

Three Steps to Recruiting Study Participants through Your Website

By Rick E. Greenfield

A good website is the foundation for online patient recruiting. A research site can create a good website by following these three steps:

Step One. Create Your Brand Identity

Start by creating your brand identity, i.e., who you are and how you present yourself to the world. The main elements of brand identity are your name, your logo, and your slogan, e.g., “Leading the Search for Better Health.” Your website domain name should be as short and memorable as possible. Use your logo, slogan and website address on business cards, brochures, study flyers and anywhere else you can think of.

Clinical research sites communicate with two main audiences: customers (sponsors and CROs) and patients/study participants. These two audiences have different interests, so your brand identity should work for both.

Step Two. Build Your Website

The design of your website says a lot about you. Are you friendly? Professional? Expert? Efficient? Dedicated to helping patients?

The content of your website also matters. What information do you provide about your studies? Your people? Your facilities? Your relationship with the community? Clinical research in general?

Given the two audiences your website should address, you can adopt one of three strategies:

- Address both audiences (less than optimal for either one).
- Focus on one audience and provide a link to a section of your website that addresses the other.
- Create two separate websites, with links from the sponsor/CRO website to the patient/study participant website.

Your website should include the following elements:

- A simple, uncluttered homepage.
- Appealing images that depict a cross-section of your community enjoying life and smiling about their health. If local residents can identify with the people in the pictures, they are more likely to open their minds to learning about your studies. You can include a few pictures of doctors and nurses, but leave out the exam rooms, syringes, equipment and building — you want inviting images.
- A “call to action” like “Learn More Today” with a clear and conspicuous link or button to access a page for enrolling studies.
- A page listing your enrolling studies that showcases each study with a brief description in plain language and a link to “Study Details.”
- A page for each study that provides IRB-approved details in plain language about the study in an attractive manner. Include the main eligibility criteria and reasons to participate, such as free pre-screening diagnostic tests or exams.

- A short online application form where patients can submit their contact information to be considered for participation. Limit this information to first name, last name, phone number, email address, and study or studies of interest. Asking for medical history or other details will lead to fewer applications, so obtain that information later. Over time, you can build a database of potential participants for future studies.
- A "Contact Us" page that clearly provides your phone number, email address, and physical address (with online map embedded). This a good page for some staff pictures.
- A page about study participation in general that includes reasons to participate. You might want to include information from CISCRP showcasing the altruistic value of participation.
- Text in a clear, relatively large font, especially if you serve elderly patients or people with disabilities. If appropriate, properly translate text into other languages, e.g., Spanish. Translate at least the information patients are most likely to need before contacting you.
- More than 65% of web traffic is now over mobile devices, so make your website mobile-friendly so it auto-scales to the tablet, phone or other device on which it is being viewed.

Review other clinical research websites to see what you like and what you don't like about them. There are countless books and articles about website design. You can use one of the many do-it-yourself website design tools, but hiring a website designer can be a good investment; find one whose portfolio is compatible with your ideas.

Step Three. Drive Traffic

Whether you advertise your studies in print, on radio or television, with email, or with online media like Facebook Ads, Google AdWords, and Craigslist, encourage people to learn more at your website. It is much more efficient and reliable to manage content about your site and studies in one place. However, you should create unique landing pages for different campaigns. Tailor them for different studies and audiences and track click-throughs.

Author

Rick E. Greenfield is CEO of RealTime Software Solutions, LLC, a leading clinical trial management system (CTMS) vendor, and formerly COO of Clinical Trials of Texas, Inc., one of the largest multispecialty sites in the U.S. Contact him at 1.210.386.4201 or rgreenfield@realtime-ctms.com.