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Short Communication

Comparison of internet and mailing methods to recruit couples into research on unaided smoking cessation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Cost-efficient recruitment methods are critical to smoking cessation research.
- This paper compares three methods used to recruit single-smoker couples.
- Two Facebook advertising methods and one specialized mailing method were compared.
- The “Send People to Your Website” Facebook mechanism was the most feasible.

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ABSTRACT

In smoking cessation studies with restrictive criteria (e.g., single-smoker couples), thousands of potential participants might need to be screened to obtain a reasonable sample size. Consideration of recruitment methodology is critical because recruitment methods influence both the success and cost effectiveness of recruitment. Although traditional recruitment methods are often used to recruit participants into smoking cessation research, newer technologies, such as paid Facebook advertising, might offer more cost-effective alternatives for recruitment. The current analysis compares two versions of paid Facebook advertising and a specialized mass mailing method used to recruit single-smoker couples into an intensive three-week study of unaided smoking cessation. The three methods are compared in terms of demographic characteristics, eligibility, and cost-effectiveness. Although Facebook's “Promote Your Page” mechanism achieved the fastest recruitment rate (2.75 couples per month; 498 USD per couple), Facebook's “Send People to Your Website” mechanism was the least expensive and provided the most demographically diverse sample (1.64 couples per month; 181 USD per couple). The specialized mailing method was not productive or cost-effective (0.80 couples per month; 454 USD per couple). Paid Facebook advertising fared better as a recruitment method than a specialized mailing method often used in survey research. Studies that have less restrictive eligibility criteria, that draw from a larger local population, or that recruit for a less intense study might find paid Facebook advertising to be quite feasible.

1. Introduction

Recruitment methods influence the success and cost effectiveness of recruitment. A recent pilot study of married and cohabiting single-smoker couples (i.e., one current smoker and one never/former smoker) recruited only 5.8% of those who initially expressed (LaChance et al., 2015), suggesting that researchers might need to screen thousands of respondents to obtain a reasonable sample size. Recent studies of smoking cessation within couples (single- and dual-smoker) recruited participants through print advertising (LaChance et al., 2015; Lipkus, Ranby, Lewis, & Toll, 2013; Lüscher et al., 2015), television or radio advertising (LaChance et al., 2015), and academic or marketing

institutions (Lüscher et al., 2015; Scholz et al., 2013). Newer technology-based methods, like web-based advertising (Lipkus et al., 2013; Lüscher et al., 2015; Scholz et al., 2013) and crowd-sourcing (van Dellen, Boyd, Ranby, MacKillop, & Lipkus, 2015), are becoming common. Specialized mailing methods have successfully recruited drug-using couples (Homish & Leonard, 2009), but such methods are new to research on smoking couples. We compare three methods (two Facebook advertising methods and a targeted direct mailing method) to recruit single-smoker couples into a study on unaided smoking cessation.

Paid advertising on Facebook reaches much of the local population (Frandsen, Walters, & Ferguson, 2014), accesses hard-to-reach

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populations (Rait, Prochaska, & Rubinstein, 2015), allows targeting by demographics or keywords (Carlini, Safioti, Rue, & Miles, 2015; Ramo & Prochaska, 2012; Ramo, Rodriguez, Chavez, Sommer, & Prochaska, 2014), and can be less expensive than traditional advertising and other types of internet recruitment (Carlini et al., 2015; Ramo et al., 2014; but see Rait et al., 2015). Accordingly, paid Facebook advertising might be ideal to recruit smoking couples from a local population. We included two methods of Facebook advertising in the current study. In Facebook Method 1, clicking on the study ad sent potential respondents to our Facebook page where they could follow a link to our screening survey. In Facebook Method 2, clicking on the study ad bypassed our Facebook page and sent potential respondents directly to our screening survey.

Traditional use of mass mailing to recruit participants is expensive, both in resources and time (Bornstein, Jager, & Putnick, 2013; Fouad et al., 2004), and provides relatively low pay-offs in terms of response rates (Aitken, Gallagher, & Madronio, 2003). Therefore, we used a “targeted” direct mailing approach (Derrick, Leonard, & Perry, 2015; Homish & Leonard, 2009), based on the Tailored Design Method (TDM; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2007), to achieve higher response rates and improve the cost-effectiveness of postal mail recruitment. The TDM obtains a sample through a series of five mailed contact points. We used the TDM to recruit and screen participants for our larger study.

1.1. Overview

We examined three methods to recruit single-smoker couples into the Daily Experiences with Smoking Cessation (DESC) Study, an ecological momentary assessment study of unaided quitting. We compared these three methods in terms of demographic diversity, eligibility, and cost-effectiveness.

2. Method

2.1. Facebook recruitment

We used two paid Facebook advertising tactics to target users 18–55 years old who were in a relationship and lived within 25 miles of Buffalo, NY. “Promote your Page” is designed to increase “likes” and “shares.” Facebook optimizes performance of the ad by showing it to people similar to those who liked or shared the Facebook page in the past. In our study, users could like or share the page, or they could click on the ad itself to be sent to our Facebook page. On our Facebook page, they could learn more about the study and link to our online screening survey (Facebook Method 1, used for eight months). “Send People to Your Website” is designed to increase traffic to an external website. Facebook optimizes performance of the ad by showing it to people similar to those who visited the external website in the past. In our study, Facebook users bypassed our Facebook page by linking directly from our ad to our screening survey, where they learned more about our study through the consent information (Facebook Method 2, used for 14 months). We used the same series of ads in both recruitment methods. These ads included a small photo (e.g., of a cigarette), and a single statement: “Couples from Buffalo area needed for confidential, paid study on quitting smoking.”

2.2. Targeted direct mail recruitment

To recruit via mail, we purchased names and addresses from Click2Mail (<http://click2mail.com/mailling-list-services>), a direct mail marketing company that provides tailored lists to target households based on public real estate records, telephone directories, and consumer history. We specified households in Erie County, NY with married occupants between the ages of 18–55 with a history of purchasing tobacco products. Of the 13,752 households in the database that fit our selection criteria, we purchased a randomly selected list of 800 names.

We initiated TDM mailing procedures (Dillman et al., 2007) with a new batch of 100 households each month for eight months. Because pre-contact increases response rates (vs. no contact; Edwards et al., 2009), we sent a pre-notice letter (Mailing 1) to indicate that a survey would arrive shortly. Five days later, we sent an invitation letter, screening survey, and return envelope (Mailing 2). To increase response rates, we personalized the invitation letter, included a non-conditional monetary incentive (1 USD), and used first class mail to deliver the surveys (Edwards et al., 2009). One week later, we sent a postcard (Mailing 3) to thank respondents and to remind non-respondents to complete the survey. We sent Mailings 1–3 to all households. Mailing 4, sent only to non-respondents, included a cover letter, duplicate survey (replacement surveys enhance response rates; Edwards et al., 2009), and business reply envelope. Eight weeks later, we sent continued non-respondents a final letter (Mailing 5).

2.3. Eligibility criteria

To be eligible after Initial Screening, couples needed to meet relationship criteria (a different-sex relationship; cohabiting at least six months or married), demographic criteria (both partners 18–55 years old; comfortable reading/writing English), and smoking criteria (one smoker interested in quitting and one never/former smoker). Interested and initially eligible couples were contacted via telephone for more in-depth screening (Phone Screening).

To be eligible after Phone Screening, the smoking partner had to meet additional smoking criteria (smoked 2+ years; smokes 10+ cigarettes per day; no non-cigarette forms of tobacco; motivation to quit of at least 50 on a 1–100 scale; not seeing a provider or taking medication to quit smoking). The couple also had to meet logistical criteria (partners lived together; neither partner worked nights; both partners could receive texts during the day), and safety criteria (i.e., no severe violence). Both partners had to agree to participate, and the smoker had to quit smoking 12+ h before the first appointment (verified with an expelled breath carbon monoxide reading of < 10 ppm).

3. Results

We asked three questions: 1) Did respondent demographic characteristics differ by recruitment method at Initial Screening? 2) Did respondent eligibility differ by recruitment method? 3) What was the most effective recruitment method?

3.1. Demographic characteristics

First, we examined whether demographic characteristics reported in Initial Screening differed by recruitment method. Several differences were observed (see Table 1). Targeted TDM respondents and their partners were older, less likely to be smokers, less likely to be Black or Hispanic, more educated, less likely to be in unmarried cohabiting relationships, more likely to be married, and less likely to be in same-sex relationships than Facebook Method 1 or Method 2 respondents and their partners. Similarly, Facebook Method 1 respondents and their partners were older, less likely to be Black, more educated, more likely to be married, and less likely to be in same-sex relationships than Facebook Method 2 respondents and their partners. In summary, Facebook Method 1 respondents generally fell between targeted TDM and Facebook Method 2 respondents.

3.2. Eligibility

Flow through the study design differed by recruitment method (see Table 2). We first examined group differences in Initial Screening completion. The dramatic difference in Initial Screening completion rates between the two Facebook methods reflects the fact that respondents to Facebook Method 1 viewed the study information on our

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