

# Case Study Commentary:

Dale Shaller

# Getting Tools Used

## Lessons for Health Care from Successful Consumer Decision Aids



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## Table of Contents

Foreword by Jessie Gruman.....	1
Executive Summary.....	3
About CFAH.....	7
Table of Contents.....	8
Introduction: 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Marketplace.....	9
Research Framework.....	17
Case Studies.....	25
<i>Consumer Reports: Car Buying Guide</i> .....	25
eBay.....	65
FDA Nutrition Fact Panels.....	113
<i>U.S. News and World Report: America's Best Colleges</i> .....	163
Case Study Commentaries.....	209
Margaret Holmes-Rovner, PhD.....	209
David E. Kanouse, PhD.....	225
Stephen Parente, PhD.....	239
Dale Shaller, MPA.....	250
Shoshanna Sofaer, DrPH.....	263
Lessons Learned: Key Variables of Success.....	275
Advancing Healthcare Decision Aids.....	293
Getting Tools Used Research Team Biographies.....	311
Acknowledgements.....	317

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## Case Study Commentary

Dale Shaller, MPA

### I. INTRODUCTION

The perspective I bring to this analysis derives from more than two decades of research and practice aimed at providing comparative healthcare quality and performance information to consumers and other audiences. Having advised as well as directly managed some of the earliest initiatives to collect and publicly report quality information on health plans, hospitals, and medical practices, I have observed some small measure of progress in our ability to tailor reporting tools to specific audiences based on careful design and testing, but I remain frustrated by our overall inability to engage consumers in the use of these reporting products and tools.

My general assumptions related to decision support are that the best way to get tools used is to: 1) clearly understand the nature of the decision and the need for support; 2) carefully design a tool that meets the needs of users at the right time and place and at the right cost (including level of cognitive and emotional effort required); and 3) establish the promotion and distribution channels needed to effectively deliver the tool to the intended users, with appropriate training and support. An additional assumption is that a tool designed for a specific need may actually serve additional intended purposes or result in unintended consequences. Finally, I believe that larger market or environmental forces surrounding tool development and promotion may influence use in unexpected ways.

Given our mixed experience with healthcare quality reporting and decision support tools, I have long wanted to look to other sectors for examples or lessons that might guide our efforts. Through various study panels and applied projects, I have suggested that tool developers may not be the best at promotion and that we should perhaps turn to experts in marketing and advertising to help us better "sell" the products we create. But an equally important issue is whether the products we have created are the right ones to meet the information and decision needs of the audiences we strive to serve.

Our greatest success thus far with public reporting of quality information lies in its influence on changing the behavior of the suppliers, i.e. doctors and hospitals, not the consumers. Is that enough? Should we settle for this? Or should we keep trying to "get it right" for the consumer? I am humbled by the scope of the challenge, yet encouraged by our collective determination to keep trying.

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## II. INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDY OBSERVATIONS

The following observations are guided largely but not exclusively by the framework of principles and variables developed by Kanouse and others for informing a successful healthcare quality reporting effort.

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

#### Variables Promoting Adoption

- ***Targeting a clear audience need:*** Central to the initial adoption of the *America's Best Colleges* guide was the identification of a clear and compelling need for information to guide a major, complex decision. Given the cost and future career implications of selecting a college, parents and students (especially those in higher socio-economic groups) are a ready, eager market for reputable information that can help them navigate the decision process.
- ***First to market with a strong brand:*** U.S. News had a "first mover advantage" and a strong reputation as a trusted, authoritative source of information and "news you can use."
- ***Large existing subscriber base:*** U.S. News had almost 2 million subscribers when it went to market with its *America's Best* brands.
- ***Strategic timing of product release:*** The *America's Best Colleges* guide is released in late August just when students start seriously thinking about this decision.
- ***Leveraged marketing:*** The guide enjoys enhanced visibility through "free advertising" provided through media coverage at the time of release.
- ***Weak competitors:*** Alternative sources of information for this decision (e.g., *Money* guide) were not as successful in reaching the target audience.
- ***Successful business model:*** Continued adoption and use of this tool over time are supported by a for-profit business model that relies on subscriptions fueled by a predictable annual need. U.S. News has an established niche that

becomes self-reinforcing as colleges themselves legitimize the rankings by taking them seriously in marketing to prospective students. The college business model, which relies predominantly on student enrollment, reinforces the value of the college guide rankings, thus perpetuating a virtuous cycle.

- ***Transparency in rating methods:*** Although subject to some criticism, the ranking methods used by U.S. News are open to inspection (unlike some competitors) and colleges have an opportunity to provide feedback, thereby reinforcing credibility and acceptance.

### Observations on Tool Functionality

- The online and print versions of *America's Best Colleges* provide multiple indicators of "academic quality," all lined up together for easy comparison and "one-stop" shopping.
- The content of the guide provides a balance of objective measures as well as reputation measures, and in addition to college profiles, offers supplemental information on the application process and how to pay for college.
- The navigation of the online tool is simple and user-friendly, and allows side-by-side comparisons of several colleges at a time.

## B. ***Consumer Reports: Care Buying Guide***

### Variables Promoting Adoption

- ***Complexity and perceived risk of decision:*** Similar to the choice of college, buying a car is a big-ticket item that creates a lot of anxiety and perceived need for gathering as much information as possible before facing the dreaded "showdown" with the car dealership. As noted in the case study, "the CR car buying guides and other CR products are widely used because they are demand-driven."
- ***The tool fits the need:*** Even though shoppers differ in the attributes they care most about (e.g., safety, price, reliability, performance), many of the factors that consumers consider most important to car purchase lend themselves to guides. The average time of 7 hours spent online to research a car purchase is

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staggering compared with the average of 15 minutes that people spend reviewing their health benefit plan options during open enrollment.

- ***Devoted target audience segment:*** The annual CR car guide has a devoted, self-selected target audience that is highly motivated and interested in this type of decision support. CR has the largest online subscriber population of any consumer information web site, and it continues to grow. It is noteworthy that the focus of the CR car guide is on the *average* car buyer within this targeted audience segment, not the specialized car enthusiast.
- ***Impeccable branding:*** The CR brand and reputation as an impartial, objective, unbiased, trusted information source are core assets comprising a key variable influencing use of the car guide.
- ***Multiple synergistic promotion strategies:*** CR employs a combination of marketing and placement approaches that are diverse and leveraged, including partnerships with other online distributors, the Cooperative Extension Service, multiple sales outlets, earned media coverage, and word of mouth marketing; even its successful lawsuits are leveraged to promote the brand.
- ***Independent testing and evaluation:*** CR is famous for its product testing, refusal to accept outside advertising, and extensive use of feedback from subscribers to inform new product development and features. These attributes further reinforce user loyalty.
- ***Successful business model:*** Relying predominantly on subscription and sales revenues, CR was able to introduce "reasonably priced" online subscription fees at a time when Internet content was viewed as largely free. This model works over time because of the stable and growing base of users, even though the CR car guide is not the most used tool for car shoppers (only 33 percent of new car shoppers use the CR guide).

## Observations on Tool Functionality

- The multiple sorting and ranking functions of the online tools allow consumers to review information and make comparisons according to their individual priorities.

- The additional tool content is useful and relevant, offering consumer comments (in keeping with the growing trend of online information sources), forums with experts to answer specific questions, and allowing users to differentiate between major and minor problems.
- The online tool is easy to navigate and use. In spite of the vast content, it is easy to sort and select the models, features, and comparisons that matter to you.

## C. Nutrition Facts Panel

### Variables Promoting Adoption

- ***Government mandate on food suppliers:*** Unlike the tools described in the other case studies, the NFP is unique in the federal legislation and regulations that require the food industry to place NFPs on most processed food products. This mandate clearly has been a key force driving the widespread placement of the food label and has strongly contributed to large scale use of the label by over 60 percent of adult Americans.
- ***Growing popular demand for nutrition information:*** Food consumption is a daily necessity, but prudent decision making about food purchases is not. Of the major factors in food selection - price, taste, convenience, and nutritional value - consumers must rely on external sources to inform them about nutritional quality. Growing public awareness and knowledge about the role of diet and nutrition, consumer demand for more healthy foods, and skepticism about suppliers' food claims all have led to increasing use of the NFP.
- ***Government as a trusted brand and source of information:*** Research has shown that consumers perceive the federal NFP to be accurate and trustworthy. The credibility of the NFP was enhanced by the personal leadership and "champion" role of David Kessler, who contributed to the brand strength of the FDA.
- ***Public financing "business" model:*** The original scientific base and ongoing updates for the food labels; oversight, monitoring, and research related to food industry compliance and consumer use; and public education are all funded through public appropriations. Although funding levels have been called

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inadequate, especially in relation to consumer education and marketing campaigns (although information on exact funding for promotion was not available for the case study), public financing at least assures a minimal ongoing level of tool support.

- ***No financial barriers to consumer use:*** Given the public finance model, and because the NFP is required, the burden of compliance rests with the industry, thus allowing consumers to have free access to the good. Consumers may face other barriers, however, related to the complexity of the label itself.

### Observations on Tool Functionality

- The standardized, consistent design of the NFP contributes to its familiarity and ease of use. However, the downside of a "one size fits all" approach is that it never does, and therefore the ability to customize to audience segments needing more - or less - information, is lost.
- The conversion of nutritional content to "percent daily value" facilitates comprehension and minimizes misinterpretation of weight amounts.

## D. eBay.com

### Variables Promoting Adoption

- ***First to market with a hot new brand:*** In contrast to U.S. News and CR, both of which had established brands, eBay successfully launched a new brand that hit the market at a strategic moment when e-commerce was on the rise and no other consumer-to-consumer auction trading platform existed for mainstream goods.
- ***Accommodation of diverse audience of users:*** In contrast again to the U.S. News and CR tools, which focus on a specific target audience, eBay appeals to and supports the needs of a diverse array of users, from deal seekers to those with niche hobby interests.
- ***Participatory Web 2.0 model of e-commerce:*** eBay offers users with the requisite technical skills the opportunity to create content and engage in

interactive trading and learning experiences not previously offered through traditional "1.0" platforms that are unidirectional from supplier to user. Creating online social communities promotes and perpetuates use, particularly through word-of-mouth, viral marketing strategies.

- ***Business model that is free to buyers:*** Since eBay derives revenue largely from seller fees, there are few barriers to use; eBay registration is free to buyers and available 24/7/365 (all the time).

### Observations on Tool Functionality

- This tool is less about comparison and ranking of options than it is about facilitation of choices related to specific transactions between buyers and sellers. However, substantial information is provided to enable buyers to evaluate a purchase and the reputation of sellers.
- The option to trade through auction, retail, or a combination format provides flexibility to users. The "best match" sorting function facilitates buyer searches for items that correspond to the attributes they are seeking.
- The language used is inviting, and makes it clear that coming on eBay can be more than a transaction if you want it to be, but it doesn't have to be. The many additional features on the eBay community site, such as chat rooms, user groups, customer support, and other forums, offers the opportunity for a meaningful online community for those inclined to participate.

## III. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

In looking across the four case studies, it appears that there are two major categories of variables contributing to the adoption and success of these tools: 1) variables that are demand-driven, and 2) variables that are supply-driven. A third category of variables relates to environmental or market forces that affect both users and suppliers of tools.

The following matrix summarizes the key variables in the first two categories that appear to be most influential across the four case studies.

VARIABLE CATEGORY	U.S. News College Guide	CR Car Guide	Nutrition Facts Panel	eBay.com
<b>DEMAND-DRIVEN VARIABLES</b>	<b>RELATIVE INFLUENCE</b>			
Audience has a clear and compelling need: complex, high stakes decision	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Moderate
Audience perceives differences in possible choices and alternatives	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Audience is motivated to seek information and decision support	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Strong
Audience possesses the requisite skills to effectively use the tool	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Strong
<b>SUPPLY-DRIVEN VARIABLES</b>	<b>RELATIVE INFLUENCE</b>			
Strong brand and trusted reputation	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Aggressive, leveraged marketing	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Strong
Strategic timing to market	Strong	Strong	Strong	Medium
Sustainable business model	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Ability to customize tool to user preferences	Strong	Strong	Low	Strong
Transparency of ratings or comparison methods	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Strong
Minimal cost barriers to use	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Strong
Absence of strong competitors	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Moderate

As noted in the case studies, tools tend to be used when they are demand-driven. It is clear that a compelling decision requiring credible, accessible information is a major factor affecting the use of these tools. When such a need is combined with the perception of differences in alternative choices, demand for the tool increases. A target audience or community of users, predisposed to seek information and decision support and possessing the requisite skills to use the tool, creates a powerful constellation of factors helping to drive adoption and contribute to sustained use.

It is noteworthy that the list of variables that are supply-driven is longer than the list of demand-driven variables. Perhaps this suggests that there may be more opportunities to

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influence what tool suppliers do to reach their audience than influencing audience demand itself. To some extent, a clear and compelling need either exists or it doesn't. However, it is also true that suppliers may find ways to create or motivate demand where it had been previously weak or non-existent. Indeed, skillful advertisers of consumer goods clearly have succeeded in selling products and services by using the power of emotion and other messages to capture and retain market share.

The role of branding and marketing as key supply-driven variables is paramount to successful tool adoption in these case studies. The only exception to this rule appears to be the FDA's efforts to promote use of the NFP, which were recognized by developers as key to use but whose budget to accomplish it was thought to be inadequate. While the government mandate of the food label assured widespread dissemination, it has not assured widespread use. Still, even without large scale promotion, the ubiquitous placement of the NFP on food products everywhere has no doubt contributed to awareness and use.

In all cases, a viable business model has proven essential for ongoing impact and engagement. The nature of the business model across these tools varies from for-profit (U.S. News and eBay) to nonprofit (Consumer Reports) to government funding (NFP). It may matter less what the model is than the fact that it fits the tool and provides sufficient continuity to sustain a loyal base of customers or users. External market forces outside the control of either suppliers or users, such as an economic downturn, may undermine the performance of business models requiring the tool to be purchased. The ability to reduce cost barriers to users clearly provides an advantage in such circumstances.

Finally, the design and functionality of the tool itself are key variables affecting use. When the tool clearly fits the need, and provides customizable features to address specific preferences and priorities of users (such as in the case of the CR car guide and eBay), a satisfied and loyal community of users can be created. In the case of eBay, the participatory design of the tool that enables users to co-produce content and interact with one another in social networks, demonstrates an entirely new level of functionality that may become a model for future suppliers in the Web 2.0 environment. In contrast, the static and fixed nature of the NFP, while ubiquitous, provides little opportunity for users to adapt the tool to their specific needs.

#### **IV. APPLICATION OF CASE ANALYSIS TO HEALTHCARE TOOLS**

My observations and analysis of the four case studies suggest several possible directions for the future development and dissemination of decision support tools for patients and consumers of healthcare. The lessons and implications of these case studies should apply not

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only to comparative performance reporting for enabling consumer choice of plans and providers, but to other decision support related to choice of treatments and the use of personal health records and other tools designed to help people manage their health and healthcare.

## Tool Design and Functionality

In my introduction to this commentary, I posed the issue of whether our limited success with healthcare tools is due to a failure of "getting the tools right" or "getting the tools we have to the right market." These case studies have convinced me that the challenge is really both and therefore requires us to "get the right tools to the right market." Getting the tool itself right really does demand that tool makers understand the need they are trying to meet and to design accordingly. When the tool truly fits the need, as in the case of the CR car guide, uptake is swift and a loyal user base is established. Extensive customer input and ongoing feedback are also critical to success.

These case studies demonstrate that the design of tools must do more than just present ratings. The college and car guides and eBay.com illustrate the importance of incorporating adjunct information and advice, expert forums, and the opportunity to engage the user in providing comments for the benefit of other users. When ratings are presented, they are integrated across multiple dimensions and grouped together for easy side-by-side comparisons. It is a "one-stop shopping" approach that minimizes the effort required of the user by bringing all of the relevant information together in one place.

The ability to customize the tool to support a specific purchase also suggests that production of static "one size fits all" tools (such as general report cards on facilities and provider groups) will never meet the specific needs of patients with particular conditions, such as diabetes or asthma. The lesson here seems to suggest the need for specialized niche tools customized for defined audience segments, whether for choice of provider or treatment. I believe we have made some progress in this direction with, for example, decision aids developed for specific conditions and some innovative performance reporting sites such as the "D5" developed by Minnesota Community Measurement to address the needs of people with diabetes.

One of the most exciting ideas to emerge from the eBay experience is the potential of creating an entirely new model of delivering decision support through participatory Web 2.0 platforms. While not for everyone, the ability to link patients to patients

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(through sites such as PatientsLikeMe.com) and patients to providers in a new transaction model of exchange (through sites such as Carol.com) could foster wider acceptance and use of healthcare engagement tools. The success of these new platforms in healthcare will depend on a whole new generation of users who are tech savvy and plugged into social networking as a way of life.

## Marketing and Promotion

In order to get the right tools to the right market, we must finally get serious about adopting the marketing and promotion strategies successfully used in these case studies and shown to work in other sectors. Although brands cannot be built overnight, tool developers need to recognize the importance of establishing credibility and trust, and creating a product identity that consumers can relate to. Using multiple strategies to leverage marketing and promotion through advertising, news media, word of mouth, viral marketing, and placement at the point of need are all approaches that need to be applied to healthcare tools.

Unlike the tools in these case studies, which address consumer needs that are clear and compelling to users, getting tools used for healthcare engagement may require public education to help create a level of awareness that simply doesn't currently exist. This is not about creating need, but creating awareness and motivation to act on important healthcare and health management issues that may otherwise go unaddressed. In addition to education, specific training may be required for certain audience segments to use the tools. Although not a prominent feature in the four case studies, even coffee makers come with 1-800 toll free help numbers to help consumers with questions. Particularly for vulnerable populations, advocates and other intermediaries may be needed to facilitate and support adoption of decision aids and comparative reports. Such education, training, and support may need to precede marketing of the tools themselves if we want widespread adoption to occur. Building such education and training into school curriculums would help to create a new generation of consumers not only plugged in digitally but clued in to the new rules of engagement.

## Business Model

All four case studies underscore the need for a sustainable business model that fits the nature of the tool. I am intrigued by the potential role of government mandates to help assure a reliable supply of tools through at least some level of public financing. The

current opportunity created by the economic crisis and resulting stimulus initiative suggests the possibility of building needed infrastructure for personal health records and other forms of e-health tools, as well as funding for intermediaries to provide in-person support for tool use. However, it will be critical to assure that such public financing is not fleeting but rather creates a base that can become self-sustaining.

Although government intervention and funding can help stimulate supply, mandates cannot effectively compel use. People use food labels not simply because they are there and free but because there is a perceived need to know something about nutritional value. My hope, and belief, is that the same cultural forces leading to increased awareness and concern about nutrition will combine with improved tool design, marketing, and education to enhance the use of healthcare decision support tools.