



WHITEPAPER

# How Do Clinical Trials Find Patients Online?

Setting the Facts Straight on Targeted Digital Recruitment

 trialbee

## Setting the Facts Straight on Targeted Digital Recruitment

For years, clinical trials have relied upon online advertising as an important tool for informing the public about research study opportunities. As technology has advanced, those in charge of trial recruitment and enrollment have been able to employ tools and solutions that allow them to better target audiences more likely to fit their studies' eligibility criteria. While the ability to mine data to better identify those patients is obviously beneficial to sponsors, the practice raises questions and concerns around data privacy.

### Why the Worry?

It is natural for people to be uncomfortable when they think their privacy has been violated. In many cases, this worry is more than valid – particularly when some advertisers use clever strategies to recognize certain personality vulnerabilities to manipulate customer buying decisions.<sup>1</sup> It is true that our online behaviors, ranging from what we buy to our search histories, leave breadcrumbs that can lead advertisers to making highly educated guesses as to what we want. When it comes to clinical trial recruitment, however, this is a very good thing.

### How Is Clinical Trial Recruitment Different from Consumer Advertising?

The differences between how consumer brands use targeted online advertising and how digital recruitment companies work lies in their end objectives. Consumer brands want you to buy something, whereas digital recruitment companies are looking to inform potential study participants about research opportunities. Where a car company can target customers based on search and participation in car talk communities (among other behaviors) and flood those customers with hard-sell messages to try and drive a purchase, this tactic does not make sense in clinical research.

Digital recruitment companies are looking for very specific types of people who are likely to fit often complex eligibility criteria for a study. They are not, typically, looking to bring high volumes of patients into the enrollment process through ad messaging. This would only result in bogging down the process as most of the candidates would need to be vetted out after failing to meet study requirements. Rather, digital

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recruitment companies are seeking to bring in a higher percentage of likely-eligible candidates through messaging designed to inform and educate about the study while explaining the benefits of participation including both the therapy itself as well as any financial compensation involved.

### How are Potential Study Candidates Targeted?

First, to dispel a myth around targeted online advertising in clinical research – digital recruitment companies are not targeting specific people. They do not know specific names, geographic locations, health histories or other such unique and personal details. Instead, they begin by creating patient profiles. These are theoretical personas of the ideal types of eligible study participants.

To create these profiles, digital recruitment companies like the experts at Trialbee, go far beyond the obvious factors like disease, symptoms, and basic patient demographics (age, race, gender, etc.). To further define their ideal patient, they ask themselves questions such as:

- What are the ideal patient's interests? Do they like to travel? What are their hobbies?
- Do they go online for news? What websites do they frequent? What kinds of news are they most interested in (politics, sports, lifestyle, etc.)?
- Is the person a grandparent? A new mom or dad?
- If they have children, what ages are most common?
- What are the person's location habits? Are they dropping kids off daily at school or extracurricular activities? Are they making frequent visits to the doctor or a specialist?
- Does the ideal patient prefer interacting on a mobile device, PC or do they avoid digital interactions?

This last point speaks to another key difference between consumer ad targeting and clinical recruitment. Digital recruitment companies, as they develop detailed patient profiles, will not use online advertising exclusively. Rather, if the patient personas dictate television advertising, billboards, radio, or even simple posters and flyers in physical locations, these are the tactics that will be chosen. Again, the end goal is not to probe invasively to push patients into a decision, but rather to get

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accurate, useful information in front of audiences most likely to benefit from clinical trial participation.

### The Two Approaches to Targeted Patient Recruitment

With patient profiles created, recruitment activity begins. This activity is highly iterative. This means that digital recruitment companies are constantly testing messaging with audiences based on the patient personas. The level of interaction and engagement is used to further refine both the personas themselves and the messaging. For example, at Trialbee, recruitment messages are deployed through various channels. When patients click through, even before any identifiable information is shared, some data is collected, such as:

- Where in the world responses are coming from
- Which media bring in the most responses
- The time of day most responses come in
- The most common types of devices responders are using

All this data is fed back through Trialbee's proprietary data-science platform, producing increasingly accurate persona data. This allows study leaders to hone in on the most effective messaging and focus outreach on the most successful media.

Through this refinement process, digital recruitment companies can pinpoint where desired audiences spend the most time and/or which media channels have the highest potential for audience engagement. Knowing this, digital recruitment companies implement two simultaneous approaches:

- Audience-based targeting
  - This is a people-first approach, that seeks to utilize the patient personas to find those patients who are likely eligible for clinical trial participation but might not be actively looking for these opportunities



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- Contextual alignment targeting
  - Sometimes called endemic content alignment, this strategy is focused on pushing out relevant study info to groups who are active online, often in disease-specific communities

Both approaches are equally important, and necessary to involve both those patients actively interested in clinical trials while using data science to vastly expand access to study opportunities to patients further outside the research information loop.

### When Does Personal Info Get Shared?

As noted earlier, despite how specific an advertisement may seem, digital recruitment companies do not know any personal patient information when they are seeking to draw in potentially eligible candidates. In fact, no personal information is known until the patient themselves opts into the enrollment process. Here's a summary of how this works:

- A patient sees an advertisement on a website they frequent notifying them of a new drug trial that could help them manage their disease
- The patient clicks through the ad and is taken to a study-specific landing page where they can answer short questions to determine a basic level of potential study eligibility – no identifying information has been shared yet
- Following the short survey, assuming the patient meets the entry-level eligibility criteria, they may then consent to speak to a study team member – typically a nurse – to further vet eligibility

As demonstrated, no identifying information is shared until the patient consents.

### Conclusion

It is normal to feel uneasy when it feels like advertisers know more about you than they should. Certainly, privacy concerns are top of mind as many mainstream online players take steps to make consumers more comfortable about their online activities. While targeting strategies and techniques may be overused or even misused by others, when it comes to clinical research the end goal is simply to inform and benefit as many patients as possible. Indeed, the ability to use deductive reasoning as to where to reach study candidates via data-driven patient profiles is important if the industry is to answer the call of regulators to expand access to trials for broader groups of patients.

For more information, visit [trialbee.com](http://trialbee.com)



# Sources

1. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90656170/targeted-ads-arent-just-annoying-they-can-be-harmful-heres-how-to-fight-back>



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