

Overcoming Barriers to Successful Clinical Trials

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Conducting clinical research can be a rewarding aspect of your practice. It can keep you at the forefront of new developments in your field, boost your professional reputation, and increase your practice's profits. However, clinical trials also present a number of challenges, which can result in wasted time and lost money. How can you avoid the pitfalls?

Profitability

You may not think of research as a profit center. In fact, many researchers, especially in hospitals and large multi-physician practices, do not track whether or not research is generating income. It is an academic endeavor, a service to your patients, and an activity for the greater good. These things are all true, but it is also a potential source of significant revenue with careful planning.

The first step is choosing the right trial. Consider the physical space, facilities, and special equipment that a trial requires. If your office does not meet these needs, your initial investment will be greater.

Before you commit to a trial, develop a realistic budget. Take into consideration future revenue that may be generated by office upgrades or equipment purchases. Research coordinators and other specialized staff members may work on several trials. If so, divide their payroll between the projects. Any one-time expenses specific to the trial should be calculated at full cost. Don't forget the expenses of any compensation offered to participants.

If your estimated budget does not reflect profitability, then look for a different research project. Once you have committed to a project, stick to your budget.

Recruitment

Approximately 11 percent of clinical trial sites fail to enroll any patients at all, and about half of all sites are plagued by under-enrollment. Often, doctors begin research without developing a recruitment strategy. They expect to have plenty of participants from their own patient base. However, enrolling current patients is not as easy as it sounds.

Most trials have very specific criteria for participation, so you could have a limited number of eligible patients. Furthermore, convincing those people to participate can be challenging. Some doctors and dentists are uncomfortable suggesting a trial, or they don't know how to approach the patient. They are also unprepared when patients react with fear or suspicion at the thought of an experimental treatment.

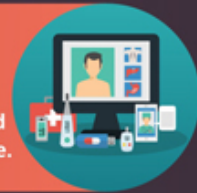
A good recruitment strategy can help you enroll more patients and reach more potential participants outside of your practice.

- **Estimate patient eligibility.** When you choose a trial, review the requirements carefully and review your patient database. Do you have a large pool of potential study volunteers? This will tell you whether you need to focus more of your efforts on inhouse or offsite recruitment.
- **Prepare yourself and your team.** How will you explain the study? What questions are people likely to ask, and how will you answer? The most common concerns are fear of side effects, potential health risk, and the possibility of receiving a placebo. You should be ready to answer these and similar questions honestly and accurately, while also explaining why you believe the research is beneficial.
- **Connect with other doctors or dentists.** Referrals can be one of your best sources of participants. To engage with fellow physicians, talk to them in person or communicate regularly by phone and email. You should be able to provide literature, and detailed information about the study, and be sure to follow up after the trial is complete. Insufficient information is one of the most common reasons that doctors choose not to recommend a study to their patients.
- **Reach out.** Use your regular marketing channels, including search marketing, email, and social media, to spread the word about your trial.

CLINICAL TRIALS: PROFIT OR LOSS?



Becoming a clinical investigator can deepen your professional knowledge, benefit your patients, and give you the satisfaction of knowing that you are furthering your chosen field of medicine. These reasons alone are enough for many doctors and dentists. However, with a little cost analysis, budgeting, and planning, you enjoy the added benefit of increasing your practice's bottom line.



FIVE MISTAKES TO AVOID



UNDERESTIMATING THE COSTS –

remember that you will need additional staff, and probably special equipment



FAILURE TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS –

between **28 and 60 percent** (depending on specialty) of clinical trial sites are non-performing



INADEQUATE SPACE –

if your office space is already crowded, you may need to budget for expansion or relocation



NOT BUDGETING OR TRACKING COSTS –

many doctors do not even know whether their research programs are profitable, or a liability

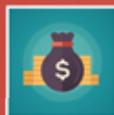


LACK OF PREPAREDNESS –

if you are new to clinical research, consider becoming a sub-investigator before becoming an investigator

MAKING CLINICAL TRIALS MORE PROFITABLE

Run several trials simultaneously, dividing payroll costs between them. You will probably need a research coordinator and other specialized staff, but one trial will not keep them busy full time.



Choose trials that are a good fit for your practice. Look for a product or device targeting a problem that is common among your patients, or your target market.



Talk to patients about your research, and make sure that other clinicians at your practice do the same. Many people are eager to try new treatments, if they are aware of the opportunity.



BUILDING YOUR BRAND – CLINICAL TRIALS BENEFIT MARKETING

- Being an investigator enhances credibility
- If the product is FDA-approved, you will have more experience than most competitors
- Patients appreciate the increased range of options
- Increase referrals to your practice
- Advertise enrollment opportunities, and attract new patients
- Expand your professional network



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Retention

You have started your trial and successfully recruited enough participants. Unfortunately, your enrollment problems are not over. The next challenge is retention. Participating in a trial takes time, and sometimes it costs money in the form of lost wages or transportation costs. Depending on the study, you may be asking people to alter their diets, activity levels, or habits. Sometimes treatments have unpleasant side effects, or patients become disillusioned when they fail to see improvement in their conditions.

When planning your research, think about what you are asking of participants. Will it be a financial burden? Will it interfere with their daily lives? What compensation are you offering? Are you assisting with transportation, special foods, and other requirements? Your budget and plan should include provisions to relieve the burden of patient participation.

Perhaps the most important aspect of volunteer retention is the human factor. You have an advantage when working with people who were recruited from your patient database. You were their doctor or dentist before the study began, and they already know most members of your team. For new patients, it is especially important to establish trust, demonstrate your excellent customer service, and quickly form a good-doctor patient relationship.

Throughout the study, keep an open line of communication with your participants. Make yourself available, or have a dedicated clinical advisor who patients can easily contact. Rather than avoiding difficult questions, address their concerns honestly. Also, discuss the study with participants frequently, let them know what is going on and what to expect, and make sure they know that their participation is appreciated.

Clinical research is not a simple sideline for your dental or medical practice. It is a significant undertaking, which will consume a considerable amount of time and resources. However, success is not as elusive as it first seems, if you are willing to face the challenges and you are ready with a strategic plan.

About the Author:

Naren Arulrajah is President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education, and the online reputations of dentists and physicians. With a team of 140+ full time marketers, www.ekwa.com helps doctors who know where they want to go, get there by dominating their market and growing their business significantly year after year. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.