How to do a lab study (fast) â?? Field-approved tips for in-person participant recruitments

Description

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Over the last weeks, I conducted a laboratory experiment at a German university campus. I tested various approaches for where, when, and how to get people into the lab. In this article, you will find some best-practice advice I learned for on-campus recruitments. These tips help you to accelerate future in-person recruitment processes and to use your available resources more efficiently. If you do not plan to do an on-campus lab study in the future, this article will still provide you some insights about how the data from on-campus studies is generated. Please keep in mind that these are only anecdotal insights from my experiences and should be evaluated and tested before being applied in future studies.

Before I give you my top 10 practical tips for on-campus recruitments, let me briefly explain what I did for my study. With the help of research assistants (RAs), I recruited around 200 participants for my lab study. All participants were recruited in person at the campus of a German university. The content of the study was about simulating everyday real-world experiences in virtual environments using virtual role-playing video games and was advertised as being about decisions in everyday experiences (not mentioning the video game) to prevent sampling biases.

Now that you know what I did in my study, here are my 10 most useful tips for successful on-campus recruitments:

1. **Understand your options as early as possible**. Issues that you do not think of as being issues might easily become real issues. For example, make sure that there is a suitable room for your laboratory available on your campus. This is especially important if you want to recruit your participants ad-hoc, meaning that people participate directly after being recruited. It should ideally not take longer than 2 minutes for participants to go from the point of recruitment to the lab. Depending on the architecture of your campus, these rooms can be surprisingly hard to book for longer periods.

2. **Coordinate all moving parts as early as possible**. For conducting a lab study, many things need to work together: a room must be booked, research assistants must be coordinated, flyers must be designed and printed, a booking tool must be set up, and so on. Try to understand your possibilities as soon as possible and coordinate everything dynamically. Write to your administration about when suitable rooms are available. Schedule your research assistants/ recruitment staff. Delegate the technical setup as far and as soon as possible. There are many points of failure in the process.
3. **Spend fewer days recruiting and more days in the lab**. In a first round of recruitment, I only scheduled one day for lab sessions. My RAs recruited participants only for this one day and I had planned to schedule more lab days afterwards in case we did not recruit the required number of participants. This turned out to be very inefficient. Many potential participants did not participate because they were simply not available that day (at least this was what they told us). Then, of course, we had to recruit more participants after that first lab day, which meant more resources being spent. And while recruiting again, more and more people responded that they had already been contacted before and did not want to talk to us again. Together, these experiences suggest scheduling as many lab sessions over as many days as possible, and then intensifying or reducing the recruitment process based on the received turnout.
4. **Hand out flyers**. Many people do not have the time or motivation to register for the study the moment they are being approached. Try to give them a flyer with a QR-code and a link to a booking website, so that they can register themselves later. It will brighten up your following days when you see the booking mails steadily rolling in.
5. **Use QR codes with redirect websites**. Embed QR-codes on your advertisement material for people to register via mobile devices. One handy trick for setting up the QR code and to design the advertisement material is to not let the QR-code contain a link to your registration page itself, but rather to a designated redirection page: On your personal homepage (or any other website that you administrate), set up a subpage that does nothing more than redirect users to another page. This subpage is what the QR-code should contain. This way, you can adjust the booking page anytime without needing to re-print your material. You simply need to re-define the link your subpage redirects to.
6. **Do not use Tablets for registration**. In the beginning of our recruitment phase, we wanted to offer people the possibility to directly register for the study on a tablet that we took with us. As it turned out, most people did not feel comfortable with the option of

entering their personal contact data into the tablet and preferred to register on their own devices instead. Even worse, some people reacted deterred when they saw the tablet we were visibly carrying.

7. **Vary recruitment modalities**. On campus, many people you approach outside have recurring events they attend routinely over their day or week. To approach different people over the course of the recruitment phase, try to vary the time, place, and maybe staff to approach as many people as possible.
8. **Think about unconventional places for recruitment**. People have things to do and places to be, especially if you try to recruit them outside on their way to their destination. Thus, approaching people outside might not be the best place for recruitment. The best situations for recruitment were those in which people a) spent an extended period of time, b) were together with friends or colleagues, and c) were not working. By far the most effective approach was to look for groups of students in the university library who were not working but chatting with each other. These groups were often open to talk to us, felt not disturbed from anything important, and often registered to the study collectively. Other particularly lucrative locations were around cafeterias and bus stops.
9. **Let participants donate their incentive**. Give participants the option to either receive their incentive in cash or to donate it to an NGO. If approached, some people first state that they do not need the incentive money but are then willing to participate after being told that they can also choose that we donate their incentive to an NGO instead. Ideally, choose an NGO that is widely accepted in the public, like food banks.
10. **Be kind to your research assistants**. This may sound trivial, but do not forget that you probably would not be able to conduct your research without the help of your RAs. Also, you want your assistants to be motivated and open-hearted while recruiting and not standing in a corner looking grumpy. Show appreciation for their efforts and empathy for their emotionally draining experience of recruiting and getting rejected frequently while doing so. Let them understand the importance of their contribution for your research.

I hope these tips might help you with your future research or at least to better understand practices of in-person recruitment and laboratory studies. If you have any questions on them, please feel free to contact me via philipp.kemper@uni-due.de.

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