

Getting Tools Used

Lessons for Health Care from Successful Consumer Decision Aids



U.S. News & World Report:
AMERICA'S BEST COLLEGES



CONSUMER REPORTS:
CAR BUYING GUIDE



eBay.com



NUTRITION FACTS PANELS

NOTE: THIS IS ONLY A PORTION OF THE GETTING TOOLS USED RESEARCH REPORT. FOR THE FULL DOCUMENT AND OTHER INFORMATION VISIT WWW.CFAH.ORG.

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GTU research was supported by The Changes in Health Care Financing and Organization (HCFO) initiative, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the California Healthcare Foundation and the Foundation for Informed Medical Decision Making.

Lessons Learned:

Key Variables of Success from the
Getting Tools Used Case Studies

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As part of the Getting Tools Used (GTU) research, the project's expert panelists analyzed four case studies of paper or electronic aids ("tools" or "decision aids") that help consumers shop for non-healthcare products. The panelists independently analyzed each individual case study, then the cases as a group, drawing on their particular expertise in the development and promotion of healthcare decision aids.

This document presents three levels of analysis of the case studies. The panelists' observations and conclusions for the case studies about "active ingredients," that is, variables greatly influencing consumers' initial adoption and ongoing use of the popular decision aids are represented in the main body of this report. Panelists' exact language is used when suitable, based on the written commentaries and on the panelists' presentations at the March 2009 GTU meeting with national leaders in healthcare and experts in healthcare decision aids. Appendix A summarizes the key variables for success identified by the panelists for each case study tool. Each decision aid and sponsor in the case studies had its own particular strengths, but the case study tools also had a number of influential variables in common. Figure 1 organizes these common variables based on the panelists' analyses.

The panelists were Margaret Holmes-Rovner, PhD, Professor of Health Services Research in the Department of Medicine, Michigan State University; David Kanouse, PhD, Senior Behavioral Scientist at RAND Corporation; Stephen Parente, PhD, MPH, Academic Director, Medical Industry Leadership Institute, Associate Professor School of Finance at the Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota; Dale Shaller, Shaller Consulting; and Shoshanna Sofaer, PhD: Professor of Health Care Policy, Baruch College, CUNY.

Getting the Right Tool to the Right Audience at the Right Time

Successful decision aids are consumer-centric, which means their content and functions are closely matched and align with the needs and interests of the target audience. Opportunistic timing also matters. In the case studies, each of the tool sponsors benefited from favorable

market conditions that helped produce a growing number of people who discovered a need for assistance with decision making. When a tool truly fits the need, as in the case of the *Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides*, uptake is swift and evolves into a loyal user base.

Decision Aids Tailored to Consumers Interests and Needs

Ratings, purchasing guides, and other decision aids become consumer-centric when the tool sponsor understands its target audience and then designs the aid to fulfill that audience's need for information and decision support. Characteristics of the audience that are important to know are cognitive abilities, interests, values, goals, and context for making a decision, and barriers that could affect tool use. This knowledge about a target audience enables the design of tools that people will find useful and relevant to their needs. Crafting decision aids so that they meet the target audiences interests and needs requires considerable sophistication, especially to attain the flexibility, reach, and deep personalization that have been powerful drivers of ongoing use of tools such as eBay.¹ In selecting cases for study, the project team sought to include a couple of decision aids that are familiar to and used by low socio-economic status groups. (Appendix B).

Additional characteristics of successful decision aids include:

- Clarity of purpose focused on serving consumers, coupled with single-minded pursuit of that purpose.
- A basis or reason for the audience to trust that the information in the decision aid is credible (i.e., factual and unbiased).
- Content that is relevant and easily comprehensible to the target audience.
- Formats and functions that are easy for the target audience to use.
- Features that give users the ability to customize their experience, which helps build a satisfied and loyal community of users.
- Development of online community and participatory platforms that highly engage users (sometimes called "Web 2.0"), setting in motion a virtuous cycle.

Potential decision aid users must have an adequate reason to trust the tool or the information it contains. The case study tool sponsors used a variety of strategies for creating a basis for trust. Strategies included careful use of objective methods, systems that reduced fraud,

¹ The Getting Tools Used project studied eBay.com as an online decision support tool that enables buyers to comparison shop and make informed decisions about products and sellers.

maintaining institutional independence, transparency with rating methods, rigorous testing, buyer/seller feedback systems, and government oversight.

With regard to content, Americans tend to like and use rank-ordered ratings, recommendations from independent experts, and information they can use to develop their own opinion about a product or service.

Target Audience

Target audiences are more likely to use a decision aid when they have a clear, compelling need for external information or support in making a choice. Such audiences understand that alternative choices have important differences, are motivated to seek information and decision support, and possess sufficient ability (such as knowledge, skills) to accurately use the tool.

To succeed, a decision aid must present credible information that consumers find useful in deciding which product or service to buy. The key is to design the tool and market it to reflect the specific type of decision (such as the stakes, frequency of purchase).

Sponsorship

Sponsorship also affects adoption, use, and referral of decision aids. The case study tools attracted users, in part, because the sponsoring organizations had strong brand identities and consumers perceived them as trusted sources of information. For example, students and their families began using *America's Best Colleges* in part because U.S. News has institutional credibility as a news organization.

Institutional credibility is not an infinite account from which organizations can draw in perpetuity; it must be actively maintained by the organization. Each case demonstrates a different approach to building trust among users. *Consumer Reports* sustains consumer trust through its organizational independence and clear commitment to the consumer and to no other stakeholder; US News and World Report draws on public trust engendered by its reputation as an objective news source, while the transparency of mutual buyer and seller ratings of eBay and the level playing field provided by the regulatory authority of the government for the Nutrition Facts Panel contribute to their authenticity.

Consumer trust is also contingent on sponsor expertise that is far beyond what a typical audience member has. Decision support, after all, constitutes knowledge transfer, and the sponsor must have a basis on which to claim expertise. For example:

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- *Consumer Reports* rates cars based on its specialists' rigorous testing in a sophisticated facility and by conducting a large survey of car buyers about their experiences.
 - The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) needed a small army of technical experts who applied a complex base of scientific knowledge to the development of the nutrition facts panel.

Viable Business Model

Odds for success improve when the sponsor is first to market with decision support, achieves a prominent market position or share of the audience, and has a viable business model for the decision aid (i.e., a way to generate revenue that supports ongoing production of and investment in the tool). Features of viable business models (for both commercial and nonprofit sponsors) include:

- A large audience, with users who have some financial resources.
- Elements that assure ongoing impact and engagement so the tool sustains a loyal base of customers.
- Ways to generate resources, perhaps at a substantial level to support start-up, maintenance, promotion and updating. (Tool sponsors that aim to be independent from the producers of the good or service being rated may need revenues that can support for expertise, perhaps specialized facilities and equipment, too.)
- The ability to generate publicity with a few high-profile cases that may influence industry practices or motivate consumers to seek information.
- The knack for identifying, adapting, or shaping opportunities presented by changes in the external environment and market.

All four cases also demonstrate the power of the relationship between the decision aid and the sponsoring organization's overall business model. While a successful product is an asset that a good business plan will exploit, the sponsors of the case study tools viewed the decision aid as being vital to overall business performance. (Two instances are *America's Best Colleges*, which advances the *U.S. News* business model of service journalism, and the decision-support features in eBay, which facilitate informed transactions between buyers and sellers and yield seller-based fees on closed listings.) Because of this relationship, each sponsor has a vested interest in making substantial and enduring investments in the tool. The organizational commitment to decision aid success is evident in the substantial resources each invested.

With regard to the FDA's nutrition fact panel, the federal mandate for use as well as the clear requirements for specific elements, provides both the impetus and the oversight needed for ongoing adoption. In this case, regulatory requirements for transparency of specific sentinel

elements provides an alternative to the revenue model posed by the other three cases in our study.

Marketing

Marketing, promotion, and dissemination are paramount to widespread use of decision aids. In the case studies, branding was a powerful force in building consumer awareness of and use of tools. The sponsors also used branding to help establish and maintain consumer trust.

Tools that are popular with consumers require considerable resources for market research so developers can make decisions based on extensive customer input and be guided by ongoing feedback. Testing and evaluation not only help assure the decision aid will fit the audience's needs, but also that messaging and promotion strategies will compel use.

Except for eBay, the case studies followed a "mass communication" model in which sponsors marketed their decision aid on a national scale. Their experiences indicate that:

- Positioning is effective when it reflects the target audience's choice and is well defined.
- Promotions help create and motivate demand. Effective promotion requires not a onetime push but ongoing efforts. In the case studies, media attention increases awareness, legitimizes the information or source, and promotes use of the decision aid. Public education campaigns, including earned media strategies, can develop potential users' background knowledge needed to use a decision aid.
- Making tools free or minimizing pricing provides broad access.
- Strategic placement assures users can attain decision support at a convenient and relevant stage in their decision-making process. Both FDA and eBay placed their decision aids at the point of purchase. This placement recognizes their audiences' primary interest is making a purchase and so they are disinclined to seek information unless it is readily at hand.

Although successful tools focus on consumer's needs and interests, sponsors can develop and promote decision aids in ways that shape how audiences approach the decision process and what they consider in their selection. Opportunities include marketing, consumer outreach and education, and tool design and content. eBay used a Web 2.0 design to develop online social communities that encourage fair trading, inform users' choices, improve tool functionality and content, and stimulate future use.

Conclusion

The success of decision support tools outside of health care derives from focus on decisions that consumers clearly identify as important but outside their immediate expertise. The information in the tools examined is deemed useful to them and is presented using language and formats that are appealing and approachable – in all cases, based on extensive testing and modification over time. The information displayed in the tools is judged by consumers as objective and trustworthy because it was gathered and analyzed by institutions that have worked consistently (and successfully) over time to build that trust. The sponsorship by these four institutions is sustained by four very different business models that have in common the commitment to supporting market research, marketing and dissemination of the tool over time.

Appendix A. Summary of Key Variables

This appendix summarizes the variables identified by the panelists for each case study tool as appearing essential to widespread audience use. Each decision aid and sponsor in the case studies had its own particular strengths, but the case study tools also had a number of influential variables in common. Figure 1 (see page 15) shows which variables appear to be the most potent, based on the panelists' commentaries.

Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides

The panelists identified the following key variables as contributing to the widespread use of *Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides*: sponsor's expertise, audience needs and consumer-centric tool design. A particular strength achieved by Consumers Union is tight correspondence (i.e., a "good fit") among four aspects of developing an effective decision aid.

- Focus on a high-stakes decision for which many consumers want information and support
- Organizational capacity to produce independent, expert ratings and reviews and to understand its audience
- Tool design that is audience-responsive
- A revenue-generating mechanism (i.e., a "business model") that supports ongoing production of and investment in the decision aid

Consumers Union has built a strong, positive brand for its *Consumer Reports* publications, which consumers view as a highly trustworthy source of information. This trust is related to the organization's marked independence from interests that could conflict with consumers' interests. Further, trust relates to the organization's ability to produce credible ratings based on extensive testing by experts in sophisticated facilities.

In regards to the audience, the panelists noted that car buyers are clearly motivated to seek information because a vehicle is a big-ticket, high-stakes decision. This audience subscribes to *Consumer Reports* because the car buying guides meet their need for reliable information and support. Consumers Union carefully augments information preferred by its audience with editorial content that educates users about other important considerations. It uses data from testing and evaluation to improve the decision aid. The price is right, too. People can obtain partial *Consumer Reports* car ratings and reviews for free or the complete guide at a low price.

Influential Variables in *Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides*

Audience Characteristics

- Has a clear need for external information and decision support

Sponsor Characteristics

- Strong, positive brand identity
- Independence from interests that could conflict with consumers' interests
- Trusted source of information
- Large, existing subscriber base
- Ability to generate data needed for tool content, including rigorous testing
- Possession of large, expensive infrastructure (such as specialists, testing facilities)
- Substantial market share or market penetration

Tool Characteristics

- Tool design and functions are audience-responsive
- Credibility of tool content
- Use of testing and evaluation data to improve or update tool
- Free or minimal pricing structures

eBay

eBay's consumer-centric design and functionality are foremost among the many eBay strengths, according to the panelists. They noted that eBay integrates decision support into the transaction environment at the time when users want information and assistance to make a buying decision. The tool also offers rich content relevant to users, great interactivity, and, of course, information about a vast array of listings and sellers. The Web site's features provide users with extensive flexibility and customization. The participatory design of eBay enables users to co-produce content and interact with one another in social networks, to which they often develop strong ties. Participation – in the form of buyers and sellers rating each other – is a primary way that eBay establishes and maintains users' trust. Thus, eBay provides a highly engaging experience that builds brand loyalty, repeat use, and word-of-mouth referrals.

As in the *Consumer Reports* case study, the panelists found that a key factor in eBay's success is the tight fit between the decision aid, the audience, and the business model. Specifically, the participatory design of eBay generates not only repeat use from highly satisfied customers but also revenue for the company in the form of seller fees. This revenue stream enables eBay to be free to buyers and comparison shoppers.

In addition to eBay developing a profitable business model, panelists called attention to the important advantage eBay gained by being among the first e-commerce companies to figure out a way to attract and keep buyers. Such a “first-mover” or “early-entry” advantage, along with successful branding, helped eBay set in motion a self-reinforcing cycle of attracting new users while retaining existing members. In a relatively short amount of time, eBay gained a substantial share of the e-commerce market.

Influential Variables in eBay

Sponsor Characteristics

- First-mover or early-entry advantage
- Strong, positive brand identity
- Viable business model
- Ability to generate data needed for tool content (through the eBay user community)
- Substantial market share or market penetration

Tool Characteristics

- Tool design and functions are audience-responsive
- Participatory community design that engages users in tool development, creating experiences and online communities (Web 2.0 platforms)
- Features facilitate choices
- Features generating credibility or trust (such as buyer/seller feedback system)
- Features for user customization or flexible use
- Redesigns so tool stays current, audience-responsive
- Ancillary information, tools, or other support available
- Entertainment, bargains, or other benefits compel initial and repeat use or referrals
- Free or minimal pricing structures

Nutrition Facts Panels

Extensive access through universal, free dissemination; placement at the point of purchase; and uniform format and content are three key variables contributing to widespread use of nutrition facts panels, according to panelists. These characteristics arise from:

- Federal policy that requires private industry to produce and print a nutrition facts panel on the labels of most processed foods.
- A high rate of industry compliance with the mandate.

Tight correspondence between the nutrition facts panel and its audience is another factor behind widespread use. FDA designed the nutrition facts panel based on scientific evidence, and it organized an initial public education campaign. These efforts helped consumers develop the perception that nutrition facts panels had accurate and trustworthy information that they needed when considering the nutritional values of a food. Further, FDA used consumer testing to inform decisions about the panel design, which helped assure that basic information in the nutrition facts panel is understandable to most adults.

Influential Variables in Nutrition Facts Panels

Sponsor Characteristics

- Strong, positive brand identity
- Viable business model
- Ability to generate data needed for tool content (through food producers)
- Regulatory authority of the Food and Drug Administration
- Substantial market share or market penetration

Tool Characteristics

- Consistent graphic presentation
- Universal or widespread placement
- Free pricing

Panelists noted that inadequate resources have constrained ongoing consumer education and promotion of the decision aid. Even the initial campaign heavily depended on private organizations because Congress appropriated only minimal funding. In most years, food safety, pharmaceutical oversight, and other highly visible FDA responsibilities appear to have drawn resources and leaders' attention away from nutrition labeling.

U.S. News & World Report: America's Best Colleges

Two variables that support continued adoption and use of the *America's Best Colleges* is the *U.S. News & World Report's* strong brand and extensive publicity about its college ratings and rankings. First, *U.S. News* has a reputation as a trusted, authoritative source of information. It fosters credibility not only by being transparent with its methods but also by adding objective indicators of academic quality so ratings are not based solely on subjective peer assessments. Second, media coverage of the annual college rankings heightens visibility. Colleges themselves legitimize the rankings by using them in marketing to prospective students and alumni.

U.S. News was the first to produce college ratings for consumers, tapping into an eager market wanting assistance with the complex, high-stakes decision of choosing a college. The company also had a large subscriber base with sufficient know-how to use college ratings. These factors helped the company garner a substantial share of the college decision-aid market. *America's Best Colleges* has sustained its competitive edge by targeting the informational needs of college-bound students and their families just as they are getting serious about the college selection process. *U.S. News* can keep the college ratings and rankings price low because it charges premium rates for advertising in the popular annual newsstand issue.

Influential Variables in *America's Best Colleges*

Audience Characteristics

- Audience's clear need for information

Sponsor Characteristics

- Strong, positive brand identity
- Trusted source of information
- Viable business model
- First-mover or early-entry advantage
- Access to or ability to generate data needed for tool content
- Substantial market share or market penetration

Tool Characteristics

- Credibility of tool content
- Strategic timing
- Free or minimal pricing structures
- Extensive earned-media coverage or publicity
- Colleges' public reactions to ratings (publicity, marketing communications)

Environmental and Market Influences (All Case Studies)

The panelists identified some environmental and market influences that contribute to widespread adoption and use of all of the case study tools. Influences that helped make it possible to produce one or more of the decision aids include technological progress, advances in scientific knowledge, and industry accountability systems that produced new public data. In

some of the cases, tool use also may relate to weak competition, media influences on consumer knowledge and awareness, and periods of economic growth.

Crosscutting Variables in Multiple Case Studies

Cross-case analyses by the panelists indicate that these decision aids have in common several active ingredients (i.e., key variables influencing the initial adoption and ongoing wide use of decision aids featured in the GTU case studies). In Figure 1, variables that appear to be active ingredients in each case study have a checkmark (✓). A variable received a checkmark if three or more panelists identified the variable as having more influence than other variables in contributing to wide adoption and use of the tool by the public. *The absence of a checkmark only means most panelists did not flag this variable as being particularly potent, even if it was present.*

As shown in Figure 1, three of the four case studies – *Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides*, eBay and nutrition facts panel – illustrate a good fit between the decision aid and audience, brand, sponsor expertise, or business model. In particular, each sponsor found ways to deliberately position itself, its decision aid or both as credible and reliable. The case studies of *Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guide* and eBay demonstrate the importance of developing consumer-centric tools as a way of achieving widespread use. Sponsor characteristics also matter, especially a strong and positive brand identity, development of a viable business model for the decision aid, and marketing and strategic timing that enable the sponsor to attain substantial market share.

Following Figure 1 is a supplemental list of variables as identified by two panelists as active ingredients. Additional information about the variables in Figure 1 or the supplemental list is available elsewhere in this document and in the panelists' commentaries.

Appendix B.

Decision Aids and Consumers with Socio-economic Disadvantages

Among the four cases, the Food and Drug Administration directly considered ways to make the nutrition facts panel accessible to populations with underdeveloped literacy and numeracy skills. The resulting tool has a two-tiered information base.

- Basic information on the panel is understandable across most of the adult U.S. population that reads English. For example, almost everyone can compare the amounts of nutrients in two cans or correctly answer calories per serving.
- More sophisticated judgments based on percent daily values are usable only by a few who have sufficient background knowledge.

Although the nutrition facts panel appears without an explanation, people can learn to use the tool. Once they have the know-how, they can count on the nutrition facts panel not to change drastically.

The larger informational environment typically fails to supply nutrition labeling education. Without a sustained public education campaign to close this gap, disparities in label use by education, nutrition knowledge, and numeracy skills are to be expected—and are found. Educational campaigns can amplify use by increasing awareness, motivating consumers to use the information, and explaining appropriate use. Ultimately, research in risk communication and numeracy may offer some improvements.

It is unclear the extent to which eBay considers accessibility for vulnerable populations in its Web site design. The company's overall plan for growing profitability does reflect intent to draw a broad base of users. Currently, about a quarter of eBay visitors have annual household incomes of \$25,000 to \$50,000.

U.S. News and Consumer Reports appear to have limited concern about reaching socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Instead, the primary focus is connecting with an audience that is large enough and has enough financial resources to sustain their business models. It is possible that persons with lower incomes and no post-secondary education may learn about their ratings and recommendations from secondhand sources, such as the news media or co-workers.

Figure 1. Active Ingredients in the Case Study Decision Aids

Active Ingredients	<i>Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides</i>	eBay	Nutrition Facts Panels	<i>US News America's Best Colleges</i>
CROSSCUTTING				
Positive self-reinforcing cycle that attracts new users and prompts repeat use or referrals		✓		
Good fit between tool and audience, brand, sponsor expertise, or business model	✓	✓	✓	
AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS				
Clear need for external information, decision support, or both	✓			✓
SPONSOR ADVANTAGES				
Strong, positive brand identity	✓	✓	✓	✓
Independence from interests that could be in conflict with consumers' interests	✓			
Trusted information source	✓			✓
Large, existing subscriber base	✓			
Viable business model		✓	✓	✓
First-mover or early-entry advantage		✓		✓
Access to or ability to generate data needed for tool content	✓	✓	✓	✓
Possession of large, expensive infrastructure	✓			
Regulatory authority			✓	
Substantial market share or market penetration	✓	✓	✓	✓

Active Ingredients	<i>Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guides</i>	eBay	Nutrition Facts Panels	<i>US News America's Best Colleges</i>
TOOL DESIGN & FUNCTIONALITY				
Content is credible to audience	✓			✓
Design and functions are audience-responsive	✓	✓		
Design engages users in tool development, creating experiences and online communities (Web 2.0 platforms)		✓		
Graphic presentation is consistent			✓	
Features facilitate choices		✓		
Features generate credibility or trust		✓		
Features enable user customization or flexible use		✓		
Redesigns keep tool current, audience-responsive or both		✓		
Ancillary information, tools or other support available		✓		
Entertainment, bargains or other benefit compel initial and repeat use or referrals		✓		
MARKETING, PROMOTION & DISSEMINATION				
Timing is strategic				✓
Placement is universal or widespread			✓	
Pricing (free or minimal) for consumers promotes use	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extensive earned-media coverage or publicity				✓
Producers publicly react to ratings (such as in marketing, lawsuits, public relations)				✓
TESTING & EVALUATION				
Testing, evaluation improve or update tool	✓			

Additional Active Ingredients

Two panelists identified the following variables as active ingredients in the case studies. (Figure 1 presents variables that three or more panelists agreed were potent.)

Audience Characteristics

- Awareness that alternatives have differences
- Motivation to seek information, decision support, or both
- Ability to effectively use a decision support tool or information provided

Objectives

- Clear, narrow objectives for tool
- Consumer-focused objectives for tool
- Reform intent for tool (such as shaping consumer behavior or decisions)

Sponsor Advantages

- Understanding of existing or target audience and their decision context
- Focus on organizational mission
- Effective champion in high-level leadership position

Tool Design & Functionality

- Focus is narrow, well-defined
- Methods are transparent
- Methods are controlled by sponsor
- Comprehensive, offering one-stop shopping
- Content increases consumer access to information about quality
- Content is comprehensible to audience
- Content is relevant to audience
- Design minimizes barriers to use
- Graphic presentation is streamlined or simple
- Ease of use (such as navigation, search)
- Features support easy, direct comparisons
- Use of decision point as a “teachable moment”

Marketing, Promotion & Dissemination

- Placement is at point-of-purchase or point-of-decision
- Communications are effective with consumers
- Promotion is vigorous, multi-faceted

- Promotion occurs via users' referrals (word-of-mouth)
- Promotion includes public or consumer education
- Promotion utilizes partnerships
- Positioning is responsive to users or their decision-making process

Testing & Evaluation

- Feedback loop with audience or an audience-related data source
- Investment in testing and evaluation