

Consumer Choice of Health Plan Decision Support Rules for Health Exchanges: Issue Brief #1

Plan Comparison Display Format

Display plans in a column format. In the Plan Comparison section, organize plans in columns (with plan dimensions in rows) rather than in rows (with plan dimensions in columns).

Figure 1. Plan Comparison with plans displayed in a) a row format or b) a column format.

Row Format for Plan Comparison

Medical Plan	Your Cost	Key Services What you pay for in-network services	Quality Ratings
Zenith HMO GOLD Yearly total cost \$5,341 <input type="button" value="My top plan choice"/>	\$7,440 Yearly premium -\$2,124 Yearly premium tax credit \$25 Yearly cost at time of service	Deductible Self Family: \$0 Annual Out-of-Pocket Maximum Self Family: \$1,000/\$3,000 Doctor Office Visit: \$15 Hospital Stay: \$250 Prescription Retail generic/brand/non-formulary: \$6/\$20/\$35 See all services...	Medical Plan ★★ Doctors & Hospitals ★★
Summit HMO GOLD Yearly total cost \$4,846 <input type="button" value="My top plan choice"/>	\$6,900 Yearly premium -\$2,124 Yearly premium tax credit \$79 Yearly cost at time of service	Deductible Self Family: \$0 Annual Out-of-Pocket Maximum Self Family: \$1,500/\$3,000 Doctor Office Visit: \$25 Hospital Stay: \$500 Prescription Retail generic/brand/non-formulary: \$10/\$30/\$20NA See all services...	Medical Plan ★★★★★ Doctors & Hospitals ★★★★★
Pinnacle PPO SILVER Yearly total cost \$4,613 <input type="button" value="My top plan choice"/>	\$6,516 Yearly premium -\$2,124 Yearly premium tax credit \$221 Yearly cost at time of service	Deductible Self Family: \$500/\$1,000 Annual Out-of-Pocket Maximum Self Family: \$2,000/\$4,000 Doctor Office Visit: \$20 PCP; \$30 specialist Hospital Stay: 20% Prescription Retail generic/brand/non-formulary: \$10/\$30/\$50; up to 31-day supply See all services...	Medical Plan ★★ Doctors & Hospitals ★★
Eminent Health PPO SILVER Yearly total cost \$4,207 <input type="button" value="My top plan choice"/>	\$6,060 Yearly premium -\$2,124 Yearly premium tax credit \$271 Yearly cost at time of service	Deductible Self Family: \$250/\$750 Annual Out-of-Pocket Maximum Self Family: \$3,000/\$9,000 Doctor Office Visit: 20% Hospital Stay: 20% Prescription Retail generic/brand/non-formulary: \$10/\$25/\$40 See all services...	Medical Plan ★★★★★ Doctors & Hospitals ★★★★★

Column Format for Plan Comparison

	My top plan choice	My top plan choice	My top plan choice	My top plan choice	My top plan choice	My top plan choice
	Zenith HMO	Summit HMO	Pinnacle PPO	Eminent Health PPO	Crown High-Deductible Health Plan	Capstone PPO
	GOLD	GOLD	SILVER	SILVER	BRONZE	BRONZE
Your Cost						
Yearly premium	\$7,440	\$6,900	\$6,516	\$6,060	\$3,840	\$4,800
Yearly premium tax credit	-\$2,124	-\$2,124	-\$2,124	-\$2,124	-\$2,124	-\$2,124
Yearly cost at time of Service	\$25	\$79	\$221	\$271	\$327	\$327
Yearly total cost	\$5,341	\$4,846	\$4,613	\$4,207	\$2,043	\$3,003
	Zenith HMO	Summit HMO	Pinnacle PPO	Eminent Health PPO	Crown High-Deductible Health Plan	Capstone PPO
	GOLD	GOLD	SILVER	SILVER	BRONZE	BRONZE
Key Services (Side)						
Annual Out-of-Pocket Maximum Self Family	\$1,000/\$3,000	\$1,500/\$3,000	\$2,000/\$4,000	\$3,000/\$9,000	\$7,600/\$15,200	\$5,100/\$10,200
Deductible Self Family	\$0	\$0	\$500/\$1,000	\$250/\$750	\$2,600/\$5,200	\$1,300/\$2,600
Doctor Office Visit	\$15	\$25	\$20 PCP; \$30 specialist	20%	10%	10%
Hospital Stay	\$250	\$500	20%	20%	10%	10%
Prescription Retail generic/brand/non-formulary	\$6/\$20/\$35	\$10/\$20NA	\$10/\$30/\$50; up to 31-day supply	\$10/\$25/\$40	\$750/\$1,500 deductible then \$10/\$25/\$45	\$350/\$700 deductible then \$10/\$25/\$45
Services: Doctor Office and Outpatient Services (above)						
Services: Hospital and Related Services (above)						
Services: Prescription Drugs (above)						

RATIONALE

Reduced text: Compared to a row format (Figure 1a), a column format (Figure 1b) has less text. Moving descriptions to a left-hand legend reduces the density of text within each cell as well as the amount of repetition from cell to cell. This creates a cleaner look and feel; it also reduces the amount of reading required, which may be especially helpful for low-literacy populations. Finally, the reduced amount of text per cell may make it easier to compare plans along different dimensions by visually scanning left-to-right, mimicking familiar online retail shopping experiences.

Hierarchy of plan dimensions: Presenting dimensions as rows ensures that **key** dimensions are visible without scrolling. Key dimensions, such as plan name and expected cost, can be positioned in the first rows, ensuring that they will appear above the fold regardless of user-side variables (e.g., computer screen size or browser). Other dimensions, such as value-added plan services, can be viewed by scrolling down the page.

Intuitive cost display: Presenting dimensions as rows allows cost components to be displayed in a vertically-arranged equation (similar to a grade-school math problem). This arrangement may make it easier for consumers to understand their total cost calculation (e.g., premium minus tax credit plus cost at time of care equals total cost). This may be especially helpful for low-numeracy populations who struggle with numbers.

Flexible covered services display: Presenting plan dimensions as rows allows more flexibility in the display of covered services. Each service can appear as a row displaying the cost-sharing amount for the different plans. The rows of services can be organized into topic clusters that can be shown or hidden based on consumer preferences or policy objectives. The services can be organized in one of several ways:

- “Key services” that the consumer flagged as important in the User Preferences section
- Essential Health Benefits (EHB) categories
- A combination of “key services” and EHB clusters (similar to Figure 1b)

Match the choice experience to the product: Choice experiences vary across types of consumer products (Table 1). A row or tile display communicates brief information about a small number of product dimensions. This format fits simple, familiar products, such as hotel rooms, which have a limited number of well-understood dimensions (e.g., cost, customer rating). A column display flexibly communicates brief or detailed information about a larger number of product dimensions. This format is well suited to complex products, such as computers, which have a number of dimensions (e.g., cost, customer rating, memory, processor, display, etc.), many of which are unfamiliar to most consumers. Because health plans are complex products with many dimensions that are unfamiliar and/or difficult to understand (Quincy, 2012), a column display may be the best approach to help consumers identify high value health plans that meet their plan needs and preferences.

Table 1. Product display formats vary across products.

Product	Display	Number	Dimensions		Link
			Complexity	Familiarity	
Amazon	tiles	few	simple	high	http://www.amazon.com
Hotel room	rows	few	simple	high	http://www.travelocity.com
Computers	columns	many	varies, many complex	varies, many not familiar	http://www.cnet.com
Cars	columns	many	varies, many complex	varies, many not familiar	http://www.vw.com/en.html
Health plans	columns	many	varies, many complex	varies, many not familiar	

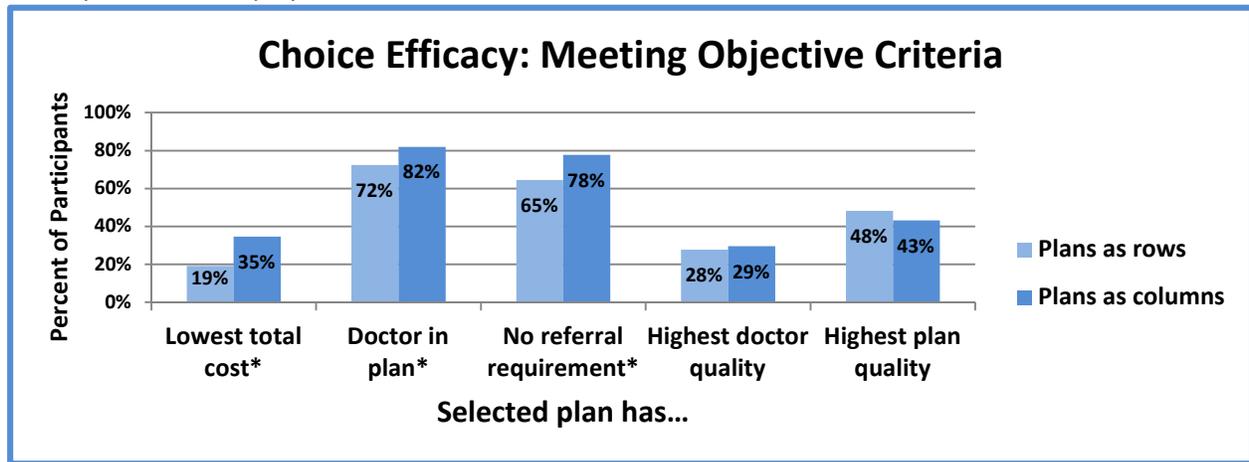
RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Our research indicates that study participants chose higher value plans when plans were displayed in a column format (with plan dimensions in rows) than in a row format (with plan dimensions in columns).

Participants (N = 280) used our online plan choice decision support tool to select a health plan. Although this choice was hypothetical, the health plans were based on real-world plan data and participants were asked to “make [their] medical plan choice as if it were [their] actual plan choice”. Participants’ preferences were queried in the User Preferences section. They were then randomly assigned to view a Plan Comparison section with plans displayed in a row format (Figure 1a) or in a column format (Figure 1b).

Participants chose higher value plans on two metrics. First, we looked at objective measures of choice efficacy using criteria such as the relative cost and quality of participants’ selected plan. Compared to participants viewing a row format, participants viewing a column format were significantly more likely to choose better plans on a number of dimensions (Chart 1). For example, participants viewing plans displayed in a column format were almost twice as likely to select the plan with the lowest total cost.

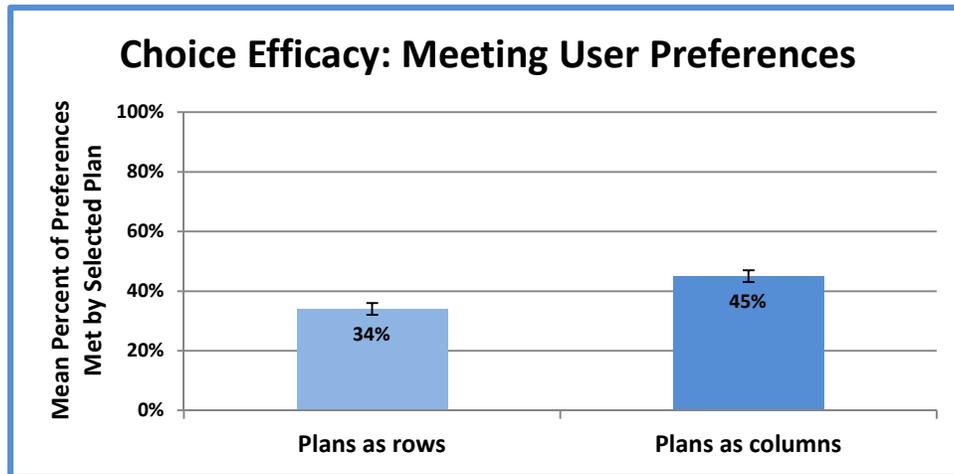
Chart 1. Participants were more likely to choose plans that were higher value on several dimensions when plans were displayed in a column format.



* Significant difference ($p < .05$)

Second, we looked at subjective measures of choice efficacy. We asked participants to rank their top three most important plan dimensions. We then assessed how well their selected plan met those preferences. Compared to participants viewing a row format, participants viewing a column format chose plans that met significantly more of their own criteria (Chart 2).

Chart 2. Participants chose plans that better fit their self-identified criteria when plans were displayed in a column format.[†]



[†] Error bars indicate standard error.

REFERENCES

For more information or other recommendations for plan choice decision support, including additional issue briefs and an in-depth report, visit <http://www.pbgh.org/exchange-plan-choice> or contact Ted von Glahn (tglahn@pbgh.org).

Quincy, L. (2012, January). What's behind the door? Consumers' difficulties selecting health plans. (Health Policy Brief).
Yonkers, NY: Consumers Union.