

Social media use when engaging research users in setting the priorities for research

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The explosion of social media use in the last several years has ushered in an era of new opportunities for researchers.¹ Most notably, social media can elicit health-related knowledge user (e.g., patient, family care giver, healthcare professional) engagement across the phases of scientific research, including at the priority-setting stage as in James Lind Alliance Priority-setting Partnerships (PSPs).¹

Benefits of Utilizing Social Media

There are a multitude of reasons researchers should consider utilizing an online presence to recruit participants. Notably, social media enables rapid dissemination of information and study materials, allowing researchers to reach broad audiences within a short timeframe.² Social media can also overcome the geographical and social network restrictions common to traditional knowledge user recruitment methods.¹ Moreover, social media platforms provide information regarding the demographic profile of an audience. Based on these analytics, researchers can identify underrepresented populations within their social media campaign and implement targeted promotions to elicit engagement.³ Benefits to social media usage extend beyond participant recruitment, as social media is an effective method of research dissemination and knowledge translation, improving research accessibility for the general public.¹ This accessibility may influence public opinion, which often drives funding for future research opportunities.¹ Finally, promoting one's research through online methods also facilitates scholarly collaborations that transcend geographical boundaries.¹ However, researchers should be aware of the limitations of recruitment, including for exercises such as PSPs, via social media, including phenomena such as the snow-ball effect, in which users may share or retweet to friends and family who share similar demographic factors, thus limiting generalizability.⁴

Fundamentals of a Social Media Campaign

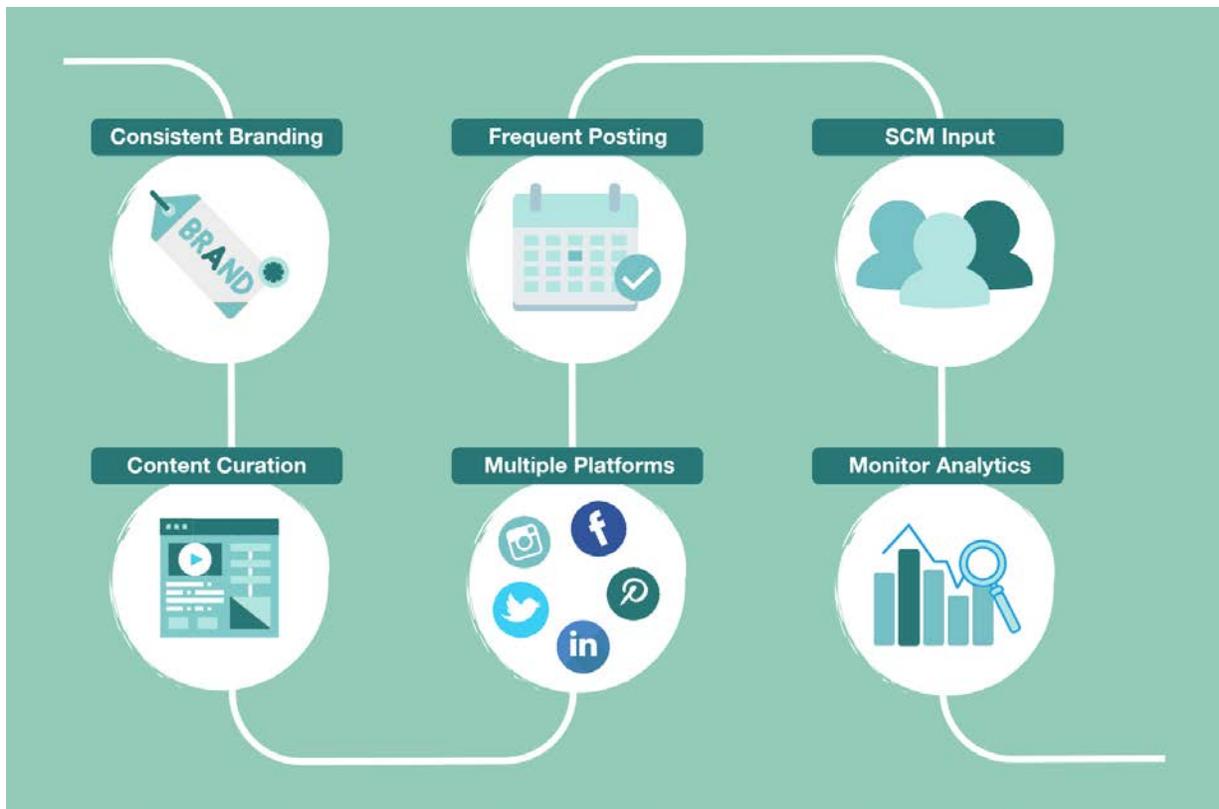
Social media is multi-faceted and constantly evolving in terms of platform and style of usage. A number of fundamental strategies may be employed by researchers to support the launch of an effective social media campaign that is optimized for knowledge user engagement. Working within the Canadian Pediatric Cancer PSP, our team has recently researched and successfully implemented these techniques to enhance our capacity to elicit pediatric oncology questions from children with cancer, childhood cancer survivors, their family members and healthcare professionals. Below we discuss specific techniques to maximize knowledge user engagement and the effect of these techniques within our PSP.

A campaign should begin by identifying objectives, followed by designing a brand that will establish a recognizable online presence to foster audience trust.⁵ The process of branding involves generating a name, tagline, logo, colour palette, font family and a consistent set of visuals.⁵ After building this tool kit, researchers can begin content curation, which entails producing a series of graphics and text.⁵ For optimal engagement, marketing studies recommend limiting the amount of text on both the graphic and within the post description.⁶ Another essential component of growing an online presence is frequent posting.⁵ Researchers should aim to post approximately 2-3 times each week, with each post having a link, hashtag and a photo or video to support brand recognition and enhance knowledge user attraction to

posts.⁵ Posts containing these components are often amplified by social media algorithms, which increases audience reach.⁵

Additionally, using a multitude of social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, further expands audience reach. Consultation with knowledge user representatives before a campaign launch regarding the platforms they and other members of their networks commonly use, can provide researchers with an understanding of which platforms to leverage. Our own team has sought to optimize our Canadian Pediatric Cancer PSP social media campaign for knowledge user engagement by implementing audience-segmented posts, which entail posting content curated for a specific audience.² For example, posts launched on LinkedIn contained key scientific-based phrases such as “Pediatric Oncology”, allowing the reach of healthcare professionals. In comparison, graphics aimed at parents and caregivers highlighted words like “Childhood Cancer” were posted to Facebook and Twitter. Media studies have also found associations between the day of the week and engagement levels. Typically, Monday posts receive less engagement, while posts on Friday made between 8 am and 5 pm receive more engagement.³ More specific information about optimal posting time can be found in the analytics section of respective social media platforms.

Related to this, a key element to a successful social media campaign is the ongoing measurement of its progress and the implementation of modifications to enhance interaction where necessary. To this end, analytics are vital social media campaign components. Analytics tools are available on almost every platform and provide insight on audience demographics, optimal posting times, and suggested post frequency. Monitoring these analytics frequently allows campaigners to continuously adapt their social media presence and refine their brand to ensure maximal reach.³ Our team for instance has utilized analytics to monitor the demographics of our audience. Within the first month of our campaign, many of our followers were internationally based and predominantly included females within the 30-35 age group. To ensure our audience reach was representative of the general Canadian population, we began following accounts associated with childhood cancer and Canada. This subsequent following spree shifted our audience towards one that included individuals suited for our PSP. Additionally, analytics showed us that GIFs and videos performed substantially better than images. Consequently, we switched to video-based posts, which increased our overall audience reach.



Organic Growth

When growing a social media presence, researchers can utilize paid advertisements and/or organic growth methods. Studies indicate that survey response rates are primarily driven by sharing amongst social media users (e.g. retweeting on Twitter, re-posting on Instagram, or re-sharing on Facebook).⁷ For this reason, as well as to support cost savings, the Pediatric Cancer PSP utilized organic growth methods in our social media campaign. Such organic methods garnered a following of approximately 1000+ individuals across the multitude of platforms, helping us reach pediatric cancer knowledge users. This growth was facilitated by “following sprees” whereby we followed the social media profiles of individuals whose demographics or interests were relevant to the field of pediatric oncology. We also utilized the connections and platforms of the steering committee members, many of whom already had large social media presences, which played a pivotal role in reaching a broader audience. Finally, we ensured our posts had searchable hashtags to further catalyze increased organic growth for our campaign.

Paid Advertisements

While there are many benefits to utilizing organic growth methods, there are also advantages to using paid advertisements. Marketing studies show that paid boosts reach significantly more users and subsequently receive significantly more engagement than organic posts ($p < 0.001$).³ For instance, paid posts have been shown to receive over 18 times more engagement compared to organic posts.³ Another key advantage of paid posts is the ability to target individuals with specific demographic factors, including age, gender, location, as well as the pages individuals interact with and the advertisements they click.³ Moreover, paid advertising provides purchasers with analytic tools to monitor the performance of the advertisement including reach and demographic breakdown.³ This information allows one to modify the campaign as it unfolds, ensuring a diverse and generalizable population is reached.

Takeaways

Social media offers many benefits to researchers interested in engaging knowledge users in research including PSPs. Specifically, valuable benefits include capacity for an expansive audience reach, economic savings, and rapid dissemination. Overall, there are multiple functions of social media that can be harnessed and implemented in an online campaign that is unique to the researchers' needs — helping reach audiences of magnitude and diversity that may be unimaginable within traditional recruitment methods. Researchers that are careful to develop a recognizable brand, select appropriate social media platforms to be present on, and monitor and augment campaign performance regularly may find success in developing a campaign that garners needed and meaningful research involvement from a large and diverse knowledge user base.

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