

Site-Managed Advertising for Subject Recruitment

By Kevin Ketels

Subject recruitment is essential for the successful execution of any clinical study. In addition to patient databases, physician referrals, and sponsor-managed, centralized recruiting programs, research sites should also consider site-managed, sponsor-funded advertising campaigns to reach potential participants. Effective campaigns require advertising that entices potential study participants (but not people who are unlikely to participate) to contact the site to learn more about the clinical study. Effective campaigns vary by study, but they should all include the following fundamental elements:

- Identify and understand the target audience.
- Tailor an easily understandable message to appeal specifically to the target audience.
- Comply with the regulatory requirements.
- Communicate through media that are appropriate for the target audience and the message.
- Experiment, track results, and learn from experience.

Identify and Understand the Target Audience

The first step in developing an advertising campaign is to define the audience you are targeting. Using the eligibility criteria, determine the pertinent age range, gender, lifestyle characteristics, and geographic locations. Rather than broadcasting to the entire population that meets the eligibility criteria, target the group that is most likely to participate. For example, the eligible age range for a study might be 18 to 80, but 40 to 60 might be the optimal target for advertising purposes.

The next step is to understand the target audience. What do they care about? What are their issues? What languages do they understand? How and when are they exposed to advertising? This information will be helpful when writing advertising copy and selecting the appropriate media.

Create an Effective Message

Study sponsors sometimes provide the ads for sites to use, but feel free to edit their content or develop your own ads to convey the message you believe would be most effective. The ad content should be simple, speak in a manner suitable for the demographic and lifestyle characteristics of your target audience, and have a clear and direct call to action, such as making a phone call or visiting a website to learn more about the clinical study.

The advertisement should communicate the essential facts:

- Who you are: Clinical research site ABC
- What you have to offer: Clinical study for indication XYZ
- Who can participate: High-level description of the most important eligibility criteria
- Where study activities take place: Location of the site
- What the study will test: The investigational drug or medical device

- What, if any, compensation is offered: Reimbursement for travel costs, compensation for their time
- How to learn more: Contact information, a phone number and/or website address

An effective advertisement is direct, clear and concise. It is not cluttered with medical terminology or unnecessary details that are difficult to understand or take extra time to digest. The purpose of the campaign is to entice potential volunteers to contact the investigative site. With too much information, qualified subjects may incorrectly eliminate themselves based only on the ad content.

Comply with the Regulations

U.S. Federal regulations prohibit coercing or unduly influencing people into enrolling in clinical studies. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) and often the sponsor must approve any subject recruitment advertising prior to it being published or broadcast. Although specific IRB and sponsor policies vary, most agree on the following guidelines:

Do:

- Give the research study a name, e.g., "Hypertension Research Study for Males with Diabetes."
- State that the primary purpose of the study is research, not medical care.
- Make liberal use of terms like "research," "experimental" and "investigation," especially when describing the test article. If the test article is approved but the study involves its investigational use for a new indication or in a new population, say so.
- Use language that your audience can understand, e.g., at a ninth-grade reading level.
- Submit the advertisement to the IRB (and sponsor) in final form for approval, including site-specific information and graphics.

Do not:

- Use language or graphics that may be coercive, unduly influential, or misleading.
- State or imply a guarantee of benefits, cure or other favorable outcome.
- Claim the study product or treatment is superior to other options.
- Emphasize free tests, treatments or test articles.
- Emphasize payment, including bolding or highlighting the compensation language.
- Use terms like "safe," "effective," "new," "best," "low-risk," "cure" or "free."
- Use the terms "treatment" or "therapy" without qualifying them with a term like "investigational."

Communicate in the Appropriate Media

Different media — radio, newspaper, etc. — target a variety of demographic audiences. For example, some radio stations play programming that attracts audiences differentiated by age, race, gender or socio-economic status. Newspapers, unless they are specialized, tend to target larger and broader audiences. After determining the target demographic for a study, determine which media are most likely to reach them with your message. Media costs vary significantly across different geographies and must be considered; the key metric when comparing media are cost per thousand audience members reached. You can further measure value for clinical research purposes with cost per inquiry call and cost per enrollment.

Feel free to further refine the target audience based on your study criteria. For example, to communicate with individuals with Type 2 diabetes, use media with an average audience age of 40 to 60. It would not be useful to target participants in their 20s or 70s for that type of campaign. Sales representatives for the various media sources can provide demographic data for their audience. Most sales reps will claim their media outlet can reach any audience, so ask the sales rep for demographic and audience size information before revealing the target population for the ad campaign.

Radio, newspaper, billboard and Internet search advertising work well in many areas. Other media like bus ads and flyers in store windows might also be worth considering. Television (including production costs) is generally too expensive for site-managed budgets, so it will not be discussed below.

Some basic tips for ads in the primary media include the following:

Radio:

- Radio is often an inexpensive way to deliver an advertising message with high frequency to a targeted audience.
- A standard clinical study ad is 60 seconds; 30-second ads generally do not provide enough time to explain a clinical study.
- Time the script while reading it aloud at a conversational pace.
- State the phone number two to three times.
- State the website address at least twice. Spell it out, if necessary.
- Radio stations typically include professional recording talent in the cost of the ad.

Newspaper:

- Newspaper advertising can deliver a fair amount of study detail to a broad audience.
- Use a bolded headline that includes key words. For instance, if the study requires participants with high blood pressure, say "high blood pressure."
- Explain, at a high level, the purpose of the study and who is eligible to participate.
- Use a graphic, if possible, that depicts the target audience. For example, use an image of an older person if the ad is for a study indication that predominately affects seniors.
- Bold or highlight the contact information, especially the phone number and website address.

Billboard:

- Billboards target specific geographic locations. Most of the people who see your ad live or work in that area.
- Use very limited copy because people are driving and only glancing at the billboard.
- Focus on one idea and prominently present easy-to-remember contact information.

Search Engine:

- With search engine advertising, your ad appears when someone does a web search on specified key words, most likely using Google, Yahoo or Bing. Your ad is thus only shown to people who are searching for information relevant to your study.
- You pay only when somebody clicks on one of your ads, typically 75 cents to \$1.50 per click, and may vary by geographic location.

- Budgets for search engine advertising are flexible. Program as much or as little as you want to spend per day. For example, you could create a budget for as little as \$5 per weekday that runs for two days, two months, or longer.
- Select key words that are relevant to the target audience, usually very simple phrases like: "diabetes clinical trial." Include your geographical location, e.g., "Phoenix." Test different terms to see which ones work the best.
- Stay within the word limits. For example, Google limits headlines to 25 characters and body copy to 35 characters.
- Link to a website "landing page" that includes the key words, ad headline, and other text from the ad.

Experiment, Track Results, and Learn from Experience

Advertising effectiveness varies by therapeutic indication, study, recruitment criteria, geography, time of year, current news, and mysterious variables that can never be explained. Nobody can guarantee what will work best for a given campaign. It is thus essential to test different ads and different media to see which combinations work best. Track your results and retain them for use in future studies.

Conclusion

Advertising can be an effective tool for investigative sites to reach large groups of potential study volunteers. Through simple tools and techniques, clinical research sites can develop and execute effective subject recruitment advertising campaigns that will not only attract new participants for current studies, but will also raise general awareness of the site for future studies.

Author

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