

Using social media for clinical trial recruitment



Find out how social media can help with participant recruitment and learn how to get started



Introduction

Over the past 10 years, the rapid growth and use of social media networks by the general population has created a powerful new tool for pharmaceutical companies and clinical research organisations (CROs) to engage with patients, and recruit them for clinical trials. CROs and pharmaceutical study sponsors are still learning how to effectively use social and digital media as part of their participant recruitment strategies.

This article discusses the benefits of social media for patient recruitment, examples of how social media can accelerate recruitment, and some tips for approaching both organic and paid social media recruitment campaigns.



Social media is a powerful tool for pharma companies and CROs recruiting patients to clinical trials

Advantages of using social media for patient recruitment

Today, new and innovative methods to recruit clinical study participants are urgently needed due to the rising cost of conducting clinical research, and the increasing focus on developing therapies for more niche populations¹.

Using social media to recruit clinical study participants offers some key advantages compared with traditional recruitment methods such as physician recommendation, TV, radio, and newspaper advertising². Because of its low cost and ability to reach a diverse and broad audience, social media can be a cost-effective approach. Social media has also been shown to recruit 'hard to reach' groups that cannot be easily accessed through traditional methods. These include low-income populations, adolescents and young adults³.

The use of social media can also reduce recruitment time by allowing clinical research teams to identify and engage with people in specific demographic groups who would be more relevant subjects for their particular clinical trials². Connecting with patients through social media can allow researchers to design more patient-centric trials, by listening to patient groups and understanding what they are seeking from clinical research.

Diverse platforms and demographics

Social media platforms can be broken down by key demographic factors, including age, gender and country⁴. Analysing these online demographic groups can help clinical researchers to identify the right platforms to target potential study participants. According to recent results from the Pew Research Center survey issued in November 2016, the use of Facebook by US adults continues to increase, while the adoption of other social media platforms remains stable. In the US, 80% of internet users – 68% of all US adults – use Facebook. In second place are Instagram and Pinterest, while LinkedIn and Twitter show the least use.



The power of patient groups in social media

Patient advocacy groups offer exciting new opportunities for clinical study recruitment. These groups often have a very active social media presence. Many have their own websites, Facebook and Twitter pages, and discussion boards. In particular, patient advocacy groups associated with rare diseases tend to have online members who are very engaged, and more likely to be potential study subjects.

It is important for CROs and pharmaceutical study sponsors to establish relationships with these associations by regularly informing them about new clinical trials at each stage, including a trial's recruitment, study progress and outcomes.

Keeping in touch with current patients at all stages can make them feel like they are more involved with the clinical study process. This approach can also allow clinical researchers to reach new target audiences. Sponsors can send press releases to post on the patient advocacy websites, provide links to relevant information about studies, or use newsletters to share information about upcoming trials or the results of studies that have recently been completed².

Some pharmaceutical sponsors are partnering with patient advocacy groups to increase patient awareness and recruitment for clinical trials. For example, MyHealthTeams is a website that hosts social networks for diseases such as epilepsy, Crohn's and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). In 2014, MyHealthTeams partnered with Biogen Idec to screen and recruit patients for inclusion in Biogen clinical trials. Following this agreement, Biogen was able to progress from screening only 6 patients a week to screening around 400 patients per week⁵.

Accelerating online awareness of clinical studies

Other sponsor companies are using digital advertising campaigns and videos to accelerate patient recruitment. In one example, a pharmaceutical manufacturer was able to fully enrol a clinical trial for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) in just four months, using digital and social media a recruitment tool. They used a high-quality website as the main hub, directing people there using ads on Google and Facebook, and through an introductory video on YouTube. The team saw traffic to the trial's website increase by 6,474% by the third month, resulting in close to 70,000 website visitors who looked at one or two pages of content. This demonstrates the power social media can have to reach people and improve the process of recruitment when used effectively¹.

Healthcare professionals are also leading the way in initiating social media recruitment. In 2014, the hashtag #WhyWeDoResearch started as a twitter campaign aimed at raising research awareness for healthcare professionals, patients and public. Within five months of its launch this Twitter campaign reached 14 countries and gained 2,364 participants. Among other community engagement activities, the #WhyWeDoResearch website now posts opportunities for patients and the public who are looking to participate in clinical studies⁶.

Tips for planning social media recruitment campaigns

There is more than one way to approach using social media for recruitment. Social media platforms can be used as advertising tools, where you can pay (usually by number of clicks or impressions) to promote posts to users within specified target demographics. For example, Facebook ads and Promoted Tweets on Twitter. However, it's essential to understand how the use of paid social media promotion is regulated in the locations where you're running campaigns. Additionally, all copy used to recruit patients should be approved in advance and kept on record for future reference. For example, if your study is subject to approval by an institutional review board (IRB), the board will typically review all the materials used for recruitment, and this will include paid social media posts².

On the other hand, social media can be used organically, without running paid placements. It's possible to run accounts, pages and engage with social media communities without paying to reach people. Although finding potential participants for a trial this way may take more time and commitment, there are ways to make this work, and a combination of both paid and organic may be the optimal approach. For example, it may be most effective to run on-going organic social media activity to build long term relationships, with paid campaigns utilised at key recruitment moments.

Some approaches to make the most of organic social media activity include:

- Review digital channels and social media sites to discover where your targeted patient audience and caregivers can be found online.
- Monitor and analyse current online discussions on your specific disease area to learn about the issues of interest and concern that your patient audience and caregivers are discussing.
- Study users' language, including the specific words and phrases they use to describe their symptoms. This can help you to use 'patient speak' in your social media content, rather than less accessible medical terms.
- Identify key hashtags and regular online chats, so you can take part in conversations, find your target audiences and build a relationship with key contacts such as patient organisations.



Summary

CROs and pharmaceutical companies are increasingly recognising the value of social and digital media for engaging with patients online, and recruiting them for clinical studies. However, no single social media platform will suit every patient or clinical trial. As such, social media should be used as a supplement to other available recruitment methods. A recommended strategy would be to integrate social media into already existing print, radio, and TV ads, along with physician referral. Using a combination of these methods is likely to play a key role in the future success of clinical trial recruitment.

Social media should be used as a supplement to other recruitment methods

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