

# Patients' Path to Care: Understanding the Decision-Making Process



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**Gelb**  
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# Patients' Path to Care: Understanding the Decision-Making Process

## Overview

How are consumers making decisions about where they seek health care? And how should you inquire about this important topic to uncover candid answers? This article will examine, based on Gelb's prior work with healthcare clients, how to effectively mine information from your organization's consumers, how to aggregate the data into a meaningful call to action, and finally how to identify feasible steps to act on the uncovered insights.

## Determining the Right Methodology

Understanding how consumers make decisions as to where to receive their health care is critical in ensuring your organization is properly positioned to attract new patients. Gaining this insight, however, should encompass more than the age-old question, "How did you hear about us," as so often included in surveys or comment cards. Identifying who or what influenced their decision allows organizations to engage in more strategically targeted marketing efforts with more successful results. However, uncovering patients' selection process is complex as they are faced with a number of tough decisions, such as – *Who will provide me the best care? Who will give me the most personal attention? Who has the best technology?* And adding to this, we have found that consumers are addressing these questions from different psychological perspectives and finding the answers in a number of places.

As with any research, choosing the most appropriate methodology influences the quality of information you are able to collect. Exhibit 1 lists questions to consider in deciphering which methodology is best for your investigation.

Quantitative data allows organizations to clearly and quickly identify trends among a large group of respondents, especially with a research effort conducted on a national scale. Health systems can easily ascertain what aspects of their institution might resonate with potential patients based on an ongoing and standardized survey effort, such as the Press Ganey patient satisfaction surveys. However, such endeavors do not always allow for specific and localized information about an organization's competitive environment, nor can they provide a detailed profile of their current patients and list characteristics and driving motivators – both logical and emotional – for them.



Quantitative - Survey	• Will your questions seek to uncover trends on a large scale among a large number of respondents?
Qualitative - Focus Group	• Will your questions aim to gauge local attitudes on general topics?
Qualitative - Experience Mapping	• Will your questions ask individuals to share personal details from their experience(s)?

**Exhibit 1 Selecting a Methodology**

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Gelb's approach to understanding how consumers select a healthcare provider often involves qualitative research methods, such as traditional focus groups or experience mapping interviews. While most researchers are familiar with the former, the latter involves in-depth one-on-one conversations with patients of an organization. These discussions follow an experience map that details key steps as a patient at a particular organization. Using this technique allows for a rich look into patients' experiences, including how they selected the healthcare organization in question in the first place. In Exhibit 2 shows an example of an experience map, with the first section highlighted as it focuses on revealing consumers awareness of and preference for an organization.

For more general conversations, such as a hospital's reputation within its community, a focus group could speak to the local opinion and would ideally be selected to represent their area. Focus groups also allow for commonalities to quickly be acknowledged as participants share ideas, contribute to each other's thoughts, and hear themes in one another's answers. However, it is important to ensure that individual nuances emerge, an often difficult task within a larger group.



**Exhibit 2 Experience Map**

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For more detailed and personal conversations, experience mapping might be the more suitable approach. This tactic is also preferable when seeking the opinions of a specific patient population, such as those with a certain diagnosis, as they are often more difficult to locate and gather together in one room at the same time. If a hospital strives to truly comprehend what brought a patient through their doors, they must first appreciate what a patient has gone through prior to that step. Gaining an understanding of how a patient's experience began starts with talking about when they first started to notice something wasn't quite right. *Who did they see first? What kind of conversations did they have with the people around them? What were they told to do by others?* Questions of this nature are often difficult for individuals to answer in a group setting given the very personal nature of discussing one's health and healthcare. It may also be difficult to address in a group setting given the nuances unique to the specific patient population in question. Making these inquiries on a one-on-one basis not only allows for a greater sense of comfort between interviewee and interviewer, but also permits for probing beyond the initial account of events. To further illustrate the often sensitive nature of these conversations, see Exhibit 3, a quote from an interviewee with which we asked how she as a mother decided where her daughter should be treated.

*"Our doctors here, they were overwhelmed. It's not like they were trying to find any kind of solution for us either. We told them to call XXX...it was like you're here to help us, why do we have to tell them what to do... [My daughter] is lying in bed...and we were so helpless. My husband was like forget it and I'll go online and we'll do whatever we need to do. He found this 1-800 number and said I'll see what happens. This was a nurse on the phone and she said I'll let you talk to this doctor. This doctor takes one week out of his whole year to do clinicals; he's in the research lab the rest of the year....it was like God was helping us. He said this is my specialty, this is what I do and I want to see your daughter. He asked my husband did she start any kinds of treatment and he said no they only did a biopsy and they've just left her to die...We asked all the doctors to get all the slides ready. And we had to take an ambulance to get there...and we had to come up with a \$1000 before they would take us and they put us in there on a Saturday night and we got there on a Sunday morning."*

### Exhibit 3 Experience Mapping Sample Response

#### Mining for and Presenting the Information

Consumers draw from a myriad of resources to determine which healthcare provider is the right one for them. Drawing these out from consumer's memory, and in detail, often presents a challenge to interviewers. Physically handing the printed experience map to an interviewee and asking them to read through the associated activities with each stage assists them in recalling what activities they may have engaged in. It may also assist in serving as a reminder that one's experiences with an organization usually begins before their first physical interaction with the entity.

Starting with the individual's more logical side may help them better organize and recall their memories. What resources have they seen from this organization, such as a brochure, web site, advertisement, commercial, or billboard? Then from an emotional perspective, many

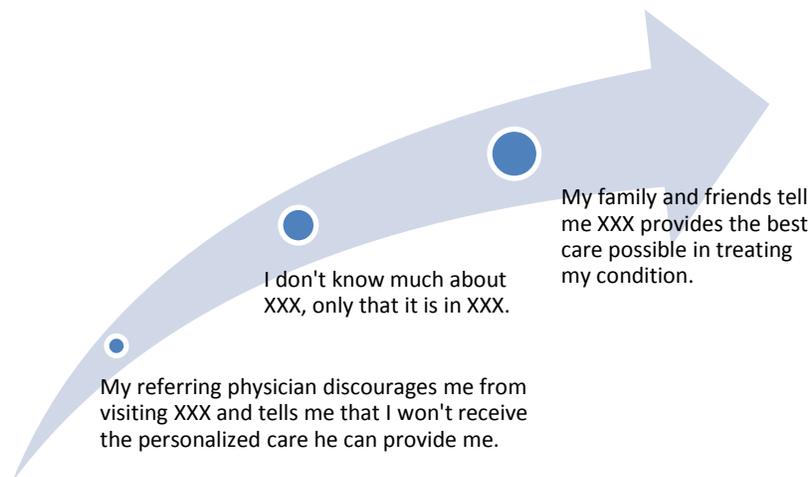
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consumers may have drawn on their own perceptions of and experiences with a hospital. They might have considered their knowledge of the facility, how have they or others they know been treated there in the past, their personal perception of the facility's reputation, level of care offered, and the skill level, knowledge, and education of physicians.

Just as it is important to understand what resources patients access, it is vital to understand how they are using these resources and what they find helpful. For example, so often consumers' decisions are understandably based on an interpersonal conversation, as it is usually an individual the consumer knows and trusts. Interpersonal resources, such as family, friends and doctors, address two areas of concern for consumers – *What's been true for you? What do you recommend?* Family and friends are questioned as to whether they're familiar with an organization, what they've heard others say about it, and if they've had prior personal experiences there. However, in a recent study we conducted with parents of pediatric patients of an academic medical center, we heard from younger consumers that online resources, such as message boards, are used in a similar manner as interpersonal networks. These resources allowed them to connect with others in similar situations as themselves, and often these individuals had more knowledge and empathy than their friends and families.

Once interviews have been completed, we have found the most valuable means with which to share collected information is to relay it from the patients' perspectives. Below we have listed steps in this process and Exhibit 4 provides examples of patient-centered statements.

- Use the data from the experience mapping interviews to aggregate the stories heard.  
Tip: Create one voice representing what was true for the majority.
- Present common themes from the consumer's perspective.  
Tip: Consider how they found about the organization in question, what they heard others say about it, and how they decided it was right for them.



**Exhibit 4 Writing in the Voice of the Customer**

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Another method with which to share your findings is to create a patient profile. Examine details from each interviewee to create an overview as to what characteristics the group of interviewees might share. These could include, but are not limited to, demographic details, psychographic information, and attitudes held by experience mapping interviewees. The patient profile is similar to demographics produced by a quantitative survey or a focus group, yet it is entirely appropriate to include the more emotional characteristics that arose out of your conversations. These serve to produce a clearer idea of your audience and their motivations. See Exhibit 5 for an illustration of this depiction.

**Segment Overview:** Low initial knowledge of their condition, and at first rely on counsel of friends, family and physician, conducting little research until additional opinions sought

**Demographics**

- Married individuals
- Involved family and friends

**Appeal of Hospital**

- Physician suggests XXX as best hope for treatment
- Friends and family endorse this, citing their own experiences
- Immediate treatment, reputation, research and treatment options not available elsewhere stand out

**Psychographics**

- Rely on others to help them, look to doctor for answers and solutions and to friends and family for reassurance
- Only when doctor disappoints (can't offer other options) do they take things into their own hands, research options and make selection themselves

**Attitudes about Condition**

- Willing to do whatever it takes to care for treatment, but limited knowledge of condition leads to immediate concern with severity of diagnosis

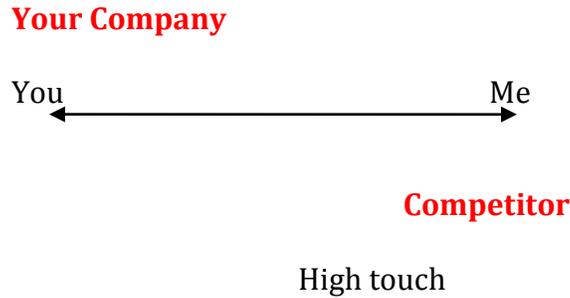


## Exhibit 5 Patient Profile

Additionally, consider developing a framework around the information by categorizing the functional and emotional needs of interviewees. Examine the language interviewees used in their conversations. Did their words center more on concepts of technology? Or was the conversational focus on more interpersonal aspects? Distinguishing between the two can help you determine if your organization is more positioned as high tech or high touch, as seen in the Perceptual Map, Exhibit 6. Also, again based on the language used by consumers in your experience mapping interviews, you can distinguish between whether you are perceived to be more focused on the consumer or yourself. Did consumers speak about how they thought you were concentrated on their care and well-being? Or conversely, did they mention that your focal point is on advancing your own research? A categorizing framework such as this further illustrates the nuanced way you are perceived by consumers and this perception might influence their selection of you as a provider. You can also employ the same process to comprehend how your competitors are perceived.

↑  
High tech

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## Exhibit 6 Perceptual Map

For the purpose of this article, we have focused on gaining a deeper understanding of consumer selection via experience mapping, but the process can certainly be used to understand consumer experiences in their entirety. Revisit Exhibit 2, the Experience Map, to review additional pieces of a patient's experience you can discuss and dissect further.

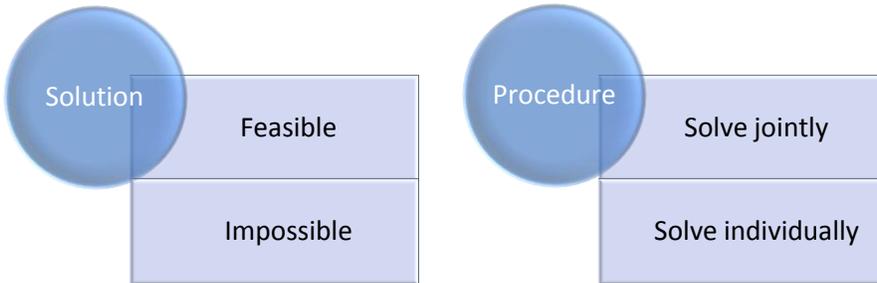
## Uncovering Your Focus

Experience mapping interviews not only allows researchers to ask personal questions of consumers, but also to dig deeper into their responses to clearly understand their needs, thoughts, opinions, motives, and influences. Such a technique could help your organization better identify how your patients are finding your front door. But patients want different things – some seek out and focus on information regarding an organization's quality while others look for stories related to the personal care the organization will provide them. To effectively address both segments, you must strategically position yourself to speak to both groups, or whichever group(s) your findings might reveal.

Workshops can be a useful tool to discuss findings and determine how to take action based on these insights. First, review the information currently offered to patients as well as the findings from experience mapping or focus groups. Then identify the areas of your organization or messages about your organization that are not being clearly communicated to your patients. Brainstorming is an effective way to recognize ways to better address these areas or messages. More specifically, workshop attendees should be encouraged to ascertain which ideas are feasible and which ones can be solved individually or require a larger team effort (see Exhibit 7).

For example, how do you make online resources interpersonal? One solution for a pediatric area of a large academic medical center was to place videos on their web site featuring pediatric patients offering more information on treatments, the facility, and their experiences. Or, how do you cultivate and maintain deep referring relationships with community physicians? An online dashboard eliciting immediate feedback from referring physicians could be a possible resolution to this as it would allow real-time responses to any feedback in need of resolution.

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## Exhibit 7 Experience Mapping Workshop

Be mindful that what kind of information and resources that will most effectively speak to your potential patients may vary. As one patient explained us,

*"I can't tell you the newspaper ad was more important than seeing a friend on TV that was treated [at the hospital] or more important than the referral from my surgeon...Every one of those things was important to me. It was seeing how all of those pieces fit together [that] gave me the comfort that I was in the right place."*

We suggest that even though your pieces may fit together in your mind, it is a worthwhile exercise to examine what pieces you are working with and evaluate how they fit together in patients' minds.

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## About Endeavor

Endeavor Management, is an international management consulting firm that collaboratively works with their clients to achieve greater value from their transformational business initiatives. Endeavor serves as a catalyst by providing pragmatic methodologies and industry expertise in Transformational Strategies, Operational Excellence, Organizational Effectiveness, and Transformational Leadership.

Our clients include those responsible for:

- Business Strategy
- Marketing and Brand Strategy
- Operations
- Technology Deployment
- Strategic Human Capital
- Corporate Finance

The firm's 40 year heritage has produced a substantial portfolio of proven methodologies, deep operational insight and broad industry experience. This experience enables our team to quickly understand the dynamics of client companies and markets. Endeavor's clients span the globe and are typically leaders in their industry.

Gelb Consulting Group, a wholly owned subsidiary, monitors organizational performance and designs winning marketing strategies. Gelb helps organizations focus their marketing initiatives by fully understanding customer needs through proven strategic frameworks to guide marketing strategies, build trusted brands, deliver exceptional experiences and launch new products.

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