

*The White Papers*

Applications of Econometrica’s  
Focus First Model: Targeting and  
Recruiting Program Participants

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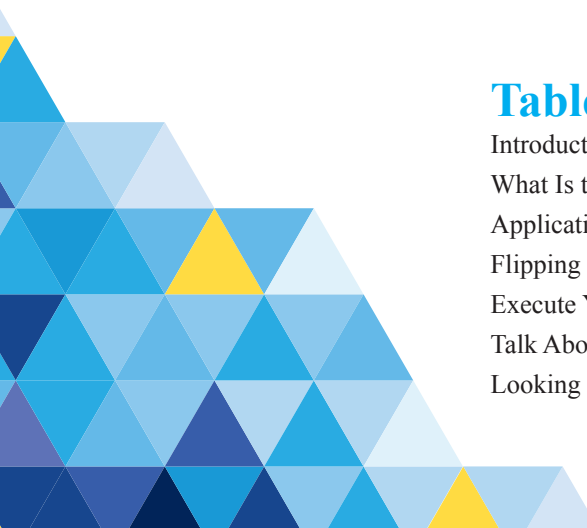
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## Introduction

As new public health programs are conceptualized and implemented, developing strategies to identify and recruit potential participants from the target population is a natural early barrier. Program participants can take many forms—they may be individuals engaging in a diabetes prevention class, nonprofit organizations joining a coalition to enhance community-based injury prevention practices, or hospitals joining large networks committed to enhancing patient safety across the healthcare system. Regardless of the type of participants that forms the program’s target audience, the strategic principles for recruiting them remain the same.

This paper explores those central tenets of participant recruitment through Econometrica’s Focus First Model—a holistic and flexible framework designed to guide operations in every aspect of program development, implementation, and sustainment. The model encourages a narrative focused on the participant to ensure that their perspective is included in program operations and recruitment strategy and leveraged to meet program goals.

Creating a culture focused on the participant has many implications and benefits:

1. Helping program operators meet program goals.
2. Encourages exploring the target audience and focuses on participants’ perspective.
3. Creating a program that is accessible and engaging.
4. Creating a program that is participant-centric and ensures that participants’ expectations are met.

The approach we outline here will prove beneficial to individuals tasked with recruiting participants for their current and future projects. More broadly, we present our Focus First Model and its application to participant recruitment in order to spark a new perspective on operating public health programs. The integrated model is built on a practice we call “Flipping the Narrative,” a paradigm under which the staff primarily focuses on goals from the perspective of the target audience (i.e., what the audience may gain from participating in the program); goals from the staff’s own perspective (i.e., what the program will gain from the participants) become a secondary focus. This paper is primarily intended for individuals in management roles overseeing the implementation of public health programming at any scale, particularly those managers who are actively seeking new strategies to streamline their practices in impactful ways. Public health and healthcare practitioners at any level of practice, and individuals managing community-based programming even outside the healthcare sphere, can also benefit from these core principles.

This paper has the following structure: First, we provide a brief overview and background information on our Focus First Model. We then explore the logic that drives progress under Focus First as it relates to participant recruitment. Last, we present a step-by-step guide to adopting the Focus First Model into your own participant recruitment efforts, with real-world examples from our past work of the model in action. Throughout the paper, we present examples from a Medicaid demonstration program that explored the impact of providing incentives for preventing chronic disease by improving healthy behaviors; the program featured 10 state-level initiatives that targeted health improvements through diabetes management and prevention, smoking cessation, health self-management, and weight loss programming.

## What Is the Focus First Model, and Where Did It Come From?

The Econometrica Focus First Model (Figure 1) is designed to help program operators navigate the operations of a program or organization.

Focus First operates on the following principle:

- People motivate culture.
- Culture motivates process.
- Process motivates outcomes.
- Outcomes motivate people.

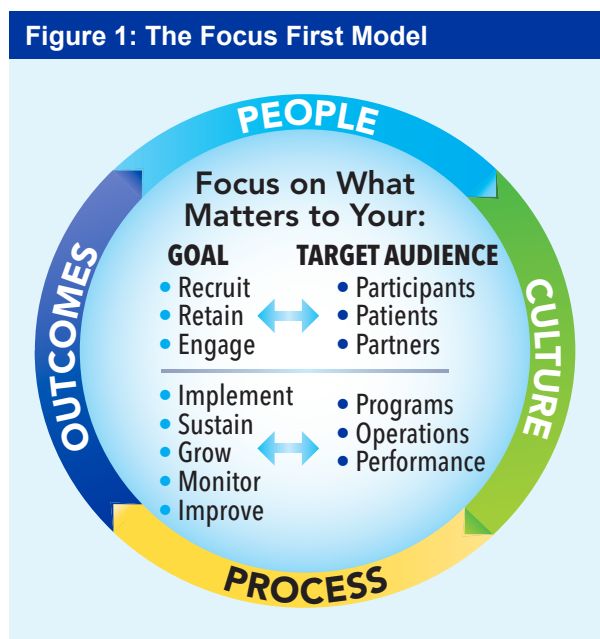
The model’s flexible core encourages program operators to target short-term intermediate goals with specific target audiences as a method to achieve long-term programmatic goals. Ultimately, public health programs aim to enhance the quality of life of a target audience, but along the way a program’s intermediate goals change from recruiting participants and engaging partners to sustaining program operations. The Focus First Model promotes a culture in which what matters most to the target audience drives processes, and the target audience ultimately reaps the positive outcomes. In this paper, we apply the model to recruiting program participants, but the Focus First Model can be applied to any incremental goal, such as retaining program partners, implementing new operational protocols, or improving program performance.

We focus on how program operators can refocus from what their organizations need from participants to what matters most to the participants themselves. The model emphasizes two-way accountability and recognizes the importance of symbiotic partnerships. A culture must be built from people who are motivated to meet the needs of the target audience while still holding that audience accountable to meet the expectations of the program. As program personnel promote a culture centered on mutually beneficial relationships, outcomes will show measurable progress toward program goals and measurable improvements in the areas that matter most to the target audience.

This model was developed on the shoulders of more than a decade of experience providing technical assistance and support to a wide array of programs and entities. The experiences reflected in the Focus First Model include on-the-ground work with grantees and organizations implementing new and innovative initiatives to improve healthcare access, outcomes, and quality across the United States. We have applied the strategies presented in the model with quality improvement organizations, hospitals, State health departments, State Medicaid offices, and American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and Tribal organizations. By synthesizing our work into a succinct strategic model, we hope to enhance the efforts of individuals and organizations in the public health field who share our passion for improving healthcare.

## Application of the Model: Participant Recruitment

Recruitment is never easy, but it is particularly difficult when programs adopt a narrative focused on questions like “What can participants do for my program?” or “What does my program need from participants?” These perspectives perpetuate a participation-quota mentality—that is, a focus on gaining participants to fulfill program requirements or for reasons important to program operations but largely unimportant to individual participants. Programs should instead consider the perspective of recruits by answering the question “What do I (the participant) gain from participating in this program?” Doing so provides



insights into participant-level interest in the program and reveals the benefits that potential recruits can expect from their participation and how those benefits relate to their own goals.

For example, a program targeting tobacco cessation should focus on individual-level motivators for quitting smoking, examine the tools the program should offer to cater to these motivators, and assess how participation in the program will directly affect a participant’s ability to quit. Through this process, one demonstration program we worked with found that providing access to one-on-one peer coaches to help participants meet their tobacco cessation goals made the program more attractive to prospective participants and thus made recruitment efforts more successful. However, simply considering the participant’s perspective is not enough: This exercise should be used to inform a ground-up recruitment strategy that will present the program in a manner appealing to recruits.

## Flipping the Narrative: The Logic Driving Focus First

As described above, we place pointed emphasis on Flipping the Narrative to successfully achieve program goals. However, operationalizing this practice may not be intuitive. As a guide, Table 1 provides a six-step logic model for implementing this strategy.

Table 1: Logical Framework Behind Every Action	
Logic Step	Example
<b>The Action:</b> <i>What is the program’s most immediate need/goal?</i>	Program participants for a grant focused on Latino food choices.
<b>The Ask:</b> <i>What does the program need to achieve the Action?</i>	Participants who will attend six in-person sessions about weight loss and food choice decisions.
<b>The Target Audience:</b> <i>Who will contribute directly to fulfilling the Ask?</i>	Individuals in the Latino community who make meal and food decisions in their home.
<b>The Motivator:</b> <i>Why would the Target Audience comply with the Ask? What is the Ask from the audience’s perspective?</i>	Participants are motivated by the well-being of their family. From the participants’ perspective, we are asking them to change their behavior and habits to choose different foods to serve to their families.
<b>The Facilitator:</b> <i>What can the program do to overcome barriers?</i>	Participants may need transportation, childcare, financial incentives to try different food choices or cooking preparations, and Latino facilitators who speak Spanish.
<b>The Frame:</b> <i>How can the Ask be framed to leverage the Motivator and the Facilitator to fulfill your goal?</i>	<p>“We are recruiting participants to help them improve the health and happiness of their families. The 1-hour classes will occur every Thursday night from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the community center. Childcare will be provided. All sessions will be recorded and posted to YouTube.com if you need to miss a session. Participants will be given \$20 each week to try new foods and preparation methods. Class facilitators speak both Spanish and English.”</p> <p>Such recruiting materials should be provided in Spanish and English.</p>

### Step 1: The Action: Define Your Intermediate Goal

Remain focused on your long-term goal but narrow your immediate attention to develop step-by-step strategies toward an intermediate goal. Intermediate goals should be measurable and challenging but ultimately attainable. As a guide, consider the construct outlined in the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goal framework. The first

step under this example is obvious: Recruit participants who will benefit from the program. Identifying the intermediate goal is important so that the program team can narrow its focus on what matters *today*, or even what matters *in the next hour*.

Sharpen the focus of your team, and your team's strategy, by ensuring that all intermediate goals are measurable in the short term. While defining the participant recruitment goals, construct a timeframe and recruitment targets over short periods. Whether your program needs to recruit 35 people over 2 months or 10,000 people over a year, the targets and expectations should be defined up front, and progress toward the target should be tracked frequently and carefully. It is certainly beneficial for continued improvement, and for reinforcing a healthy organizational culture, to recognize program team successes along the way toward meeting intermediate targets. As the immediate focus is defined, the program team can begin determining the scope of the activities necessary to meet your goal and conceptualizing initial recruitment strategies.

## Step 2: The Ask: Know What You Need

The program operators should define exactly what is being asked of potential participants. Do you need them to make a phone call? Do you need them to attend an hour-long weekly class? Do you need them to change their normal behavior or alter their lifestyle? Are you asking your audience for their participation in a one-time event, or is this an ongoing commitment? How will participation affect their day-to-day lives? Focus on broader questions, as well: How many participants are necessary?

What is the anticipated retention rate? During this step, the program's expectations must be clearly defined such that they can be presented to recruits before they make their decision to participate. Program operators are accountable to their participants and should do everything in their power to maximize the benefits that each receives from participating. However, Focus First relies on a two-way accountability: Participants are also held accountable for meeting a well-defined and realistic set of expectations.

The purpose of the Ask, in essence, is to develop an understanding of what you expect from program participants and what they should expect from your program. Carefully defining these expectations, and subsequently following through on them, is crucial to asserting an operational culture that makes meaningful contact with the target population.

Overall, steps 1 and 2 provide the opportunity for program staff to drive the operational culture. Initially, program operators build a goal-oriented culture among team members. Team members should be driven by setting achievable short-term goals to advance the program's objective, and they should learn to establish well-defined and realistic expectations of what is needed to achieve these short-term goals. This type of foundational culture will promote the development of pragmatic strategic plans to achieve the program's goals while meeting the needs of participants. In the end, the people who make up the program team will dictate its operational culture.

## Step 3: The Target Audience: Define Who/What You Need to Achieve Your Goal

The power of Focus First lies in the detailed approach to this step and in the culture that promotes an exploration of the target audience. Under this application, the target audience is obvious, as well: the individuals participating in the program.

The audience should be defined very specifically. In the case of our work with a program designed to aid individuals in tobacco cessation, we encouraged program operators to examine their target audience closely. Recruitment teams considered how to describe the "ideal" program participant, exploring where they lived and worked, what language(s) they spoke, and their background. Recruiters examined how prospective participants spent their time, including hobbies and general aspects of their day-to-day lives. Further attention was given to details that would directly aid in program operations: How does the target

Figure 2: People Motivate Culture



audience like to receive information? Whom do they trust? What is their education level? What resources do they have available to participate in the program? In the end, all of the information compiled about the target audience contributed to one central question: What matters to members of the target audience? Under this program, one successful strategy that emerged was to work with partners on the ground who had existing close relationships to the target audience. Program operators worked with local Federally Qualified Health Centers and local health improvement case managers. Program staff also conducted outreach to primary care providers within communities to coordinate with the local Office of Public Assistance.

Identifying detailed specifics about the target audience enables the program operators to understand their motivators. This step places the audience at the center of focus for all program operations and reinforces the participant-centric culture. Program managers should assert the importance of this operational culture among all team members and promote a participant-centric approach as the optimal tool for problem-solving.

#### Step 4: The Motivator: Flip the Narrative

The program's culture is enhanced further as team members engage in and master the practice of Flipping the Narrative. You need to recruit participants to successfully implement your program, but what is it that the target audience needs, and what are the potential gains of participation for each individual participant from your program? Often the answer seems simple (e.g., the program will help each participant quit smoking).

However, it is important to go deeper than the obvious potential gains:

*Why* would a participant change his or her lifestyle and quit smoking? Use the information collected during steps 2 and 3 to consider the specific aspects of the program that will drive participation among the target audience. In the example of smoking, participants may be motivated by many reasons (e.g., to protect their children from secondhand smoke, to save money, to improve their health, to live to see their grandchildren graduate college). In fact, motivators are often multifaceted. In one demonstration program we supported, operators discovered that it was not only monetary incentives that motivated participants to engage in a diabetes prevention program, but that intrinsic motivation also played a large role. Consider specific motivators and currently unmet needs of potential participants. This approach ensures that your strategy focuses on the benefits to the participant, not only on the internal program requirements necessary for success.

**Figure 3: Culture Motivates Process**



#### Step 5: The Facilitator: Remove Barriers to Participation

As an insider, the program's benefits are clear; in fact, those benefits are likely what drove the program's design and implementation strategy in the first place. It is easy to strategize from the assumption that anyone presented with the opportunity to participate will be thrilled to do so. Of course, the reality is that individuals and organizations face real and often overlooked barriers to participation, whether logistical (such as scarce transportation) or personal (like a fear of stigmatization). Or perhaps the opportunity costs of participation are not justifiable on an individual-by-individual basis. A recruitment strategy must account for these factors in order to meet potential participants where they are and motivate participation. It is not uncommon for individuals to be interested in participating but unable to do so because of both real and perceived barriers. All potential barriers should be explored and considered in developing a recruitment strategy. In fact, we have found that simply understanding and addressing participation barriers in recruitment efforts makes participation more enticing for members of the target audience. For example, under one demonstration, the program operators discovered that program participation became possible for many additional interested individuals if the program provided and coordinated transportation, particularly with cab services.



## Step 6: The Frame: Create Your Recruitment Strategy

At this point, the foundation for successful recruitment has been established. The team members have defined short-term goals and determined how to measure their achievements. They have identified the target audience, examined the details of these individuals, and developed an operational culture based on what matters most to that audience. They have developed a clear understanding of the program's expectations for all participants and adopted a paradigm of two-way accountability to drive the program forward. Finally, the team has become comfortable with stepping outside the world of operating the program to view it from an external lens, and the team has strategically addressed potential participation barriers.

The medium(s) chosen to relay recruitment information about your program is important because it ensures your message is seen and heard by as many members of the target audience as possible. The profile of your target audience developed early in the recruitment process provides key information for the recruitment strategy. As processes are developed, focus on avenues that are salient to your target audience—specifically identify where, when, and how to reach recruits. Additionally, your recruitment efforts should involve sustained contacts with the target population, whether through face-to-face outreach or other strategies, such as outreach via social media. There is no single solution for participant recruitment, but your recruitment strategy should engage the target audience in their daily lives. For example, in a program focused on diabetes management, the operators worked with healthcare providers (such as nurses and case managers) to integrate program recruitment into routine follow-up calls after appointments.

The message itself is as important as the messenger. Messaging should outline the expectations the program team has for each participant, provide clear direction on how to proceed, and relay a realistic estimate of the time commitment necessary to participate. The team should also plan to redevelop program messaging to stay interesting to the target audience as more information becomes available. In general, the goal of recruitment should not be simply to reach the desired number of participants but to recruit the right participants; that is, the goal should be to recruit participants who are committed to the program, stand to benefit from the program (i.e., are truly in need of the program's services), and will maintain their engagement throughout the program. Recruitment mechanisms should be designed to reach as many members of the target audience as possible, while the messaging should be developed to engage potential participants and identify those who will experience real benefits through their participation.

The messaging should also communicate how you intend to address the participation barriers that have been identified. Programs should carefully frame their recruitment efforts based on the meaningful information they have collected. In one example, a smoking cessation program was framed as “tobacco education” to recruit Medicaid beneficiaries; the framing asserted a nonconfrontational approach to assisting individuals in smoking cessation and made participation more attractive to recruits. In another example, program operators were careful to frame participation in a diabetes prevention program as a “year-long support tool” rather than a series of instructional classes; this framing emphasized the full benefit of the program and promulgated an inclusive and caring environment to prospective participants.

## Execute Your Recruitment Strategy and Assess Your Effectiveness

Focus First aims to develop a recruitment strategy that will support the goals of your program. As the processes developed are executed and become measurable outcomes, your team should gauge progress and challenges and identify any changes that are necessary to further your short- and, ultimately, long-term goals. Recruitment outcomes happen fast and should be tracked regularly. Examine whether the messaging is providing the motivation necessary to engage participants in your program and

**Figure 4: Process Motivates Outcomes**





consider how effective your chosen mediums are in reaching members of your target audience. Use data to assess progress (e.g., How many participants have been reached? How many have been successfully recruited?) and challenges (e.g., Are there unforeseen barriers to participation that were not considered during strategic planning?). As time passes, you may be able to collect even more robust outcome data by surveying participants about their recruitment experience and collecting their suggestions for improvement.

Outcomes should be continuously tracked and linked to their preceding processes. Similarly, the program team should track progress toward the predefined recruitment goals and benchmarks at regular intervals, such as weekly check-ins with the program team; assessments of progress toward recruitment goals should occur at least every 2 weeks. It is important to identify processes that are working—and those that are not working—as quickly as possible to ensure that your program is building on success, recruitment stays on schedule, and program goals are achieved as intended. Processes will always yield outcomes, but only the right processes will result in the outcomes your program hopes to observe; it often takes several iterations to refine a strategy before it achieves even short-term goals, so maintain your flexibility and avoid dwelling on an established process if you are not seeing the desired outcomes in the data.

## Talk About Your Outcomes

The outcomes achieved by your program (whether in recruitment or otherwise) are a primary motivator for team members to continue their work every day. Collecting outcomes data is the easy part; translating that data into action requires dedication but is a powerful tool for driving progress. Outcomes should be frequently discussed and made a focal point of operations. When they indicate that a milestone has been reached or a short-term goal achieved, they should be celebrated to maintain program staff engagement. If data reveals operational shortcomings, those shortcomings should be reviewed to spur critical thinking and problem-solving to motivate team members toward improvement.

There are several outcomes to evaluate and discuss during participant recruitment efforts. Focus on your strategy's ability to reach the target audience and whether those who are participating in your program are the same individuals you envisioned initially. Document recruitment successes and lessons learned to reveal future improvements, areas for increasing efficiency, or avenues for cost savings. Finally, consider how closely your team adhered to the Focus First principles and the role that Flipping the Narrative played in your recruitment efforts. All this data will help inform your program team and support efforts to assert a participant-centric culture as the program continues to operate.

## Looking Toward the Future

Econometrica is committed to supporting organizations and programs to positively impact public health and quality improvement efforts that improve accessibility to quality healthcare. In our efforts to do so, we intend to continue releasing Focus First Applications papers regularly, with future topics to include leveraging the Focus First Model to improve recruiting organizations and community partners and implementing systematic performance management systems to aid quality and inform strategic planning. Later in the series, we will discuss how the Focus First Model can be applied to other common obstacles, such as retaining participants and partners, as well as considerations to include when building a sustainable program, even under changes in funding status.

**Figure 5: Outcomes Motivate People**



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