, a follow-up story sharing how the clinic is rectifying the situation may help to rebuild trust.

What to do in the weeks and months following an attack

It can be tempting to return to business as usual once the dust settles after a significant crisis, but there is considerable reputation recovery work in the weeks and months that follow to solidify trust and regain confidence.

- **Evaluate new procedures for effectiveness** – Each month or two, evaluate the effectiveness of any new procedures, protocols, policies, areas of improved clinic and client relations, or protocols that have been launched in response to the crisis.
- **Conduct periodic customer satisfaction surveys** – Insights from these will help guide reputation recovery strategies. Many medical practices routinely send a patient satisfaction survey immediately following a visit to the clinic or a consultation. It can also be advantageous to send a survey to clients who haven't used your services in over a year. This could provide insights into why, and/or prompt them to make an appointment.
- **Evaluate unprompted customer reviews** – Check customer reviews on external sites like Google and Yelp. Continue this weekly for the first month or two, then monthly thereafter, refining practices based on client review feedback to ensure continually increasing scores.
- **Proactively prompt clients to provide reviews:** When you feel confident in daily client interactions and satisfaction, proactively prompt clients to share their feedback in a Google or Yelp review.

Often, people review businesses when they have a poor experience. They may be less inclined to provide a glowing review without prompting—but those reviews are essential, especially in the aftermath of a reputation-compromising event. Some techniques for prompting reviews:



- Directly prompting during a face-to-face interaction following a positive interaction where the client expressed satisfaction
- Sending a text message or email follow-up after their visit, requesting feedback and encouraging them to share their experience via their social media channel of choice or on review sites such as Google and Yelp
- Posting signage in the clinic asking for reviews (this could be in the same location where you encourage clients to follow your social channels)

- **Emphasize your key attributes through storytelling:** For example, if a cyberattack accused a veterinary clinic of lacking compassion or being more focused on money than care, then increased authentic storytelling that emphasizes deep and personal levels of compassion, care, and commitment to the wellbeing of pets and their owners will help rebuild trust and confidence.

If the cost of care is a core issue or complaint, authentic and relatable stories that demonstrate compassion while increasing audience understanding of veterinary costs can increase trust. Include helpful tips on how to help reduce the costs and share options/solutions to consider. Emphasize how you are helping pet owners, and how you are contributing to the health and welfare of pets, as well as any free promotions to help pet owners as they manage costs. These steps will build empathy toward veterinary professionals who are also impacted by costs.

Steps for effective storytelling

Determine

- Determine what specific public perception you want to shape, or shift, following the attack.

Develop

- Identify and develop authentic storytelling opportunities that emphasize your brand promise to solidify for audiences why the accusations were unfounded or inform audiences of how your practice has changed (if relevant).
- Do not mention the former accusations or do any tie-backs to the issue.
- Use stories to bring your brand to life and rebuild trust.

Examples may include generating media coverage and social media posts about:



How the clinic or organization is giving back to the community



Keeping pets safe by informing owners on things like household plant toxicity



Highlight the importance of creating a pet care disaster plan



Special alert to pet owners on an upcoming community event you are hosting



Helpful tips for pet owners (importance of dental cleanings, or annual vaccinations, etc.)



Any special recognition being given to an individual, the practice or company

Activate

- Once social media and client relations have been restored to primarily positive interactions, it may be a good time to increase the frequency of positive storytelling across your clinic's social media channels.
- Engage local reporters and news outlets by pitching stories that will further bolster positive brand perception.
- If your veterinary practice places advertisements, evaluate the content and determine if refreshed content is warranted to emphasize the brand attributes you want to elevate.

Monitor

- Monitor audience engagement and response to the stories and adjust strategy as necessary to increase and sustain positive interactions and audience engagement.