

Module 3: Recruitment and Retention

Introduction to Recruitment and Retention

Welcome to the third module in the Social and Behavioral Research Best Practices for Clinical Research course. Throughout this module, we'll discuss why recruitment and retention is so important to the success of a study and how to do it well. Let's get started by hearing from Helen, a research assistant. She recently worked with her principal investigator, Dr. Reisman, to recruit new participants to a study focused on the alcohol consumption of young adults.

Elevated Alcohol Consumption Study

Recently, I worked with Dr. Reisman on a study addressing the prevalence of elevated alcohol consumption among young adults. Participants were asked to make weekly calls into an interactive voice response system to report how many alcoholic drinks they consumed on a daily basis. Early on, we had a little trouble finding participants for the study and needed some good ideas for recruitment.

Staying In Touch

After thinking through our best recruiting options, we decided to use a multi-pronged approach, which involved posting flyers and requesting a waiver of consent from the I.R.B. The waiver of consent allowed us to approach potential participants we already knew had a higher than average level of alcohol consumption.

Additionally, because Dr. Reisman had good relationships with area rehab clinics and we had received I.R.B. approval to add two sites, she arranged for us to meet with clinic staff on a regular basis to discuss the study. This valuable relationship really helped our recruiting efforts during this study.

Retaining Participants

When it came to retaining participants during this study, we really focused on building good relationships. We made sure that, whenever possible, the same team members interacted with participants. For example, because I was responsible for interviewing Participants 10 through 15, I always worked with them. Developing a good rapport really helps build trust with each participant.

Course Study Manual Check-In

Take a minute to explore the Resources section in the top right corner of your screen. Here you'll find your Social and Behavioral Research Course Study Manual for this module covering recruitment and retention. Be sure to print this before you continue.

Throughout this module you'll be able to pause the course and take notes specific to your institution. In the end, you'll have a roadmap to a successful social and behavioral research study.

What is Recruitment and Retention?

Recruitment and retention are the efforts made by a study team to enroll and retain participants for their research. Details about participant qualifications are laid out in the inclusion and exclusion criteria of a clinical protocol and should be kept in mind during the recruitment process. If someone who is interested in the study does not meet these criteria they cannot participate in the study, no matter how much they would like to.

The actual methods used to enroll and engage participants can vary and are often based on the participant population or focus of a study. For example, if you are hoping to recruit older adults, you probably don't want your primary recruitment source to be a

social media campaign. The average eighty-year-old isn't as likely to use social media as someone in their twenties, for whom this strategy may be more appropriate.

Additionally, when thinking about a recruitment strategy, you should consider using multiple sources. This will help ensure you meet your recruitment goals.

Recruitment and retention should be about nurturing relationships with repeat interactions over the course of your study. If you have a good relationship with your participants and they feel valued, they are more likely to continue to participate in your study.

Why do Recruitment and Retention Matter?

A study is only as good as its participants. That's why recruiting and retaining participants is so important. Typically, there is a statistical justification for the sample size of participants. An adequate sample size will likely be able to show that an important difference in outcomes exists, if there is one.

Whenever possible, make sure that your population is diverse. Say you're studying adults who are trying to quit smoking. People from all backgrounds, genders, ages and ethnicities smoke and your sample should reflect this. A varied sample will ensure that your results give a realistic picture of people among all walks of life. Furthermore, funding organizations often require a plan to ensure a diverse study sample.

Finally, consider the importance of a complete data set for a participant. Once someone has taken part in your study, efforts should be made to keep them engaged, without pressuring them! If a participant drops out before the study is completed, you may have to enroll an additional participant to make up for the drop out. This is costly, time-consuming, and frustrating for the study team.

The bottom line? Developing a strong recruitment and retention plan helps to ensure that a diverse population of participants is recruited and retained in a timely, cost effective way.

What's the Process?

Successful recruiting and retention efforts are ongoing. Remember that for most studies, not every participant must be at the same stage of a study at the same time.

Additionally, successful recruitment often involves using multiple recruitment methods. Make sure you consider the population you need to recruit, and plan what recruitment methods might work best.

Finally, stay flexible! Sometimes your recruitment strategy isn't going to work as well as you think it should. Don't be afraid to try something different once you have your Institutional Review Board's approval. Think back to Helen's study. If only one group - such as white males - are signing up, she should revisit her recruitment plan and try to identify strategies to recruit a more diverse population. This may involve some strategies she hadn't thought about with her initial recruitment plan.

Recruitment Strategies

There are many strategies when it comes to recruiting participants. As mentioned before, these should be appropriate for the population you are targeting. And don't be afraid to use multiple strategies for the same study - you'll increase your chances of success! Also, consider asking your peers working on other studies for strategies they have successfully used in the past. Remember, all recruitment strategies and materials must be approved by the I.R.B. before you use them. Click each strategy to learn more.

Print

While print materials are a go-to in the recruitment world, potential participants can easily ignore things like mail letters and flyers. But that doesn't mean they are completely ineffective. They just have to be done well. Be sure to think about not just the content, but how that content is presented. Does it provide the right amount of information so that the participant can understand the basics of the study, but it isn't overwhelming? Is it accurate and balanced? Do you have a call to action that will inspire readers to pick up their phone at that very moment and reach out? Lastly, make sure that your study materials are eye-catching. Sound graphic design and readability can go a long way!

Online

Online recruitment is becoming more and more popular, and can include posts on social media and websites. Examples of websites you might want to think about using include advocacy groups for the condition you are studying, your own lab's website, and clinicaltrials.gov. This last site includes a listing of clinical trials, and is maintained by the National Institutes of Health. Additionally, some studies are now using search engine advertising to help draw people to their study.

In person

In person recruitment can be extremely effective for certain studies. In short, go where the people are! Connect with an advocacy organization for the condition you are studying, and attend events that they sponsor. For example, if you are hoping to recruit school-aged children, make a presentation at a PTSO or PTA meeting. If your budget allows, buy some small promotional items, such as pens or pads of paper, with your study logo and contact information on them. These items will remind potential

participants about the study when they get home. Additionally, many studies have success recruiting directly from the clinic where their potential participants receive care.

Don'ts

There are also some major don'ts you should be aware of during the recruitment process. Your I.R.B. will be on the lookout for these when you submit your recruitment plan for approval.

Avoid doing anything that could be interpreted as coercive. You must not pressure potential participants into enrolling in the study, and make sure that if your study offers compensation for participation, the amount reflects their time and effort. Keep in mind that for some populations, a small amount of money might mean much more than it would to a more affluent study participant.

Also, do not overpromise what a participant might gain from a study. You must never promise a cure or advertise your study as “treatment.”

Lastly, be careful how your recruitment materials are presented. Make sure the graphics and images you include are appropriate, and that the materials clearly indicate that it is an advertisement for a research study.

Now, take a moment to pause this module and jot down some recruitment strategies you have used that were successful. Could any of the ideas we just discussed be applied to your current study?

Retention Strategies

There are also many great strategies when it comes to retaining participants throughout a study. Just like recruitment strategies, these should be tailored to your participants and not rely on only one method. Click each strategy on the left to learn more.

Build Trust

One way to build trust is to get to know someone. Work on building good relationships with your participants by connecting with and communicating openly with them. You can start the relationship the right way relationship by providing clear materials on how to get to the study visit, and any preparation needed. If you are asked a question, answer it honestly. Another pillar of trust is to do what you say. If you say you'll meet a participant at 9 am on Monday, you better actually meet them at 9 am on Monday. Perhaps even arrive early, just in case. Also, try to make study visits as convenient and enjoyable for the participants as possible. If participating in a study is a hassle, there's a good chance that participants will drop out.

It may be necessary to share the outcome results with participants after a trial is complete. But as always, check with your study team and make sure that you have this plan approved by the I.R.B. before notifying participants of any study results.

Check-In

Clinical protocol mandated check-ins give you an opportunity to interact with participants. These visits are a good time to ask how the study is going or if they have experienced anything out of the ordinary. But be sure to let participants know ahead of time that you will be reaching out to them periodically throughout the study.

To make your check-in process more successful, gather several pieces of contact information from your participants. Get two phone numbers or both a phone number

and an email address. It's also a good idea to ask participants how they prefer to be contacted. Be sure to ask study participants if it is okay to leave voicemail messages on the phone numbers they provide. Some participants may not want others in their household to know they are participating in a study. Additionally, be sure to follow your institution's policy on email use for the protection of participant identity and health information.

Be Social

Starting any study visit with a little small talk is a great way to put your participant at ease. Some study teams might keep up with their participants by sending along thank you cards or periodic study newsletters. People like to see that their participation is really contributing to an important cause.

Don'ts

The "don'ts" of retention are very similar to those of recruitment. Participants should never be made to feel coerced or pressured to stay in a study.

Take a moment to pause this module and jot down some retention strategies you have used that were successful. Could any of the ideas we just discussed be applied to your current study?

Recruitment and Retention Considerations

There are multiple considerations to keep in mind when recruiting and retaining participants. It will be important to weave these considerations into your recruiting processes from the start. Click each one to learn a bit more.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are so important that we're mentioning it twice. Remember, it is unethical to coerce a participant by promising them a cure or treatment, rather than emphasizing that the study they are participating in is research. Participants should never feel pressured into participating in a study. It must be clearly communicated to them that their participation in the study is entirely voluntary and they can stop their participation at any time.

Cultural/ethnic/racial considerations

It's critical to know your audience when interacting with participants. Be sensitive to their cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Characteristics of the recruitment setting

It is always important to consider the setting of your recruitment efforts. The privacy of a participant always needs to be protected. If you are recruiting in a public space, speak in a quiet voice. You should also be aware of the potential participant's current situation. Are your efforts distracting them from other things they should be focusing on? Do they have time to be recruited?

I.R.B. approval

Remember that all materials and methods for recruitment and retention must be approved by the I.R.B. before you use them. Check with your institution to see if they can provide assistance in creating these types of materials for participants.

Plan if a participant drops out

Make sure that you have a plan in place if a participant drops out of a study. Will you need to recruit another participant to replace the one who dropped out? How will their data be handled moving forward? This information should be included in the clinical protocol document.

How did you hear about us?

When a participant comes in for their first visit, ask them how they heard about your study. You can then collect information on what recruitment strategies are most successful and re-target your efforts from there.

Your Turn

Now it's your turn. Read the case study on screen and choose which of the considerations Elia failed to implement during her recruiting efforts. When you're ready, click Submit.

Course Study Manual Check-In

By now you should have filled in the Recruitment and Retention section of your Course Study Manual. If you haven't, take some time to complete this job aid. And don't forget to check out the Resources section for additional information and links, as well. When you're ready, click Next to move to the final assessment for this module.

Lessons Learned

Overall, recruitment for our study was really successful! We were able to gather great data because we really focused on recruiting and retaining a diverse group of participants. We paid attention to where potential participants spent time and went beyond the usual flyers and letters to cultivate good relationships with local rehab

facilities. After we got a waiver of consent from the I.R.B., we were able to target our efforts by reviewing medical records to identify eligible participants.