Using Social Media for Recruitment and Research

Social media can be an instrumental tool while conducting research and recruiting study subjects, however appropriate measures must be taken to ensure that personally identifiable information, (PII), protected health information, (PHI), and other types of sensitive information are protected throughout the recruitment and research process.

Issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and potential risks to subjects arise when researchers and subjects interact virtually. However, through the development of a carefully-considered management plan, social media accounts can facilitate ease in targeting potential subjects and widen the scope of potential data collection.

When appropriate and applicable for the study, the Penn IRB supports the use of social media in research and has issued a guidance document to serve as a resource for research teams considering the use of social media that is designed to assist with the development of a management plan. Please note that the Penn IRB requires the review of this comprehensive management plan before the initiation of research-specific utilization of social media.

The IRB guide covers the following topics:

The Use of Social Media as a Recruitment Activity -
1. Recruitment Ads:
   a. One-way ads that do not involve direct communication with potential subjects.
2. Interactive Recruitment:
   a. Recruiting subjects through two-way communication via researcher-initiated social media accounts.

The Use of Social Media as a Research Activity –
1. Social media may be used in research procedures for things like data collection or as a means of intervening with subjects for research purposes. When social media is used for research the IRB requires that investigators carefully consider a plan for protections that will be utilized for each social media application to minimize privacy, confidentiality and safety risks to subjects.

The guide includes specific information about IRB submission requirements for any planned use of social media.

To view the complete IRB Guide go to:
http://www.upenn.edu/IRB/mission-institutional-review-board-irb/guidance

If you have any questions about the IRB’s policies on the use of social media in research, please contact David Heagerty (heagerty@pobox.upenn.edu) or Jessica Jones (jonesjes@upenn.edu).