

The Pulse on Global Trials By Matthew Howes

In January of this year, Danish company Novo Nordisk joined the ranks of digital pharma pioneers by announcing it would use e-recruitment programs in parallel with traditional recruitment techniques for clinical studies in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Such companies are pioneers not because they are the first to leverage digital technologies in clinical trials, but because they are adapting their recruitment paradigm from site-driven to community-driven.

With nearly 80% of clinical trials failing to meet enrollment timelines, it is clear conventional recruiting systems simply are not producing the desired results. The underlying cause is that many organizations begin trials with a false sense of what to expect. They continue to believe investigators can deliver the same quantity of patients in an environment that is increasingly global, diverse and specialized.

It's time for pharma companies to become comfortable with social media and engage the full community, which includes a wide spectrum of stakeholders—from healthcare professionals to families and caregivers to policy makers and NGOs. Unfortunately, as the industry grows increasingly aware of the power of digital and social media, it struggles with how to best adapt to the opportunities to connect with varied audiences around the world.

Today, patients are more aggressive in seeking solutions to their personal health issues. Online seekers search for a wide variety of health-related issues across numerous sites and networks. According to a recent survey managed by London-based Tudor Reilly Health, "The internet now is the key source of clinical information for the general public, with almost

three-quarters of the patients who completed the survey never being informed of clinical trials by their doctors."

The conventional, top-down approach to trial recruitment leaves a gap, because it fails to address the shift from physicians supplying study participants to patients demanding participation opportunities.

So how can we use digital and social technologies as a tool to engage multiple community stakeholders in clinical research?

Tamar Weinberg, digital marketing specialist and social media consultant, identified two essential goals achieved by taking advantage of the medium:

- Target specific patient demographics
- Drive more pre-qualified patient referrals.


Investing in a strong online presence has proven useful when targeting specific demographics, by engaging potential patients with valuable content. In an article published in *Medical Daily* titled *Social Media, Viral Videos Help Researchers Find Patients with Rare Diseases for Clinical Trials*, a new study on social media has revealed "researchers found 84% of all patients for two pediatric rare disease trials through social media outlets." Online seekers had been voluntarily posting videos of their conditions with the hope of finding others who could understand what they were going through. This is a prime example of how to use social media monitoring to identify target audiences online and understand how best to engage them.

Other companies have been pioneering innovative applications of digital media to accelerate traditional approaches. In a global trial for non-small-cell lung carcinoma (NSCLC) that was at risk of failing to recruit and randomize

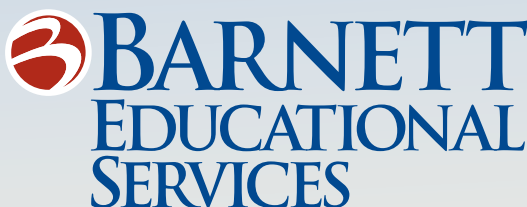
1,300 patients, EMD Serono Merck leveraged digital and social media to rescue the trial, which spanned 30 countries. The digital strategy included three core components:

- A recruitment campaign leveraging Google AdWords, Facebook and YouTube to accelerate recruitment
- A clinical study web site for NSCLC patients to increase informed consideration of study participation
- Rich content-balanced information about the START study, including information about NSCLC, treatment options and risks and benefits of clinical trial participation.

The results of the digital intervention were impressive: a 647% increase in the number of visitors per month, with Facebook providing 64% of visits. The trial, which had been at risk of failing, not only filled in four months after implementing digital tactics, it beat the target goal by 12%. In fact, investigative sites asked the company to stop sending patients because they could not accommodate them.

Ultimately, the next evolution of clinical trial recruitment and retention is more than just applying digital tactics. It's a reinvention of the underlying model. The world is online and on the go, with the fastest growth in mobile and digital adoption occurring in emerging markets. Patients are more engaged in searching for clinical trials, and there is an unmet need in connecting them to health activities, including trial participation, that are important to them. 

Matthew Howes is head of strategic services at inVentiv Digital + Innovation, the digital center of excellence for inVentiv Health. Email matthew.howes@inventivhealth.com.



Barnett Educational Services connects clients with core clinical research training solutions and resources focused on practical application and measurable results.

For more information, please visit: www.barnettinternational.com