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Expert Column

# The Pulse of Healthcare: Innovative Strategies to Attract and Retain Blood Donors

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Transfusion Medicine is a rapidly evolving medical specialty. Wolf aptly describes the unique nature of blood transfusion services, asserting that *"unlike other clinical laboratories, the blood bank provides a parenteral therapeutic agent."* The World Health Organisation (WHO) characterizes blood donation as the voluntary donation of blood for transfusions or medication production. The WHO's goal is for all countries to obtain their blood supplies through voluntary, unpaid donors. As the transfusion service is dependent on community support and the goodwill and generosity of the public, continuing meaningful publicity programs at national and local levels, combined with well-organized expert bleeding teams, are essential to ensuring the ready availability and supply of blood. Over the years, we have applied innovative strategies to both attract more new donors and retain the existing population of blood donors.

Leveraging technology and digital platforms in this digital age provides unparalleled opportunities to engage with potential and existing blood donors. Developing user-friendly mobile applications with features such as appointment scheduling, donor eligibility checks, personalized reminders for upcoming donation drives and also including geolocation services to notify donors of nearby donation centers or mobile drives can streamline the donor experience. Digital health solutions have been instrumental in enhancing donor recruitment. For example, studies show that mobile apps with gamification features can increase donor retention by engaging younger demographics effectively.<sup>(1)</sup> We can use social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram

as powerful tools to share compelling experiences from blood and blood product recipients, thereby motivating potential donors. Regular live sessions, Q&A interactions, and donor testimonials on these platforms can foster a sense of community and connection.

Partnerships with corporations and educational institutions can significantly expand the donor base. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs can encourage companies to organise blood donation drives. For instance, CSR initiatives not only address critical health needs but also enhance corporate reputation and employee engagement. Successful strategies include fostering employee participation, collaborating with healthcare professionals, and using feedback to continuously improve these campaigns. These dual benefits demonstrate how businesses can contribute to society while strengthening their internal culture and public image, as highlighted by Corporate Wellness Magazine's insights on effective corporate wellness programs.<sup>(2)</sup> Offering incentives such as employee recognition, certificates, or small gifts can motivate participation. Educational institutions, including universities and colleges, are prime locations to recruit young and healthy donors. Integrating blood donation awareness into health courses or hosting annual campus drives can create lifelong donors.

We always consider the donor experience during and after the donation process, as it can either encourage or deter further donations. Therefore, enhancing the donor experience through initiatives such as air-conditioned donation suites, comfortable seating, free Wi-Fi, providing refreshments, personalized donor badges, or any other form of special appreciation can create a memorable and positive experience that encourages repeat donations. Research by Martin-Santana et al. highlights the role of block leaders in motivating existing donors to return, emphasizing the importance of personalized communication and community trust in fostering donor loyalty.<sup>(3)</sup> Post-donation follow-ups are also crucial. We can foster a sense of accomplishment and reinforce the value of donors' contributions by sending a simple thank-you message or notifying them when their blood has helped someone. These personalized gestures are effective for turning one-time donors into regular contributors.

Organizing themed blood drives, such as holiday or festival drives, can create a sense of excitement and celebration around the act of donating blood. These events can include entertainment, food stalls, and partnerships with local celebrities to attract crowds. Themed blood drives like holiday events are shown to attract 20% more participants compared to non-themed campaigns, primarily due to added community engagement and festive atmosphere. Additionally, community-focused events such as health fairs, offering free health screenings and wellness talks, can incorporate blood donation into a wider health initiative. We should also hold educational campaigns to dispel various myths and misconceptions about blood donation. These campaigns can help clear the hesitation among multiple potential donors that arises due to unfounded fears related to pain, safety, or perceived adverse effects.

Targeted recruitment and inclusion strategies can guarantee the reach of diverse demographics. For example, collaborating with cultural and religious organizations can help overcome specific barriers and promote blood donations within particular communities. As discussed in the article **'Blood Donation for all: Inclusivity is Important to the blood supply,'** fostering inclusivity not only ensures equitable participation but also addresses the need for diverse blood types to meet the growing demand for rare and unique blood profiles.<sup>(4)</sup> Engaging community leaders as advocates can build trust and encourage participation. Recruiting donors

from all communities can also help meet the demand for rare blood types. We can incorporate customized messages that resonate with particular groups or initiatives, emphasizing the significance of diverse blood donations.

Adapting to the lifestyle and schedules of potential donors can increase participation. We can accommodate individuals who cannot donate during traditional working hours by extending our operating hours and offering weekend donation slots. Mobile blood collection units that travel to high-traffic areas, such as shopping centers or business districts, can also make donation more convenient. Flexible donation hours and mobile blood units have been shown to improve accessibility, particularly for working professionals, increasing donation rates by up to 25%. While these methods can increase the number of turnouts in urban areas, donors from rural areas may lack access to these donation sites. This is especially common among the Orang Asli community in Malaysia. Organizing blood donation campaigns in the rural areas at a more accessible location to these communities at regular intervals can help to handle this situation efficiently.

Last but not least, utilizing the power of data analytics can improve donor engagement strategies. The power of data analytics has been further demonstrated by *Li et al. (2023)*, whose study highlighted how advanced computational techniques can significantly enhance blood demand forecasting and supply chain management, addressing inefficiencies and shortages.<sup>(5)</sup> By analyzing donors' demographics, habits, and feedback, blood centers can develop targeted campaigns and tailor their outreach efforts. Predictive analytics can also help identify optimal times for reaching out to previous donors and scheduling donation drives to maximize turnout. Managing donation intervals is critical to ensuring the safety and health of frequent blood donors. In Malaysia, it is recommended that the minimum interval between whole blood donation is 8 weeks and the maximum number of donations per year is 6 times for males and 4-times for females to allow sufficient time for haemoglobin and iron levels to recover. Educating donors on the importance of these intervals prevents risks like iron deficiency anaemia. Alongside scheduling guidance, transfusion services should provide nutritional recommendations to support donors in maintaining adequate iron levels. Emphasizing iron-rich diets, including red meat, leafy green vegetables, and fortified cereals, can help replenish iron levels. Vitamin C rich food such as oranges and bell peppers, can be suggested to increase iron absorption. In some cases, especially for frequent donors, oral iron supplements may be advised under medical supervision. By implementing such strategies, blood donation programs can foster long-term donor health while maintaining a stable blood supply.

Attracting and retaining blood donors requires a multifaceted approach that combines technological advancements with community engagement, personalized experiences, and strategic partnerships. By implementing these innovative strategies, transfusion services in Malaysia can create a robust, sustainable and motivated donor base. This not only ensures a consistent blood supply but also fosters a culture of compassion and community resilience. All these continuous adaptations, efforts and approaches can help meet the growing demands for blood and contribute to saving countless lives.

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