

The Pulse on Global Trials

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Around the world, advances in digital media and technology have created new memes in healthcare, like mHealth, Big Data and the Quantified Self. What does this mean for clinical trials? When will digital interventions become standard practice in medical research? And who will be leading the charge?

In a global survey I completed last week, in partnership with MedLive, over 95% of 75 clinical investigators surveyed indicated they are interested in using digital innovations to acquire patients into clinical trials, but fewer than 8% report doing so today.

Though some countries may have an easier time than others finding patients, the challenge of acquiring patients into trials is shared equally between developed and emerging markets, according to the survey results.

If physicians are in favor of solving patient recruitment challenges in part through digital, mobile and social tools, what can pharma sponsors and research organizations do to make this a reality?

Search marketing and social media outreach should be standard practice today, but for some reason industry has not caught up with society in these areas.

Clinical research is stuck in an outmoded industrial model that looks more like a factory assembly line than an R&D process. Investigators are vendors. Research participants are the raw materials. For an industry whose purpose is to improve lives, this seems misaligned.

Top social media opportunities

Percent of investigator responses

Educate the community about clinical research	74.3%
Promote awareness of clinical research	73.0%
Share information on where to find clinical trials	70.3%
Increase clinical trial participation among patients	59.5%
Identify patient concerns and barriers to study participation	58.1%


Source: Matthew Howes, in partnership with MedLive; N=75 global clinical investigators

2014 should be the year we reframe clinical trials in the human context, and here's why: With the rise in global trials, the need for collaboration among multiple stakeholders, across multiple regions, has never been greater. Investigators and feasibility analysts need to be involved in protocol development, not just execution, in order to realize the efficiencies emerging markets promise.

And to reach, recruit and retain an expanded patient pool, we need to leverage proven social networking models. The MedLive survey revealed that physicians around the world believe there is untapped potential to improve the clinical trial "experience," starting with social media. Ways physicians agree social media could be leveraged, according to the survey, include educating society on the value of clinical research, raising awareness of trials and helping people locate them, and identifying patient concerns and barriers to trial participation.

Leadership for change may likely come from other industries. Outside the U.S., telecom leaders already have stepped in to put mobile health in the hands of patients.

In Japan, NTT Docomo partnered with a medical equipment manufacturer to power wireless links to a wide range of mHealth devices. Turkish mobile operator Turkcell is providing solutions (such as text messages to expectant moms) that don't require their doctors' involvement. And in Abu Dhabi, Etisalat has taken on the mission of reducing maternal mortality in childbirth by 75%.

The clinical research industry ought to look for innovative partnership opportunities like these. It's time to understand what motivates investigators and patients alike, to improve the clinical trials experience and to measure success, not just by what research yields, but also by how the human experience is improved. 

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