



Healthcare organizations spend a great deal of time talking about excellence.

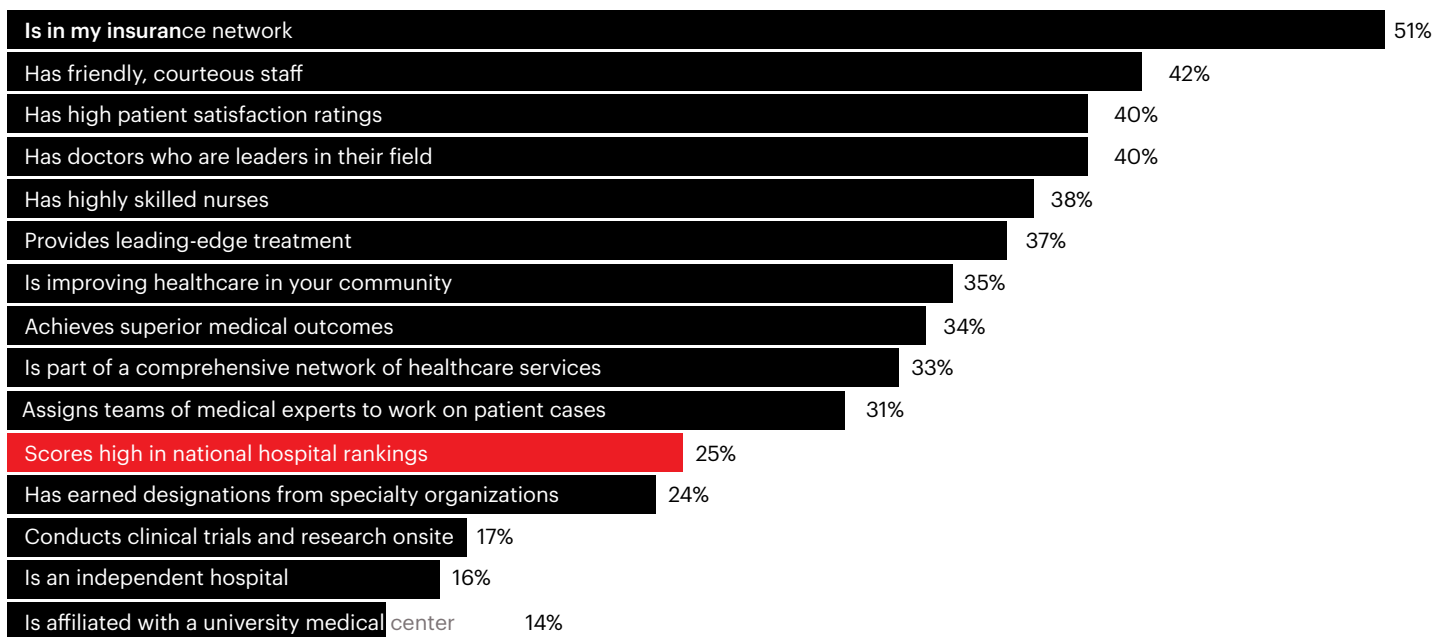
Spend enough time looking at healthcare advertising and certain patterns become difficult to ignore. The physicians change, the logos change, even the color palettes change, but the themes remain remarkably consistent. Rankings become headlines. Awards become campaigns. Research, technology, and innovation are presented as reasons to choose one organization over another. Drive through almost any city and you'll eventually find a physician looking confidently into the distance beside a claim like "Nationally Ranked" or "World-Class Care."

Why do so many campaigns feel the same?

Healthcare organizations have spent decades earning reputations for excellence because clinical quality genuinely changes lives. They recruit leading physicians, invest in research, purchase new technology, and pursue national rankings because those things improve the care they deliver.

Reputation has a considerable influence on how people make purchase decisions. Patagonia didn't earn its reputation for quality and craftsmanship through advertising alone. It spent decades building products that people trusted, and its marketing gradually shifted from introducing the brand to reinforcing what customers already believed. Years of thoughtful design and innovation from Apple created expectations that now form part of every new product launch. Talking about excellence reinforces brands that have already earned the right to do so because customers see that excellence as part of the value they're purchasing.

Yet when we ask consumers how they actually choose a hospital or health system, something interesting happens. Unlock Health's Consumer Compass research consistently shows that the single biggest factor is whether the organization participates in a patient's insurance network. Courtesy and friendliness, patient satisfaction, and confidence in the physicians and nurses providing care all rank ahead of national rankings. Rankings matter, but they sit much farther down the list than many healthcare marketers assume.



Q: If you had to choose a hospital or health system today, please indicate how essential each factor would be in helping you make your final selection. Unlock Consumer Compass, n=3003 Sept 2022–March 2025

The findings become even more revealing when viewed alongside today’s financial realities. Rising deductibles and out-of-pocket costs have made affordability part of almost every healthcare decision. Many people delay preventive care, postpone treatment, or avoid care altogether because they’re uncertain what it will cost or whether they can afford it.

Patients approach healthcare carrying a very different set of questions than the organizations hoping to reach them. Will I receive good care? Can I trust these people? Will my insurance cover this? Can I afford it? Will someone listen to me? Clinical excellence helps answer every one of those questions, but only after someone understands what that excellence means for them personally.

Awards, rankings, research, and technology gradually become the message instead of the evidence behind it. Organizations communicate what matters most inside their own walls while patients search for confidence, reassurance, affordability, and clarity.

Many organizations really are nationally ranked. Their physicians have earned national recognition. Their researchers have changed the way medicine is practiced.

However, patients still have to translate those achievements into something personally meaningful. Excellence should never be the destination of healthcare marketing. It only becomes persuasive when people understand what it means for their diagnosis, their treatment, their family, and their financial reality.

What pride costs

We’ve all met that person.

Within the first few minutes of a conversation, you’ve learned where they went to school, the awards they’ve won, the important people they know, and all the places they’ve been. They may be every bit as accomplished as they sound. You still find yourself looking for an exit.

Patients come to healthcare organizations looking for someone they can trust with their health. They're often making decisions at the most vulnerable moments of their lives, placing their health, their family members, and sometimes their future in the hands of people they've never met. Your job is to connect with these people and lay the foundations for trust, and you can't do that by keeping the focus on you.

A commitment to clinical excellence and research matters only in terms of the superior health outcomes patients can expect. Research alone doesn't build trust. Rankings don't build trust. Awards don't build trust. They become meaningful when people understand how those accomplishments improve the care they'll receive.

Too often healthcare marketing begins in a way that erodes trust rather than builds it. Organizations introduce themselves through credentials instead of connection. They ask patients to translate institutional achievements into personal confidence before a relationship has even begun.

But if excellence isn't the way to build trust, what is?

Humility: *Thinking of those we serve ahead of ourselves.*

Effective healthcare marketing starts in the same place that most healthcare mission statements do, with the patient.

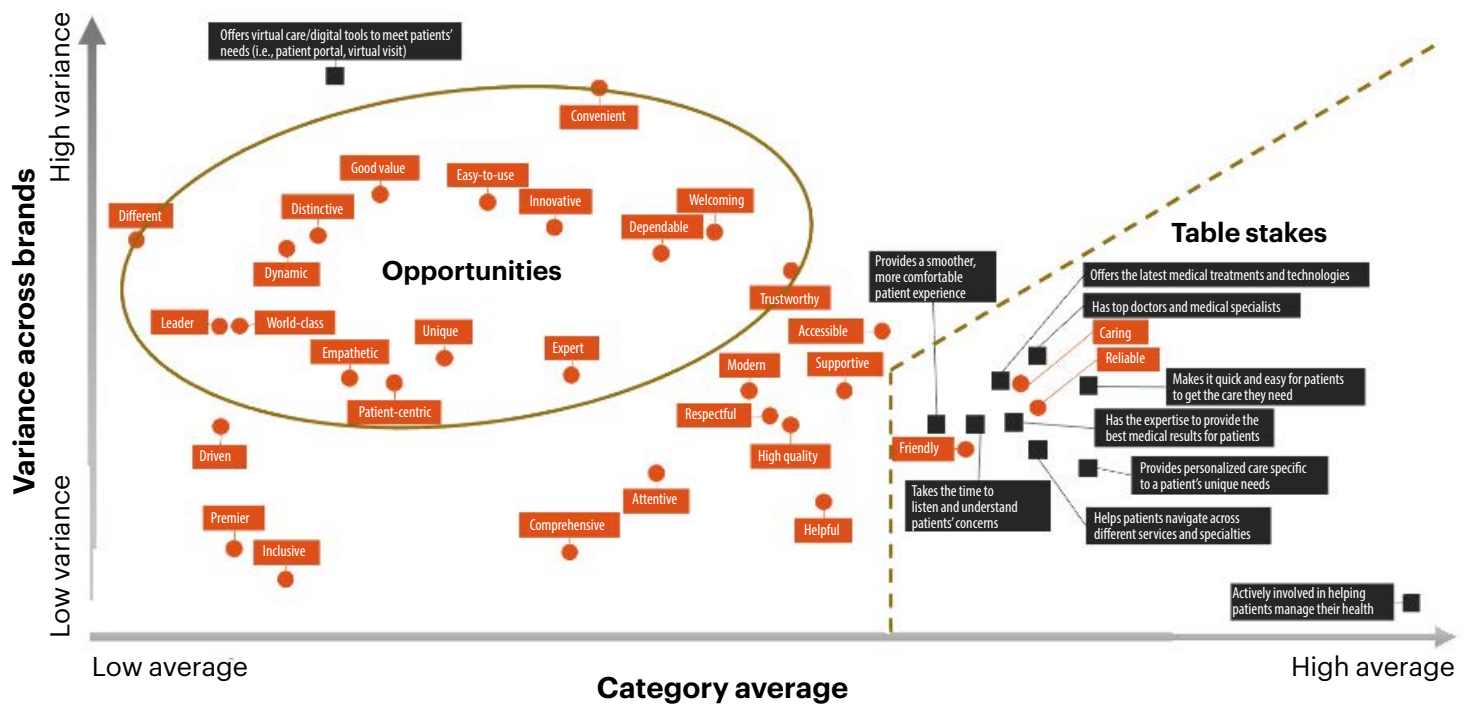
That's easy to say and can be surprisingly difficult to do. Many marketing strategies begin with legitimate business objectives like increasing cardiovascular volume, growing market share, recruiting physicians, or launching a new facility. They help organizations grow, remain financially healthy, and continue serving their communities.

Keeping the patient at the center of the work often makes those objectives easier to achieve. Human beings are wired for stories, especially stories about other people. When marketing begins with what someone is experiencing and then shows how an organization's expertise can change that story, business objectives and patient needs begin working together.

Context is what allows excellence to become meaningful.

Healthcare marketers don't have to guess what matters to patients. We can draw from experience and research. We talk with patients and families every day. We have tools like journey mapping and social listening to help us understand what people are experiencing and why they hesitate to seek care.

Research from our friends at Geisinger reinforces what we've seen in our own research. Delivering patient-centered care with empathy and compassion is one of the most important promises a healthcare organization can make. Nearly every health system makes that promise, but the ones that stand out demonstrate it in ways that feel distinctive, authentic, and uniquely their own.



There is an interesting strategic opportunity here. You won't find many hospitals willing to say they aren't caring, compassionate or friendly. These qualities are fundamental to healthcare, and because nearly everyone claims them, consumers can reasonably begin to treat them as the price of entry.

Humility becomes more powerful when an organization demonstrates those qualities in a way that feels genuinely its own. That might come through how it speaks, the experiences it chooses to portray, the way it acknowledges what patients are worried about, or how honestly it addresses the practical barriers people encounter when seeking care. That creates a useful paradox. Putting yourself second can make your brand more distinctive.

The objective is to become more relevant. A health system can have extraordinary physicians, advanced technology and nationally recognized programs and still begin the conversation with the person it hopes to help. Humility gives those accomplishments context, and context is what allows excellence to become meaningful.

How to embody humility

1. Start with the patient's story

The journey to care begins with a problem: a lump that won't go away, a diagnosis they never expected, a knee that keeps them from playing with their grandchildren.

Marketing becomes more human when it begins there too. Then the organization, the technology, and the nationally ranked service line come in—in service of helping that person receive the best possible care.

Human connection can take many forms. Humor, surprise, beauty, tension, insight, or a fact that changes the way someone sees their situation can all create an emotional response. Animation can do it. An extraordinary

landscape can do it. So can the kind of sweeping storytelling that makes Disney and Pixar films resonate with adults and children alike.

The goal is to make someone feel something that connects the message to their life. Reassurance, hope, curiosity, recognition, even discomfort can give them a reason to pay attention and understand why what we have to say matters to them.

Does every campaign need a dramatic patient story? No. But every campaign should answer a simple question, “What is happening in this person’s life that makes this message matter today?”

2. Translate expertise into outcomes

Healthcare organizations have extraordinary expertise that should be part of the healthcare decision-making process. The challenge is communicating that expertise in a way that helps people understand why it matters.

A nationally ranked cancer program may have better outcomes or provide access to clinical trials. Deep experience in orthopedic surgery may help someone recover more quickly and return to life without pain. Advanced imaging may lead to earlier diagnoses and a wider range of treatment options.

Expertise becomes meaningful when there’s a direct connection between the organization’s capabilities and the care people receive.

Research. Technology. Awards. Credentials. Every one of these should be part of the story of what’s possible for the patient.

3. Treat every interaction as a chance to earn trust

Marketing begins the relationship, but every subsequent patient experience determines whether it continues.

Your advertising, scheduling process, website, and front desk interactions are all part of the story patients tell themselves about your organization. That’s why marketing and patient experience need to be closely connected.

Each interaction answers the same question, can I trust you?

Keep this in your pocket

Before you approve your next campaign, here’s a simple action that can help keep the focus where you want it. Count the pronouns.

How many times does your copy say “we,” “our,” or the organization’s name versus “you,” “your,” or “your family”?

If “we” is winning by a wide margin, pride may be too.

The next temptation

Pride is usually the easiest sin to recognize because it announces itself so confidently.

The next one is harder to spot. It often disguises itself as innovation, ambition, and the desire to keep up. In healthcare marketing, it usually arrives wrapped in a demo, a conference presentation, or a vendor pitch.

Gregory called it **Lust**.