

Dealing with Problematic Comments on Clinical Study Facebook Ads

By Ross Jackson

Because so many people see Facebook ads, you can expect at least a few negative or other problematic comments for all to see. Even though you do not author such comments, viewers will associate them with your study. Because commenters are not bound by your professionalism and ethical constraints, their comments can seize viewers' attention. Handling such comments can be a delicate matter.

Types of Problematic Comments

Most problematic comments on clinical study ads fall into five categories:

- **Guinea Pig Comments.** People may say they don't want to be a "guinea pig" or "lab rat" subjected to dangerous experiments just to line the pockets of big pharma.
- **"Humorous" Comments.** People may, for example, respond to an ad for an Alzheimer's study by saying, "I can't remember if I've applied for this or not." Such "humorous" comments can disconcert patients and their families, causing them to lose interest in your study.
- **Comments About Trials Gone Wrong.** People may post a link to a news story about an entirely unrelated study that went badly (e.g., the 2006 TeGenero study).
- **Overly Positive Comments.** People may post a comment on your ad that overstates the advantages of enrolling or otherwise promote the study in ways that would be unethical for you to do. While such people may just be trying to be helpful, the effect can be to imply that you endorse the comments and are thus untrustworthy or unethical. In some cases, such comments may cause people to enroll in your study who should not be enrolling.
- **Revealing Comments.** People may post a comment on your ad that reveals problematic information about the study (e.g., how to answer the eligibility questions).

Responding to Problematic Comments

While many people will ignore or tolerate problematic comments, others — especially those with only mild interest — will be put off by them and lose interest in your study.

You can handle negative comments in the following ways:

- **Leave it to the Facebook Community to Respond**

Other Facebook users may reprimand the commentor or respond constructively with their own point of view. For example, they may say, "I sincerely hope you don't suffer from the effects of this disease yourself, but if you or someone close to you ever does, you'll realize how inappropriate your flippancy is in the face of this destructive disease."

- **Respond to the Comment**

Respond to problematic comments in a timely manner to nip problems in the bud. Keep your audience in mind since some audiences may react differently than others.

Before posting your ad, anticipate problematic comments that might appear. Prepare constructive replies that rebut any accusations or falsehoods, objectively present your study in a positive light and convey that you are a courteous and trustworthy source of information. Honesty, facts and figures, links to explanatory content on your website, an offer to answer questions, and consideration for the commentor and patients will serve you well.

Anticipate how the commentor may respond to your comment and prepare replies to those comments, as well. Replying to comments in a constructive manner helps humanize the study and engage with viewers as an actual person, rather than a faceless corporation. Do not get into arguments; it is not productive.

However, responding too often to problematic comments can have negative consequences: First, you may come across as defensive and make people wonder why. Second, you may come across as a "Big Brother" figure opposed to Facebook's culture of free discussion.

Creating your own problematic comments and responding to them is a tempting way to engage with your audience but keep in mind that any deception can lead to very negative consequences (e.g., if the person handling the fake discussion later reveals the truth).

- **Delete or Hide the Comment**

If responding to problematic comment is impractical, you can delete or hide it. However, when you do so, somebody may notice, causing them to question your integrity and perhaps post their own comment about it.

Deleting a comment removes it entirely. Hiding a comment hides it from everyone but the original commentor and their Facebook connections, reducing the number of people who might see it. Hiding a comment thus lets the original commentor think their comment is still visible, so they do not make an issue of re-posting the comment or one that is even worse. However, if the commentor has numerous connections, a lot of people might still see the problematic comment.

Conclusion

Just as every clinical study is different, there is no silver bullet for handling problematic comments on your study ads. Over time, you will learn how best to handle them. To speed up the learning process, you can try different strategies with different ads and see which work best.

Author

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