The 5 Advantages of Digital Advertising (e-Recruitment) for Clinical Trials

Discover how digital advertising has surpassed traditional media channels when it comes to driving qualified patients into clinical trials and how e-recruitment presents an untapped opportunity to accelerate patient enrollment.

According to recent reports from the Tufts University Center for the Study of Drug Development (http://csdd.tufts.edu), enrollment timelines in clinical trials are being extended nearly two-fold[1] because sites are not effectively recruiting patients utilizing traditional methods, and yet very few clinical trials are utilizing digital and social media to help recruit patients (89% of trials are NOT utilizing them[2]). Digital and social advertising techniques have become pervasive in other industries (comprising ~28% of all US advertising spend in 2015[3]), and have been shown to be equally (in fact more) effective than their traditional counterparts in recent clinical trials.

Here are five of the advantages digital exhibits over traditional methods of patient recruitment:

1. Volume

Virtually all patients are online; 80 percent of Internet users are seeking healthcare information[4] and 62 percent of US adults with a chronic condition are going online. Whether they go to the search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN), social media sites (Facebook, YouTube), or a variety of health & wellness websites, these are a highly engaged and representative[5] patient population. What this means is virtually any condition/disease of significance has a high volume of patients online. Here are some examples of the search volumes just on Google of keywords specific (or highly related) to a given condition:

- Emphysema 2,046,000 searches/month in the US
- Alzheimer's 792,000 searches/month
- Sciatica 2,511,000 searches/month
- Venous Ulcers 894,000 searches/month
- Eczema 4,343,000 searches/month
- Asthma 647,000 searches/month

The above generally represent existing demand; patients out there actively self-diagnosing (or relaying a given diagnosis) and seeking additional information about (and often a potential solution to) their condition. When you add in the additional volume on Yahoo, MSN & Bing, as well as display and contextual advertising volume available on social media and related health & wellness sites, overall available volume typically is 10-20X that listed above. With click-through-rates ranging from 0.1 – 5% (depending on media), it is easy to get thousands upon thousands of qualified visitors to your website(s).

2. Flexibility

No other media is as flexible as online. You don't need to book weeks in advance; you can usually turn a campaign on (or off) on a moment's notice.   You can easily create (and get IRB approval) on a larger number of 'creatives' (display ads or text ads) and then test them to see which ones have a better response.   You can turn off (or down) the spending on a given site if they are overwhelmed, not able to follow-up on additional leads, or perhaps have simply met their site's recruitment goal. You can (usually) scale up quickly if you find a site needs more leads, is behind on their recruitment goal, or if online efforts in a particular location are highly effective.

3. Targeting

Despite some myths to the contrary, digital advertising is amongst the most targeted type of media available. One can target by condition (as evidenced by the keywords used during searches, or the content of a given website page).   The geographic targeting of online platforms are highly sophisticated; you can target by cities, zip codes, radius around a given point and more (or conversely one can 'negative out' areas where success is less likely). Many platforms (like Facebook) allow demographic & interest-based targeting, so you could, for instance, target women 65 years and older in the Las Vegas area who have expressed interest in chronic renal disease, nephrologists or dialysis centers.

Another myth is that older patients are not online: 71% of US adults ages 50-64 and 58% of those over age 65 seek healthcare information online[6]. We've seen strong success in disease areas that are predominantly elderly patients (e.g. chronic renal disease/dialysis, knee osteoarthritis/replacement). The internet touches all demographics.

Most importantly, if you have proper tracking in place you can target by actual leads (see next section).

4. Tracking & Optimization

Done right, online media are amongst the most trackable available. Through professional techniques like dynamic phone tracking, conversion code pixels, goal tracking, and CRM integrations, you can track every inquiry, referral and even enrolled patient back to the media and even specific keyword from whence it came.   With this information in hand, you can begin to manage your media mix like a good investment portfolio; spending more in areas that have actually produced inquiries, referrals and/or enrolled patients and less in areas that have not.   The resulting 'optimization' can produce major reductions in media cost (we've often seen 40% reductions[7] from baseline).

5. Cost Efficiency

With the targeting, tracking and optimization discussed, the end result is a media that typically produces more referrals (and enrolled patients) at a lower cost.   One outlet reported that online patient recruitment averages a 75% lower cost per patient than traditional media[8]. We've seen similar results in numerous clinical trials (and can produce case studies to prove it).

If you are recruiting patients for a U.S. clinical trial (or even in Europe, Canada & Latin America), you should consider making digital advertising a strong component of your media mix.

1. Impact Report, Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development, Vol. 15, No. 1, Tufts University 2013.
2. "Industry Usage of Social & Digital Media Communities in Clinical Research." Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development. June 2014
3. Lunden, Ingrid. "Digital Ads will be 22% of all U.S. Ad Spend in 2013…" TechCrunch, Sept 30, 2013
4. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010
5. Scher, David Lee, "Five advantages of online patient communities." Aug 2013
6. "Health Online 2013" Pew Internet & American Life Project.
7. MD Connect, Case Study #4 – Business Impact of 'Active' Online Campaign Management & Optimization
8. Hess, Jon, "Web-Based Patient Recruitment," Cutting Edge information, http://www.cuttingedgeinfo.com/process/?ref=122