

Leveraging On-Line Social Networks for Clinical Trial Patient Recruitment

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The phenomenal growth and utilization of online social networks has created a range of new opportunities for recruiting patients into clinical trials. From Facebook to MySpace and Bebo to hi5, social networks offer sponsors a channel through which they can proactively and cost-effectively place trial information directly in front of potential participants.

But just as social networking services are still working through the questions and challenges presented by this relatively new online frontier, so too are trial sponsors trying to understand the true promise and potential pitfalls associated with leveraging these networks to recruit participants.

Acurian's experience demonstrates that social networking is indeed a valuable piece of the modern trial recruitment mix which, if designed and deployed properly, can be a very effective method for generating pre-qualified patient referrals and lowering the overall cost per randomized patient. Critical to any recruitment plan utilizing social networking services are applications that actively drive and engage traffic, as well as back-end tracking systems that allow sponsors to monitor responses in real time and alter the marketing mix as needed.

Recruiting through On-Line Social Networks: Common Sponsor Concerns and Questions

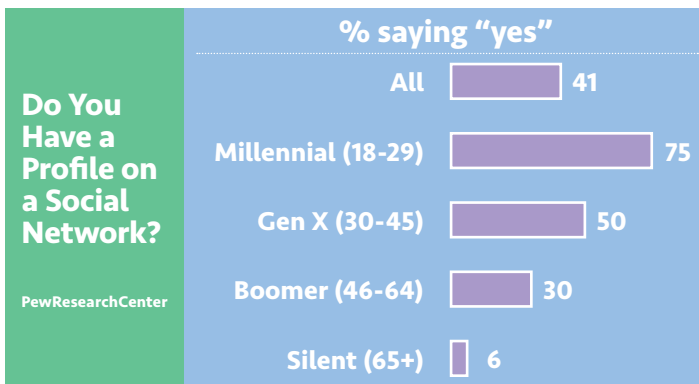
- What and where are the real recruitment opportunities?
- How do sponsors discern them from the social media hype?
- How do social networking activities integrate within the more traditional marketing mix?
- How can sponsors cost-effectively establish a presence within the vast, competitive and crowded Internet space?
- Which online recruitment methods target patients most efficiently within legal and regulatory boundaries?
- What *are* the legal and regulatory boundaries?
- Is response measurable?

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The Case for Being Bold

Millions of people go online in search of credible health information. According to The Pew Research Center, 57 percent of all American adults turn to the Internet when they need information or assistance in dealing with health or medical issues.¹

For several reasons, social networking (defined, in its Web-based context, as on-line interaction between individuals who share interests or activities) provides a tremendous opportunity for clinical trial sponsors to leverage this vast amount of online health information-seeking. First, social networking sites have become ubiquitous among U.S. adults: According to a February 2010 report from the Pew Research Center, 52 percent of adults age 18-64 now have a profile on at least one social networking site.



Secondly, because individuals have actively "opted in" to social networking services, they are more likely to receive and act upon messages delivered through these services as compared to unsolicited communications or even traditional advertising. Along these same lines, social networking sites provide the potential for – and advantage of – peer-to-peer influence and referral. Finally, because of the "viral" character of social networking sites and activity, message reach can expand exponentially – without exponential investment.

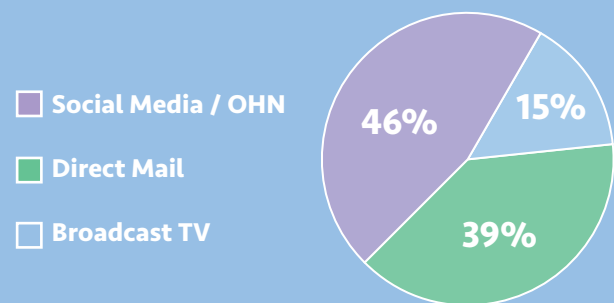
Establishing visibility in an on-line environment requires the same basic approach utilized in traditional recruitment channels

This isn't to say that social networking is a trial recruitment panacea. It's highly unlikely that a social networking campaign alone will fulfill the enrollment goal for any one clinical study. The 2008 demise of Veritas Medicine, a patient recruitment company that relied almost exclusively on online tactics to

generate patient referrals, is a real-world demonstration of the fact that internet-based tactics are not a singular solution for patient recruitment. However, assuming an understanding of the opportunities and limitations associated with social networking and e-recruitment, it can be a very valuable piece of the overall marketing mix.

Referral Source Distribution for Phase III Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy Clinical Trial

Source: Acurian



* Referral definition: Person has DPN, passed all 18 of the protocol-specific pre-qualification criteria, and selected one of the 38 participating research sites as convenient

Different Medium, Similar Approach

While the "newness" and continual evolution of social media makes it an overwhelming and intimidating channel for many clinical trial sponsors, social networking really isn't that different from other methods of recruitment. Establishing visibility in an on-line environment requires the same basic approach utilized in more traditional recruitment channels: define and understand the target patient group, then structure a strategy to motivate them to respond.

Identify the most appropriate social networking spaces given the targeted patient age range, gender, disease category, and geographic location

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have the ability to target advertisements to individual users' pages based on information from the individuals' profiles, including gender, birthdate and geographic location.

For now, e-recruitment is most appropriate and effective for therapeutic areas that impact wide age ranges (versus those that effect primarily older adults). This will change over time as seniors become more Internet and social-media savvy – which is happening quickly. During the one-year period between January 2009 and January 2010, Facebook use among the 55+ age group grew a whopping 923 percent.²

¹ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1248/americans-look-online-for-health-information>

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Given the fact that social networks reach people in nearly every city in every country on the globe, the targeted geographic messaging (i.e., geo-targeting) available through several social networking services is also critical to ensure the cost- and recruitment-effectiveness of online trial promotion. Both Facebook and MySpace allow advertisers to target messaging within a specific radius of a city or ZIP code. Given that distance to a research site is still, by far, the number one reason why patients do or do not choose to participate in a trial,³ it is best to stay within 30 miles for most disease categories. Trials recruiting for serious indications such as cancer are the exception to this rule. These patients are willing to travel farther for treatment, so sponsors can usually extend the geographic recruitment radius.

Develop sponsor- and IRB- approved messaging for use in various forms, including online advertisements, Tweets and hyperlinks

While the jury is still out on how the FDA will regulate Web 2.0/ social networking communications between pharma companies and patients, there seems to be little to no concern about discrete content and communications that can not be altered and do not involve mechanisms for patient feedback. In the case of clinical trial recruitment, it is helpful to remember that sponsors are neither selling a product nor making promises or claims about treatment. They are simply presenting clinical trials – through sponsor- and IRB-approved messaging - as an option to potential participants. Once this messaging and approach are established, the mix of channels used to reach potential participants should not matter.

Sample clinical trial advertisement on Facebook

Constant low back pain?



Clinical research study in your area is looking for study volunteers with low back pain. Click here to see if you might pre-qualify.

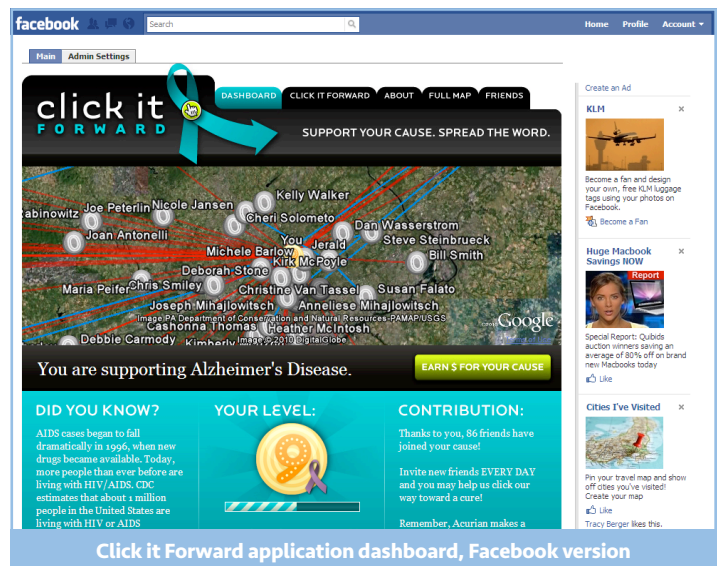
Like

As an example, once a sponsor or advertiser submits an approved advertisement for inclusion on Facebook or MySpace, it is reviewed by an internal editorial committee at the respective social networking service. If the content is approved by this committee, the advertisement is displayed within specific sizing and placement parameters on the network. Any subsequent revisions to the image or text must again be reviewed and approved by the sponsor and IRB, and ultimately the editorial committees from the social networks must approve any altered creative.

Disseminate content within selected social networking spaces

Once the target patient is defined and content and messaging are approved, sponsors are ready to begin strategically and systematically introducing the content into selected social networking spaces.

Existing applications such as Facebook and Twitter garner millions of updates each day,⁴ and new services that allow people to connect online are continually emerging, so (as noted previously) there is no shortage of opportunities for targeted message delivery. These opportunities include the development of unique, specific applications that run on users' social networking "desktops" (aka, Facebook or MySpace profiles). Advertisers can build these applications using publicly available Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) developed and published by respective social networks. APIs enable individual applications to function and behave consistently in terms of installation and dissemination within given networks, including how users virally share an application with network friends.



facebook

click it FORWARD

SUPPORT YOUR CAUSE. SPREAD THE WORD.

You are supporting Alzheimer's Disease. EARN \$ FOR YOUR CAUSE

DID YOU KNOW? AIDS cases began to fall dramatically in 1996, when new drugs became available. Today, more people than ever before are living with HIV/AIDS. CDC estimates that about 4 million people in the United States are living with HIV or AIDS.

YOUR LEVEL: Thanks to you, 86 friends have joined your cause!

CONTRIBUTION: Invite new friends EVERY DAY and you may help us click our way toward a cure!

Remember, Acurian makes a

Click it Forward application dashboard, Facebook version

In January 2009, Acurian launched Click It Forward (CIFA), a proprietary initiative and application designed to grow clinical trial awareness online, increase patient access to relevant trials and increase sponsors' access to interested participants. The initiative invites Facebook and MySpace users to add the cause-related social marketing application to their profile pages, in exchange for a donation to a selected health-related cause. Based on the cause or causes that each user selects, Acurian displays specific (and IRB approved) clinical trial participation opportunities on the CIFA dashboard and sends IRB-approved emails to users who have provided permission to be contacted.

³<http://www.istrategylabs.com/2010/01/facebook-demographics-and-statistics-report-2010-145-growth-in-1-year/>

⁴(2008, 2009 Acurian) Retrieved from 2,500 national health surveys for diabetes, women's health, and asthma. Question #10, "Rank Top Reasons Why You Would Not Participate in Clinical Research"

⁵<http://www.allfacebook.com/2010/02/twitter-facebook-status/>

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As an additional means of expanding sponsors' access to potential trial participants, Acurian created a proprietary on-line network comprising hundreds of health-oriented Web sites. Collectively, these sites provide a full spectrum of therapeutically relevant, global advertising opportunities. The networks determine where individual ads will run based on their content and target audiences, ensuring the most effective response and rate of return.

Monitor results to adjust resource allocation as necessary

The on-time, on-budget completion of any clinical trial recruitment effort has always been dependent upon the ability to measure, assess and adjust recruitment tactics in real time. This capability has become even more critical in the current environment, as recruitment budgets shrink and the marketing mix becomes more complex. Sponsors need tracking mechanisms that allow them to immediately identify less effective tactics and re-direct time and money into those that are generating a better return – whether on- or off-line. The range of additional recruitment channels offered by the Internet alone – not to mention the continuing segmentation capabilities of traditional media – means that sponsors always have additional options.

The availability of “channel-appropriate,” effective options should apply to pricing as well. Traditional online promotional pricing is based on cost-per-click or cost-per-thousand impressions. These pricing systems do not protect sponsors from curiosity seekers or geographically inappropriate users who click on trial ads, therefore incurring cost, but never intend to participate in studies. Without a performance-based pricing structure in place, sponsors will always bear the risk of online advertising that is too broadly disseminated or that attracts too many virtual “tire kickers.” Sponsors should look for a recruitment partner with the business volume to negotiate payment based on achieving a meaningful recruitment milestone, such as pre-qualified patient referrals that are geographically proximate to a participating research site.

For more than a decade, Acurian has used a proprietary, real-time tracking system called Recruitment Manager to monitor the effectiveness of specific trial recruitment tactics. As e-recruitment gained traction, the company adapted Recruitment Manager to enable real-time tracking of dozens of simultaneous e-recruitment

initiatives. The platform collects and evaluates conversion ratios from dozens of Internet-based sources simultaneously and in real time, and then integrates these data with the results from more traditional recruitment activities. Aside from delivering more cost-effective, targeted campaigns, this platform allows Acurian to share cost risk with clients as described above – by pricing recruitment activities based on meaningful performance milestones.

The Future is Already Here

The perceived novelty of online social networks, as well as the existing uncertainty about their place in pharmaceutical industry communications, is engendering a “wait and see” approach among many clinical trial teams. Fortunately, though, there is already enough accumulated e-recruitment experience that sponsors can be assured of both the viability and safety of the approach. There's no need to wait any longer, and doing so will sacrifice time, dollars and potential participants. In 2009, a full 54 percent of all pre-qualified patient referrals generated by Acurian's recruitment efforts came from online initiatives. And as individuals increasingly get their news and information online, traditional recruitment channels will continue to fall behind in terms of prominence and value, as well as contribution to the overall recruitment mix. As a case in point, 24 of the 25 largest newspapers are experiencing record declines in circulation, yet over 1.5 million pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) are shared on Facebook daily.⁵

Leveraging social networking tools as an integral part of more than hundreds of clinical trial recruitment campaigns has left no doubt: With the right approach, the right experience and the right tools – social networking channels can be cost-effective and efficient recruitment tools that put sponsors' messages directly in front of selected, active and engaged audiences.

10 Most Popular Social Networking Sites

Site	Monthly Visitors
Facebook	122,220,617
MySpace	55,599,585
Twitter	23,579,044
LinkedIn	11,228,746
Classmates	14,649,224
Ning	5,881,943
Bebo	3,120,062
hi5	2,176,014
Tagged	3,731,972
MyYearbook	3,025,772

As of March 2010; ranked by a combination of Inbound Links, Alexa Rank, and U.S. traffic data from Compete and Quantcast. <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>

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⁵<http://socialnomics.net/2009/08/11/statistics-show-social-media-is-bigger-than-you-think/>

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About Acurian

Acurian is a leading full-service provider of clinical trial patient recruitment and retention solutions for the life sciences industry. Through its proprietary patient panel of over 65 million patients, centralized advertising capabilities, and a fully hosted enrollment management technology platform, Acurian is able to identify, contact, prescreen, and refer patients into clinical trials, all while supporting investigator sites with services to maximize the randomization potential of every referred patient. Since 1998, Acurian has supported over 400 protocols for more than 60 companies. Acurian's investors include Euclid SR Partners, ProQuest Investments, JP Morgan Partners, Flatiron Partners, CDP Capital Technology Ventures, and Merck Capital Ventures.

From More Information

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