**Improve Patient Recruitment in Clinical Trials: 3 easy steps**

Struggling to get qualified patients for your study? Working long hours only to find you’ve missed your quota? Are potential participants dropping out last minute?

From HIV treatment to peanut allergy therapy, much of the movement behind medical advancement is due to successful clinical trials. These trials drive medical research forward and allow vital advancements to be achieved through successful patient recruitment. Meeting and exceeding your participant quota is all about balancing your professional, scientific strategy with tactful use of humanity resources and rapport building.

There are three major stages of patient recruitment and each of these stages must be approached strategically in order to achieve the best patient enrollment results.

1. **Initial Outreach**

Online businesses, like Amazon, have boomed over the last decade, making everything from banking to groceries digitally available at any time of day. Consumer Health Online found that three quarters of Americans are looking up medical and treatment information online every month. In contrast, just 11 percent of clinical trials use digitized patient recruitment.

Social media is an avenue little used in the world of scientific study and clinical researchers would be wise to explore that possibility. It would be easy and convenient would for your potential participants to simply click a link and be brought directly to your study. The links would be readily available through search engines and media sources that recall search history and advertise accordingly, thereby reaching your ideal patient.

*“Targeting the right audience with the right message on the right channels can make a meaningful difference in patient recruitment...”*

* Ed Miseta, Chief Editor at Clinical Leader

However, it should be noted that ‘normal’ digital advertising rules do not apply to patient recruitment. There are specific strategies that need to be implemented in order to successfully recruit. Miseta has a great [guide](https://www.clinicalleader.com/doc/traditional-digital-advertising-rules-don-t-apply-to-patient-recruitment-0001) that further explains this tactic.

The advancements that come with a digital reach don’t mean that more traditional recruitment methods should be disregarded. It is equally important to engage physicians and alternative resources in the referral strategy in order to reach the widest audience possible.

1. **Streamline the Process**

Getting people to engage with your initial screening, whether through a phone call, an online form, or a physical document, is all about timing. *How hard is it to enroll? How long will the initial screening take? What’s the wait time for secondary connections with more information?* The answers to these questions will heavily impact the success of your conversion efforts.

Streamlining the screening process will improve patient recruitment in several ways. When you ensure fast response rates to trial leads you will automatically increase your patient enrollment by connecting while the idea is still fresh in their minds. “Call people immediately,” says Trialfacts CEO Nick Karrasch. “I don’t mean within an hour; I mean within a minute of them making that first inquiry.” If you have an interest form set up, treat it as an opportunity for instantaneous contact, not a backlog to be cleared later.

If that idea sounds a little overwhelming to you, be sure to put the tools in place that will set you up for success. Use an SMS alert system, such as Zapier, to alert you when new inquiries come in. You can then call the potential participant immediately to schedule a screening. Appointment scheduling systems can also be a useful tool for connecting with participants. This can make scheduling appointments easier and it saves you time in the process. It is still highly recommended that a courtesy call or text be sent to confirm the screening appointment and offer your help in the meantime. In fact, that personal follow up is critical in reaching a 100 percent contact rate.

Throughout this process, keep volunteer contact timely. When setting up an appointment for the initial screening, be sure it’s within a few days, not next week or further down the road. One of the main reasons potential patients drop out before the study is because what was a priority for them loses its urgency. They may lose interest or they may just get busy. You want to avoid either scenario.

Once the patient has committed to a screening don’t drop the ball on keeping them engaged. Another mistake that many researchers make in retaining their enrolled participants is by complicating the process. Remember that they are volunteering. “If there are a lot of hoops for them to jump through, you’re going to have a high dropout rate,” says Karrasch. Sending a 20-page consent form via email is the single most effective way to get people to *not* participate in your study. Instead, save the more intense paperwork for when the patient comes to their initial study visit. Potential participants can read it 15 minutes ahead of their appointment and have the researcher available to answer any questions or concerns.

1. **Rapport Building**

Keeping patients engaged so they are set to move forward with the clinical trial is all about being good-natured and flexible with the participants needs. If outreach and conversion are about strategy and efficiency, enrollment is about personability. The more personal your recruitment approach, the better.

*Yes*, you need to keep your team efficient. *Yes*, you need to track your outreach and conversion rates. *Yes*, there’s a budget and timeline to consider. *None of that matters if you do not have the participants to fill your study quota.*

Never conflate efficiency with pure mechanical optimization. A high conversion rate – getting people to fill out that form or make that phone call – is important to the recruitment process but a personal touch that encourages enrollment and participation is even more important. After all, your goal in improving patient recruitment isn’t simply to get the highest number of *random* participants, it’s to recruit the highest number of *qualified* patients that will follow through and complete the full study.

Taking a personal approach to a large scale and largely technical recruitment campaign may be easier said than done. So how can you keep things personal in practice while balancing hundreds (or thousands) of phone calls, appointments, and feedback?

For starters, take it *one step at a time*. All of the touchpoints of the recruitment process, from your initial inquiry to the personal screening, should be treated as a two-way street. You assess the potential patients for the study, and they assess your study to see if they want to participate. The phone and clinical screenings see the highest dropout rate, often because recruiters lack the personal touch that keeps individuals interested in following through. According to Karrasch, it’s about showing that you care for that individual person by “connecting on a personal level,” not “sticking to a script.”

*“If you’re doing a fantastic job at reaching people via the phone, but doing a poor job cultivating interest during the phone screening and connecting on a personal level, then you’ll have a lot of people drop off at that stage.”*

* Nick Karrasch, CEO of Trailfacts

Taking a personable approach doesn’t mean you have to do away with call sheets and appointments. It simply means bringing sympathy, respect, and trust into the mix. Speak to the ways your clinical trial will benefit the patient and their family. Encourage questions. Be honest.

The difference between successful and unsuccessful patient recruitment is the understanding that you are forming a trust relationship with the participants who choose to be involved. You’re recruiting for a clinical trial, but clinical should at no time describe your demeanor.

**The Bottom Line**

Improving patient recruitment in clinical trials is not rocket science; it’s about striking a balance between strategic efficiency and public connection. You want your recruitment process to be personable on the front end, but statistically efficient on the back end.

“Because of the multiplicative effect, enrollment is only going to be as good as your weakest step,” says Karrasch. “Any breakdown in your funnel means you’ll have a large drop out rate.” *Maybe you’re not making the right connections with your participants. Maybe the value of your study isn't being presented effectively. Maybe the connections you’re making are great but poorly timed.*

There is no one size fits all, simple trick or quick fix to improving patient recruitment for your clinical trials. Instead, take the above-mentioned information and review your entire process from start to finish in order to find out what is working for you and what isn’t. Only once you know the process can you improve upon it.