



Put your hands up

The struggle to recruit participants for a back pain study sparked a eureka moment. BY KEITH NEWMAN

A RECRUITMENT website with a difference has begun to bridge an aching gap in the New Zealand science and health market, by matching researchers with those who don't mind being researched.

Jamie Mannion had his eureka moment back in 2007 when he was immersed in an exercise science paper at Auckland University and needed to recruit 20 people with back pain. His supervisors warned that the most difficult part of many research projects was finding willing participants.

With the help of his mother, respected marketer and co-director Jude Mannion, enough volunteers were eventually tracked down, but Jamie was surprised to learn many enjoyed the experience and were eager to volunteer for other projects.

And it wasn't necessarily cash inducements that would keep them coming back. Their motivation was largely altruistic. "People were responding because

they, friends or family members had a health condition and by participating in research they felt they were contributing something tangible."

It was clear two groups in the market were looking for each other and Mannion reasoned that with the right online tools, he could arrange a meeting place. It was that bright idea that resulted in an application to the Spark New Business Idea Challenge.

"After six weeks of mentoring, a market research exercise and the creation of a solid business plan, Getparticipants won \$20,000 of development time at the Icehouse plus seed capital of \$20,000, which was matched by Mannion family interests. "Spark helped me get off my arse, gave me the skills and encouragement to explore the idea, validate the market and structure a business."

The website, launched just over six months ago, is already delivering an invaluable service to the research community with many clients having 50% of their needs met within hours. According to Mannion, research is on a growth curve with about 4000 studies done in New Zealand each year involving an estimated 2000 human participants.

But 65% to 85% of studies don't meet recruitment targets. "They either have to extend deadlines and use up more money and time to find the right people

or turn in results that are less meaningful than they could be."

The traditional way of getting volunteers is to leave flyers in waiting rooms or public areas, or to advertise. Even if you get the numbers there's still the laborious process of interviewing and screening to cover off all the legal, ethical and other responsibilities.

Getparticipants volunteers are essentially pre-qualified across a range of demographics, giving researchers a current database of about 1200 potential recruits. The bulk of researchers, who pay a small fee, are universities, although there are some clinical trials with pharmaceutical companies.

Dr Markus Melloh from the School of Medicine at the University of Otago says the site rescued his research on chronic back pain because he was struggling to find volunteers. Once he signed with Getparticipants his average weekly hit rate went from one to 10.

"Getparticipants is the smartest approach I have seen anywhere to resolving the challenge of bringing researchers and volunteers together.

"Without it my research project would have almost certainly run out of time," says Melloh.

While Mannion's company is not yet turning a profit, it's holding its own and has new developments and markets in mind. In fact Melloh is so impressed

he's now Getparticipants' director of research and is developing a new strand of business that will make the online recruiting site even more valuable.

"We're looking to establish a registry with more detail about participants and, through a portal approach, researchers will be able to collaborate and share each other's raw data," says Mannion.

While user fees will be low, this extra functionality will help bolster the number of volunteers and researchers. "It will be a world first and bring volume that will translate into revenue for us."

Mannion's goal is 10,000 volunteers, a critical mass he hopes will ensure all client recruiting needs are met within hours. He's got the Zeald web development team on board to ensure the system is robust enough to handle that growth and is now building momentum for the next challenge — an assault on the Australian market.

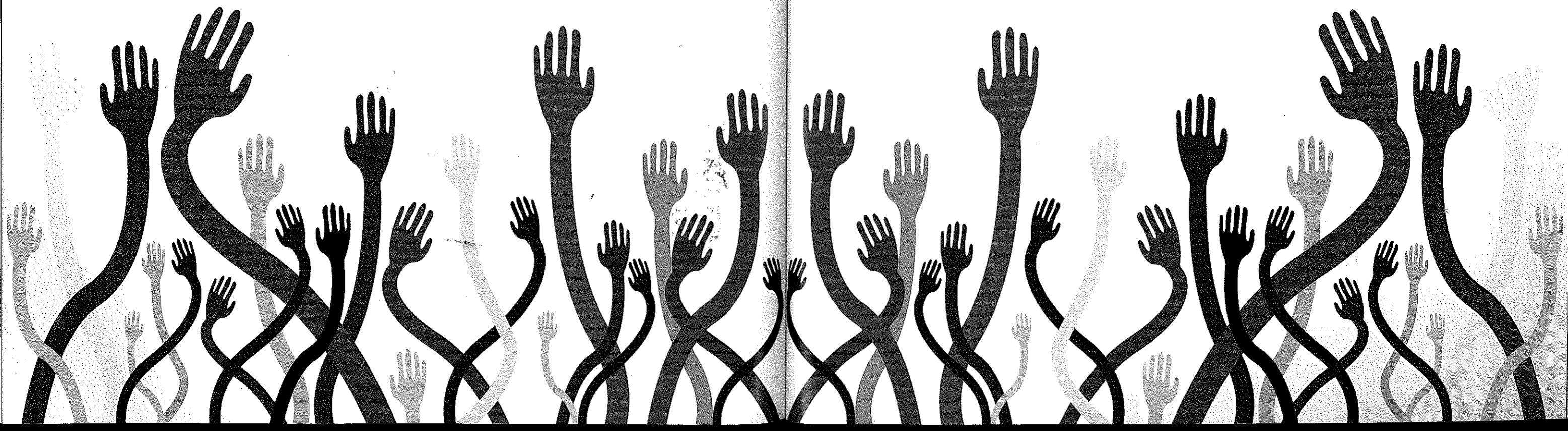
While all his research clients are currently in the scientific field, Mannion is also exploring ways his online recruitment and filtering tools might be repurposed for DIY consumer research, allowing small to medium sized businesses to poll the database with customised surveys and questionnaires.

Getparticipants.com



Getparticipants founder Jamie Mannion and his mother and co-director, Jude Mannion

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARCEL TROMP AND ISTOCK





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