

Big Changes to Google Places: What it Means to ODs

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By Daniel Rostenne



Google Places is a leading social media hub where consumers rate businesses—and where businesses find new customers from positive reviews. Google has changed some key rules at this site, and ODs looking to benefit may have to make some changes.

Google recently announced changes to Google Places, the web giant's local search engine site that provides users with local business listings integrated with Google Maps. This spells good news—and bad news—for optometric practices.

On the positive side, Google makes it easier for your patients (hopefully the happy ones) to post consumer reviews of your practice. On the negative side, Google suppresses consumer reviews that are posted from other sources (e.g. Yelp, CitySearch, DemandForce) that you might have relied on up until now to drive new patients to schedule appointments with you.

Here are things to be aware of with the new Google Places...and steps to take to maximize your visibility with consumer reviews posted from wherever, including Google.

Changes to Page Listings at Google Places

1. Only reviews posted on the place page by Google users are listed and counted in the total number of reviews.
2. Many of the business details you provide when you claim your listing (such as description, services, products, etc.), which were previously shown on the place page may no longer be visible on the page. Google says that these details should still be included as background information when claiming a listing, however, as they will continue to add value to the listing and help Google to better understand the business.
3. Two new red "Google Reviews" buttons have been placed in prominent locations on the page. One is at the top beneath the business info. A second is at the beginning of the review section. This makes it easier for a user to write a review. Now you just have to send a patient directly to your Google Places listing, which now provides a more clearly marked link to write a review.
4. Google lists links to reviews from third-party review sites toward the bottom of the page after the reviews from Google users.
5. Citations, mentions on another web site that list your business name, phone number and address (also known as NAP), have been removed from the page. A citation serves to validate the existence of your business and the information provided in your listing as Google's spiders search the web, and therefore, ultimately impact your Google listing rank. We are not yet certain if and how this will impact local business search engine optimization (SEO).

Steps for Practices to Take

Adjust: Adjust your review strategy to put more emphasis on getting reviews on Google. While you shouldn't abandon other review sites entirely, Google is still the overwhelming powerhouse for online search, and the SEO advantages of making Google happy will lead more traffic to your web site and hopefully generate more patients for your practice.

Be vigilant: Look to trusted sources of up-to-date info on these kinds of topics (Review of Optometric Business, EyeCarePro Blog). You never know what Google will do next and how it can impact you.

Encourage reviews: Remember, even the happiest patient may not think to write up an online review—unless they are asked. Put a strategy in place in your practice to request patient reviews. In light of recent changes, Google should be the primary focus of that strategy.

Daniel Rostenne is the CEO of EyeCarePro.net, an AOA Preferred Provider of web services, specializing in web site design, social media and search engine optimization. Daniel can be reached at danielr@eyecarepro.net or (412) 532-6542.

Encourage Patients to Use Google Places
Google suppresses listings from review sites like Yelp! that compete with Google Places. Let your patients know they can find you on Google Places, and consider encouraging them to submit testimonials about your practice.—ROB Editors