



# GET CREATIVE

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*Branding and advertising  
for clinical trial  
recruitment and retention*

**COUCH.**



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# THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGE

Testing safety and efficacy is a critical step in the process of bringing a new therapy to market. As well as extensive laboratory testing, clinical trials are essential to the development process, as they allow researchers to see how the therapy affects the body, how it is metabolised, whether it causes any side-effects, and if it works as an effective treatment for the intended condition. The unfortunate reality is that while being life-enhancing and life-saving, trials are extremely expensive to run. A problem which is aggravated further by two big challenges:

## RECRUITMENT

Some trials fail to recruit any participants so never even begin. Trials that do recruit successfully encounter retention as the next hurdle.

75%

of clinical trials fail to enrol the target number of participants within the expected time frame.<sup>1</sup>

These delays are extremely costly – each day that a trial is delayed, it costs an organisation between

\$60,000 and \$8 million.

## RETENTION

25%

of participants drop out of a trial before it finishes.<sup>2</sup>

People not completing the trials is creating barriers to bringing new drugs to market; around 27% of the cost of drug development is spent on clinical trials.<sup>2</sup>

## HOW CAN WE OVERCOME THESE CHALLENGES?

The opportunity for more successful recruitment is there; clinical trial sponsors just need to take a more creative approach to reaching people.

In this white paper we explore some of the key issues in the clinical trial recruitment and retention. And to provide tangible solutions, we discuss creative marketing and advertising methods that have the potential to improve the success of clinical trials.

## WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF THESE CHALLENGES?

Awareness is arguably the largest obstacle in recruitment challenges, with misconceptions about pharmaceutical companies, and over-reliance of recruiters on doctor referrals is also creating barriers.

Over 57% of US adults have never seen an ad for a clinical trial.<sup>3</sup>

50% of US adults have never even heard of a clinical trial.<sup>3</sup>

96% of US adults have never participated in a clinical trial.<sup>3</sup>

In the UK, statistics are similar:

85% of UK health seekers are unaware that they can participate in clinical trials.<sup>4</sup>

75% of UK health seekers said they would enrol if given the opportunity.<sup>4</sup>

## CREATIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

*Clinical trials are high stake endeavours – for people’s health and well-being, for the researchers who spend years working on a new treatment, and for the pharma companies who sponsor the trial. To ensure successful recruitment and an effective trial, intense investment in the planning phase is vital. Here are some factors to consider when planning a creative recruitment strategy.*

### DEVELOP MATERIALS TO INCREASE HEALTH LITERACY

Health literacy can address the general public’s extreme lack of awareness and any misconceptions around clinical trials and the pharmaceutical companies that run or fund them. Creating and distributing materials that can be used to educate both health seekers and healthcare providers is likely to increase the number of people who might consider signing up for a clinical trial. Whether this is in the form of physical leaflets and pamphlets, or online marketing such as videos, websites, banners and adverts, the following key factors need to be considered:<sup>5</sup>

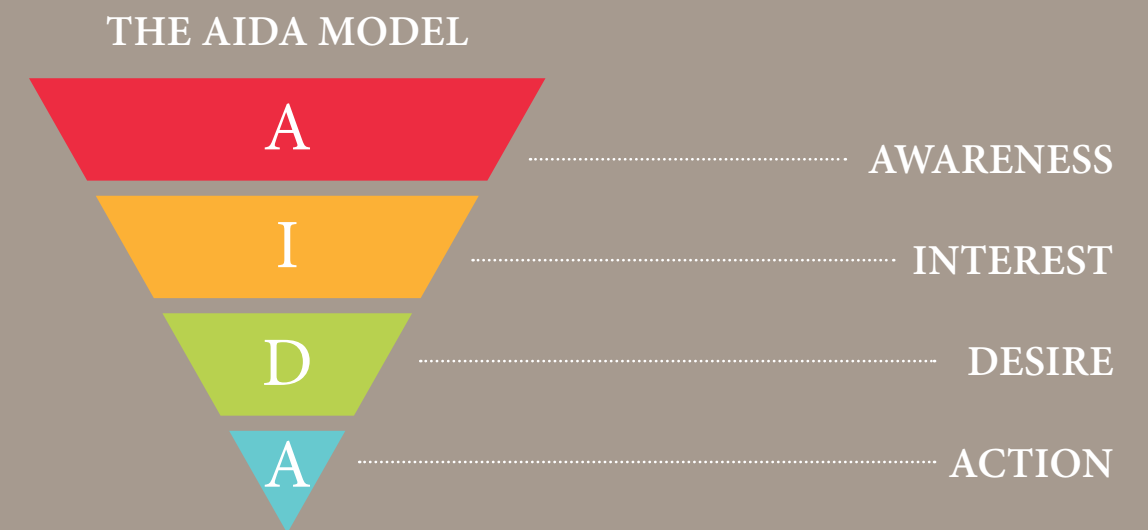
- Content and organisation of the content
- Language and tone
- Cultural competence
- Design accessibility

The consideration of these when creating materials can help the industry begin to debunk myths around clinical trials. Taking the initiative to improve health literacy around clinical trial materials could increase the number of people willing to take part in them. In turn this creates a faster path to market for drugs that can address the unmet needs of health seekers.

### MAKE HEALTH LITERACY MORE ACCESSIBLE WITH VIDEO

Video can make clinical trial information more accessible to low health literacy populations. Video has the power to convey information in an easier to understand format, with pictures and body language explaining key points. There are some good examples on YouTube of clinical trial explanatory videos, including About Clinical Trials by the Sarcoma UK Clinical Trials Hub.<sup>6</sup> This video clearly explains the clinical trial process and the benefits to patients, addressing frequently asked questions.

Figure 1. The AIDA model to creative recruitment strategies



### OFFER DEPENDABLE AND TRUSTWORTHY BRANDING AND ADVERTISING

Branding can offer a strong approach to overcoming recruitment problems. By developing an ‘image’ of a trial, it instantly becomes more accessible, sets it apart from other trials, and fosters a level of trust between the pharmaceutical company and potential participants.

Think about it like this: a page of jargon and facts about a trial is going to be considerably less appealing than a leaflet with a logo and images that are memorable and engaging, and clear and simple language that informs and empathises (Figure 1). If that leaflet also directs people to where they can find more information presented in an equally appealing way, the impact is even greater. Consistency in branding and information puts people at ease by conveying dependability.

*This theory might seem like common sense, but it’s important that content is addressed and cross-checked against this theory for successful outreach and engagement.*

*Attention: Your content needs to grab the reader’s attention and resonate with them.*

*Interest: After motivating them to find out more, your content needs to spark interest. It’s important to show understanding not only for the physical factors of a health condition but also the emotional impacts, the everyday things they might feel like they go through alone.*

*Desire: This differs from interest – it is the driving force that leads to an action. Once the reader is interested, they then need to feel an urge to participate. To be interested in the content is not the same as wanting to be part of the clinical trial.*

*Action: Once the above factors are met, it’s important people know where and how to take action. This is the fundamental part of tools like calls-to-action which offer a definitive action people can easily undertake.*



## TIPS FOR BRAND BUILDING

Branding can include the name of the trial, a logo, and images and colours which can be easily identified with the trial marketing material.

Start with a simple trial name – long names impede the ability for people to talk about it easily, which is why many companies are moving towards acronyms. An example is the Novartis-sponsored TARGET – Therapeutic Arthritis Research & Gastrointestinal Event Trial.<sup>7</sup> Not only does the word ‘Target’ make discussions easier, but it also gives the trial an identity and has the empowering connotation of focusing on (or targeting) what matters to people – their symptoms.

Once a suitable brand is established, advertising is crucial – having a great image for a trial is of little value if nobody sees it. The type of clinical trial and the demographic it needs to appeal to should be identified before any marketing strategies are selected. A leaflet distributed to local doctors’ surgeries may be a suitable strategy for targeting the general population, but the ‘carpet bombing’ approach is going to be unsuitable for most trials.

## GET BUY-IN FROM HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Recruitment teams traditionally focus on doctor referrals because healthcare professionals have access to a wide range of health seekers who they already have a relationship with. When a person is considering

taking part in a clinical trial, especially Phase II or III trials, they often need to stop taking their current treatment before moving on to the therapeutic that is being trialled. For this reason, the doctor usually plays a critical role in their decision-making process. And so the best way to increase recruitment success is to get buy-in from healthcare providers.

No doctor will feel comfortable referring health seekers to a trial they don’t fully understand and can’t communicate clearly, so it’s paramount to provide all the relevant information, while ensuring it can be digested quickly. The easier the process is for the doctor, the more likely they are to consider your current trial and future trials.

### DID YOU KNOW:

*research conducted by Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development revealed that 30% of doctors and 45% of nurses never received any follow-up after their initial referral, with even more never receiving the results of the trial.<sup>8</sup>*

Also, don’t forget to share the trial results with them – this is a sign of appreciation and shows that their referrals are making a difference to research progress.

## HARNESS THE POWER OF DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In the past, phone calls, leaflets and letters were the norm of trial promotion. Even nowadays, databases and doctor referrals are being too heavily relied on as the healthcare industry struggles to move into the digital age. Online marketing campaigns have been shown to decrease the cost per referral by up to 64%,<sup>10</sup> so huge savings can be made by harnessing the power of digital and social media.

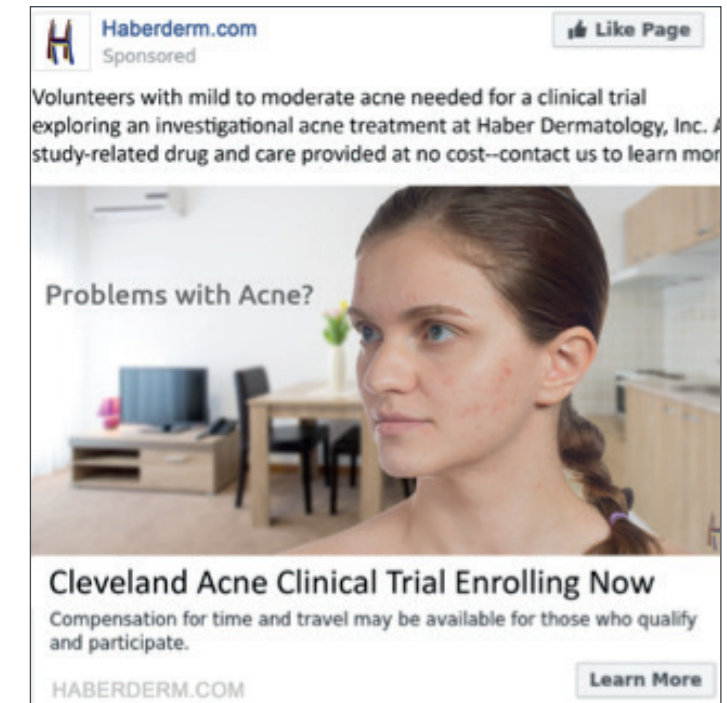
### DID YOU KNOW:

*with 59% of Americans<sup>11</sup> and 25% of Brits<sup>12</sup> searching for healthcare information online, there is ample scope to tailor online advertising towards certain demographics.*

A website can be a one-stop portal where those interested in and taking part in the clinical trial can access all the information they need, whenever they need it, and feel more engaged in the process.

In today’s social media era, any organisation that doesn’t utilise Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram accounts, will be missing out on a larger digital footprint and a better online brand presence. Google and Facebook are the two biggest platforms for potential trial participants, with Google alone processing around 28 billion healthcare related searches each year,<sup>13</sup> and Facebook acting as a ‘patient database’ of over 2.23 billion active users. By utilising Google ad words to redirect traffic to a trial website and using Facebook advertising to target specific demographics, organisations can begin to connect with a much higher volume of potential participants.

Figure 2. Targeted social media advert for a clinical trial



Facebook is becoming more actively engaged with pharma, even running educational sessions on how companies can get the most out of the platform for trial recruitment.<sup>14</sup> The first step to creating a successful Facebook campaign is to create a Facebook company page that fits your brand image and that can act as a platform for interaction and engagement through up-to-date content relevant to your audience. Content can include videos, calls to action, links to blog posts, or a range of other material designed to engage the public and direct traffic towards trial enrolment opportunities.

Taking your marketing strategy further and creating accounts on different social media sites, such as Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, allows people to follow the account that most suits their social media habits (Figure 2). They can even share this information with friends and family, making digital ‘word of mouth’ trial referrals more likely.<sup>15</sup> Twitter, for example,

is being used by companies such as Novartis Oncology to notify followers of upcoming clinical trials.<sup>16</sup> They regularly post information such as condition-specific facts and the eligibility criteria for trials that followers might be interested in.

The optimal mix of social media accounts may depend on geography, demographic and disease characteristics, but with most social media tools allowing you to post on multiple platforms at the same time, this is a highly time and cost-effective advertising strategy.

Figure 3. Instagram ad for various trials



### USE INFORMED CONSENT MORE EFFECTIVELY

Once health seekers have been either self-referred or referred by their doctor to a trial, they must give informed consent to participate. A person can't give informed consent without being given all information relevant to the trial and their participation in it, including any risks involved. They must also undergo screening to ensure they fit all eligibility criteria. It's estimated that around 95% of people fail the screening process, which could be mitigated by taking some simple steps to ensure potential participants are informed of the eligibility criteria early on. Although there may be existing medical conditions the potential participant is unaware of, in most cases, they will know whether they fit the criteria.

FluCamp, a research company studying common viral illnesses, have created a page on their website that is specifically dedicated to eligibility requirements (Figure 4).

The process is extremely simple and interested visitors only have to answer three questions to determine their eligibility. If they can answer 'yes' to all three questions, there's a call-to-action to 'Apply now' to take part in their trials.

Most clinical trials will have a much larger eligibility criteria, but these can be turned into a page dedicated to facilitating the informed consent process, streamlining recruitment. Even though this type of information is sometimes available, it's often poorly organised and filled with medical jargon.

## TECHNOLOGY IN ADVERTISING

### Clutter Theory<sup>9</sup>

Clutter theory has been researched since the 1970s and was mainly used in TV ads. Now, with the dawn of new media outputs and the fierce competition for consumer attention, it is more important than ever to understand how your marketing sits within the plethora of digital adverts out there. What's made digital advertising more challenging is the rise of software, such as Adblocker – with over 198 million users worldwide, its outreach is substantial. These programmes convey the perception that online ads are burdensome and a negative part of the online experience, so it's important to think about how intrusive this type of advertising can be. This notion echoes the sentiments of avoidance theory, which details that consumers find it hard to absorb messaging if it's displayed in a cluttered state.

By targeting your ads to be both specific to the patient and the platform, you're much more likely to capture health seekers' attention. It's crucial to consider layout, design, messaging and how this all fits with the digital medium or website you intend to place the ad on. Effects like banner blindness (overlooking banner ads on websites with heavy content) can have a huge impact on your advert's success. Digital marketing is much more nuanced than first perceived, but done correctly, its impact can be huge.

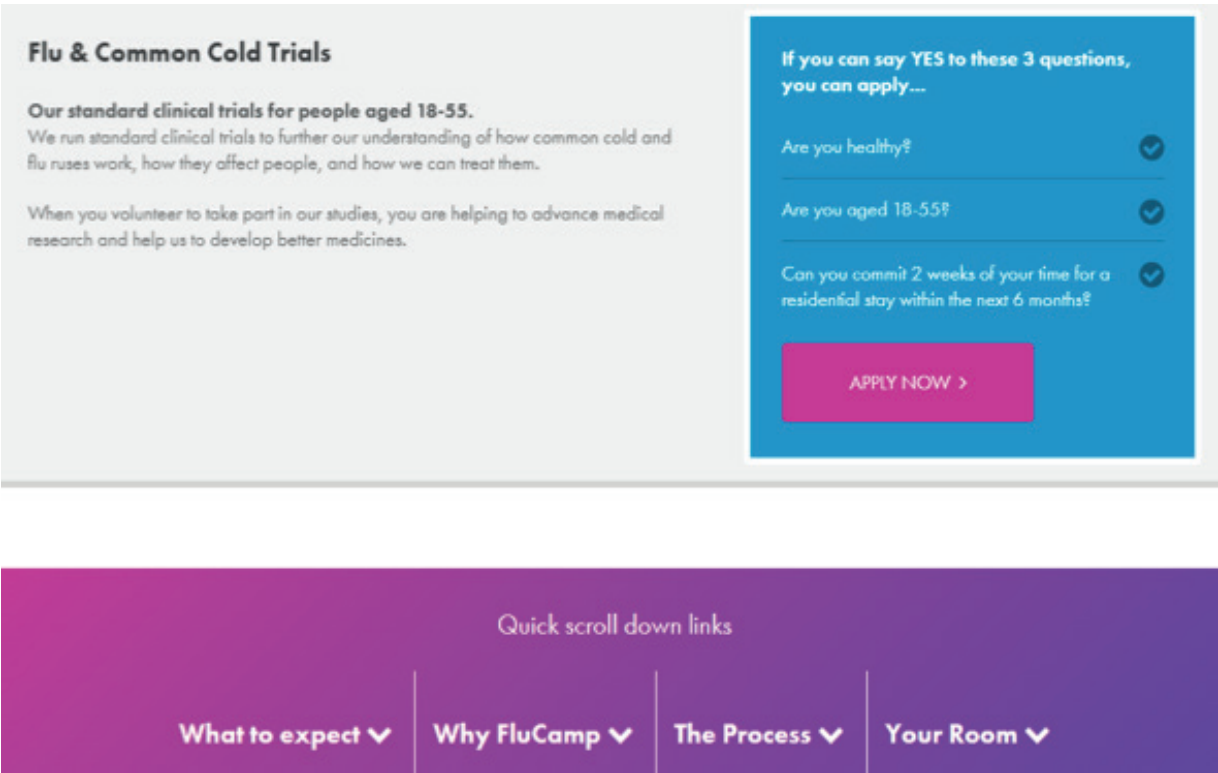


Figure 4. FluCamp's informed consent page



# CREATIVE RETENTION STRATEGIES

*Despite participant retention having a massive impact on both financial returns and medical progress, data shows that only 18% of companies focus on retention strategies. This is surprising considering that a 5% increase in participant retention rates can equate to profit increases of anywhere between 25 and 95%.<sup>17</sup> This is before we even consider the missed opportunities for improving lives due to poorly conducted trials that lack the numbers required to determine significant findings. Here are some factors to consider when planning your retention strategy.*

## IDENTIFY REASONS FOR DROP OUT BEFORE THEY OCCUR

While the difficulty in recruitment is in designing creative approaches that will spark interest in a trial, the next challenge is finding creative ways to encourage or help participants continue with an ongoing trial. Firstly, you need to understand why people might leave your trial. Placebo-controlled trials are especially vulnerable to high drop-out rates because participants often worry that they're taking the placebo that isn't managing their condition effectively.<sup>18</sup> Other key reasons participants opt out of a trial they were initially committed to are diverse and include the belief that their individual contribution isn't going to make a great deal of difference to the trial outcome. Many also find the trial appointments or the travel involved is simply too demanding.

## GIVE PERSONAL MEANING TO CONTINUED PARTICIPATION

Continued trial participation can be encouraged by showing participants how important their ongoing inclusion is. The main way that pharmaceutical companies have tried to combat drop-out is through more 'patient-centred' clinical trials. For example, by involving health seekers in the initial design of the trial, the research has greater meaning for them because it will be addressing their needs, they will feel more invested in the process due to being engaged from the beginning, and issues that may prevent their continued participation will have been addressed at the outset. Parkinson's UK is one of the world leaders in clinical trials, with public involvement as one of their key strategies.<sup>19</sup> Get health seekers involved from the outset – even helping with your branding and the naming of the trial – and allow them to feel part of the entire journey. Psychologically, it is more difficult to let go of something we have been involved in since its inception.

## INVEST IN PUBLIC IMAGE BRANDING

Ensuring that all websites and marketing material is up-to-date may seem low priority compared to developing drugs, but access to relevant and current information is essential to maintaining trust with participants. Gaining trust is important for recruitment, but maintaining that trust is just as imperative. FluCamp haven't cut any corners when investing in their public image branding, including a blog on their website to keep people informed of progress in the field, as well as testimonials and volunteer stories.

## CREATE A PARTICIPANT JOURNEY MAP

Participant journey maps help marketing teams identify weaknesses in their participant engagement levels.<sup>20</sup> These maps outline each interaction the health seeker will have with the trial, both in person and virtually, and allows marketers to easily identify where most participants are dropping out (Figure 5). Interactions include everything from appointments to text and email exchanges. This may help inspire innovative ways of improving retention – for example, if many participants are failing to attend appointments later on in the trial, text message reminders could be sent out to prevent missed appointments.

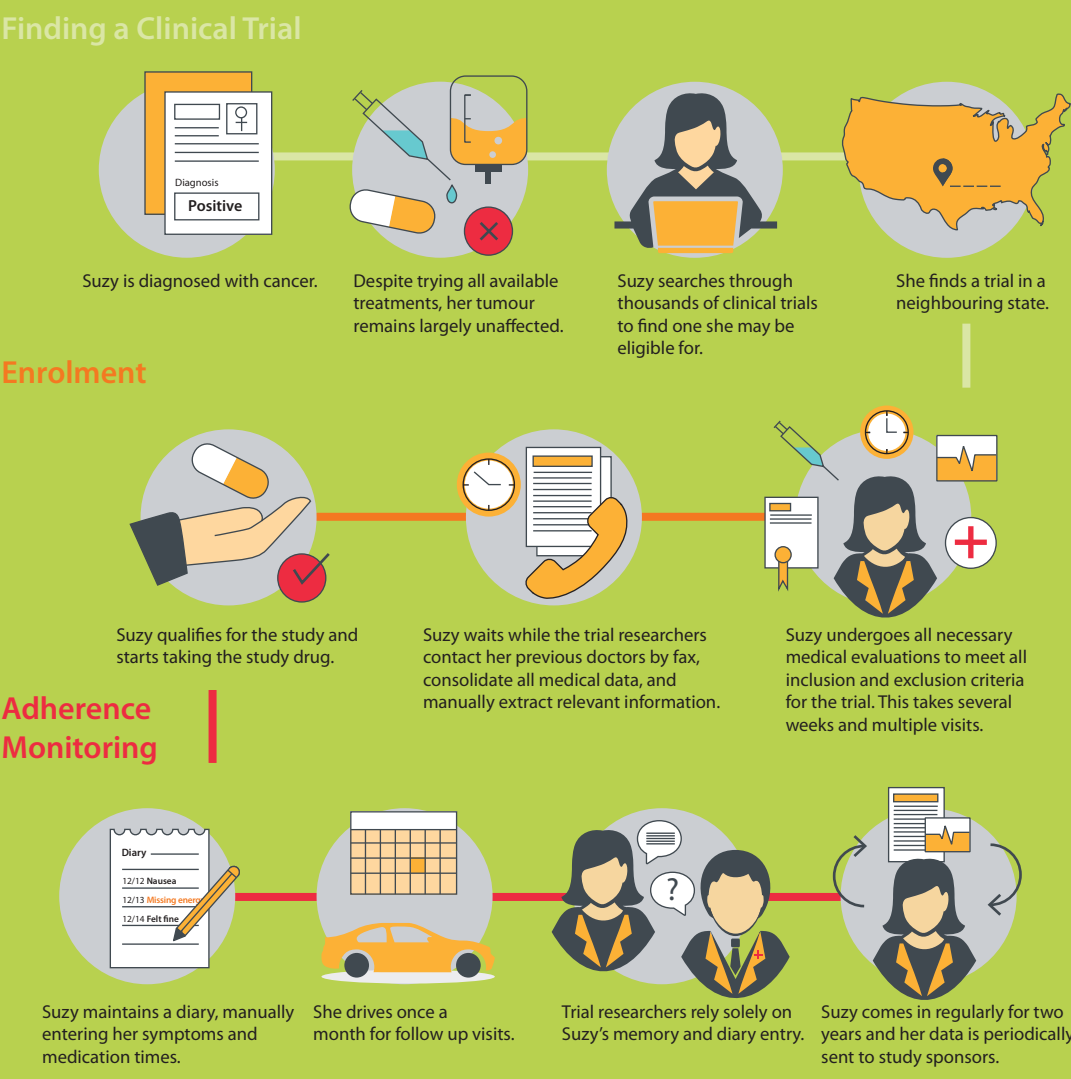


Figure 5. Participant journey map; Source: CBInsights<sup>21</sup>

Participant journey mapping allows organisations to highlight missed engagement opportunities and to implement strategies that may have otherwise been overlooked. These maps can also be adapted to inform participants of their forthcoming journey, so they know exactly what to expect (Figure 6).

OFFER A PORTAL

A recent poll found that 73% of trial participants feel their satisfaction would be improved if they could access their personal records and see how their condition is being managed.<sup>14</sup> In which case, offering a secure, online method of accessing personal information related to healthcare could encourage retention. The portal could also be used to provide reminders and quality of life tracking so that health seekers can monitor their own health and well-being throughout the trial. They also enable trial participants to interact with their healthcare provider via instant messaging or email. This will help keep participants engaged, as well as add some personal meaning as they interact with their own data and start to realise its importance.

Figure 6. Participant journey map; Source: Centre for Clinical Studies<sup>22</sup>





# CONCLUSION

*Clinical trial recruitment and retention is a global challenge for researchers and pharmaceutical companies. And the biggest and most concerning impact these challenges have is the delay in getting life-enhancing drugs to market and into the hands of the people who need them.*

Traditional methods of trial recruitment and retention are falling short, but fortunately there is ample opportunity for creative branding and advertising solutions to improve the current situation:

## RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

*A strong **recruitment strategy** will develop materials that increase health literacy around clinical trials, offer dependable and trustworthy branding and advertising, get buy-in from healthcare professionals, harness the power of digital and social media, and use informed consent more effectively.*

## RETENTION STRATEGY

*A strong **retention strategy** will identify reasons for drop out before it occurs, give personal meaning to continued participation, invest in public image branding, create a participant journey map for the company and the participant, and offer a portal to enhance engagement.*

*There are huge returns to be made by enhancing participant recruitment and retention, with the biggest return being improving the lives of everyone.*

*The key is to be creative in demonstrating that your brand cares about what matters to the health seeker.*

For more information on how you can achieve this, contact COUCH at [hello@wearecouch.com](mailto:hello@wearecouch.com) or +44 (0) 161 974 7540.

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