

TITLE: Improving engagement with trial participant newsletters using theory-based enhancements: results of a randomised Study Within A Trial (SWAT)

Authors: Karen Bracken, Camille E Short, Andrew Vincent, Gary Wittert and T4DM investigators

Introduction

Participant newsletters are commonly used to maintain participant engagement and boost retention in clinical trials. However, there is little evidence to guide this trial activity, and an approach based on theories of human behaviour could improve newsletter engagement. We conducted a study within a trial (SWAT #91), nested within the T4DM diabetes prevention trial, to evaluate the impact of theory-based enhancements to an emailed participant newsletter on participants' engagement with the newsletter.

Methods

T4DM participants are Australian men aged 50-74 years. All participants (on-treatment and completed treatment) receive quarterly email newsletters from the central coordinating centre. In this evaluation, participants were randomised to receive a one-off email newsletter with one of eight possible variations using a 2x2x2 factorial design. Factors were subject line (standard wording versus enhanced competency-based wording), sender (trial name versus site nurse's name), and salutation line (no salutation versus personalised salutation). Enhancements were designed to influence competence and relatedness, based on self-determination theory. The primary outcome was email open rate. Analysis was by logistic mixed-effects regression modelling. Three-way factorial interaction was tested, and backward stepwise elimination performed to identify the optimal model.

Results

Of participants (n=931) randomised to an email option, 511 (55%) opened the email. After backwards variable elimination, the optimal model included sender and subject line only (OR=1.8, 95%CI=[1.1, 3.0], p=0.02), but not salutation. Participants who received an email with an enhanced, competency-based subject line sent under their site nurse's name were more likely to open the email compared to those who received the other combinations (approximately 10% higher absolute open rate).

Discussion

Using a theory-based approach, combining enhanced subject line and nurse's sender name, engagement with an emailed participant newsletter was modestly increased. Although requiring replication, we have demonstrated the potential of simple, theory-based adaptations to enhance participant engagement.

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