User Experience in the travel sector

User generated insights in the user experience of 18 leading travel websites

WESTIN

Hilton

Marriott

Sheraton

HYATT

AIRFRANCE

AmericanAirlines

BRITISH AIRWAYS

DELTA

KLM

Lufthansa

SINGAPORE AIRLINES

United Airlines

travelocity

Expedia

priceline.com

bookit.com

easytobook

Usabilla is a web-based usability testing tool that allows marketers, analysts, designers and usability experts to collect visual feedback on their website in a quick and fun way. Participants answer questions with points and notes on top of a webpage, mockup, or sketch. The results of a survey are analyzed and presented visually with charts and heat maps. Usabilla's customers use these visual insights to improve their user experience and optimize their website.

Usabilla is currently in use by more than 10,000 web professionals, and globally recognized brands including Warner, EA, Discovery, LinkedIn, Disney, US Government, Sony, and Levi's.

Usabilla is a privately held company based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
Learn more: usabilla.com.

Highlights

Hotels

Sites with a clear header, ease of navigation and beautiful visual design all stand out in a positive way with trust and appeal going hand-in-hand. Busy sites with scattered testimonials, social media buttons, buttons that don't fit in with the navigational structure, or that are disguised as ads were all generally frowned upon and received negative feedback.

Airlines

The Delta Airlines homepage scored highest in terms of accuracy (67%) of participants locating the boarding pass, and Delta also scored best in terms of the time (15.3 seconds) it took to find it. KLM (39%), Lufthansa (38%), and Singapore Airlines (38%) scored lowest in terms of accuracy, and Singapore Airlines (21.1 seconds), United Airlines (22.1 seconds), and KLM (23.9 seconds) scoring lowest in terms of speed.

Comparison sites

The promotional content on both Expedia and Priceline.com tested positively with participants. The Priceline.com standouts are the last minute deals' button (22%), mobile apps (32%), navigation elements and anything to do with the bidding options of the site. Promotional content on Expedia performed more positively than other travel sites with test users responding more favorably to ads that promoted bidding systems and special deals (42%). While other sites scored badly on promotional elements, test participants cited them as a strength for Expedia.

Facebook "Like" buttons

The reaction of participants to the Facebook "Like" buttons was overwhelmingly negative across all travel sector tests. Participants strongly disliked the buttons and stated they "really hate the pushy appearance of a company asking for an endorsement" or "begging" a user to 'Like' their company or brand without any benefit to the user.

Contact options

Contact information options that are easy to locate from the homepage received high marks as a mark of website trustworthiness. Telephone numbers in particular build trust as people believe the help of a real person is just a call away.

Serendipity

Participants found added value when there was some room for serendipity on the travel sites. Not everyone knows where they want to go, and some sites cleverly cater to them by showing popular destinations, points of interest in other cities, and stunning photos that entice users to go there.

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Introduction

The travel sector occupies a very recognizable corner on the Internet. Booking an airplane ticket or accommodation is possible in a myriad of ways. Airplanes and hotels make direct booking possible, while other sites offer the ability to compare them all and act as a middleman.

Given all of these options, we decided to test these sites in greater depth than we usually do with our cases. The reason is the intrinsic customer-centered attitude of the sector. Hotels, airlines and middlemen strive to deliver a pleasurable online customer experience by embracing the importance of usability and User Experience (UX). This gives us an opportunity to look at the similarities and differences of a large number of sites that all offer the same kind of service. We use Usabilla tests to collect a large amount of qualitative feedback in a short period of time. This is a user test, that collects opinions of real users, using real websites. This is not a scientific paper and we did not track behavior. It is instead, a quick way to show you what goes on inside users heads when they visit these sites. Participants in our visual surveys are vocal, and reveal positive and negative aspects of travel sites that are easily overlooked when you only look at the numbers.
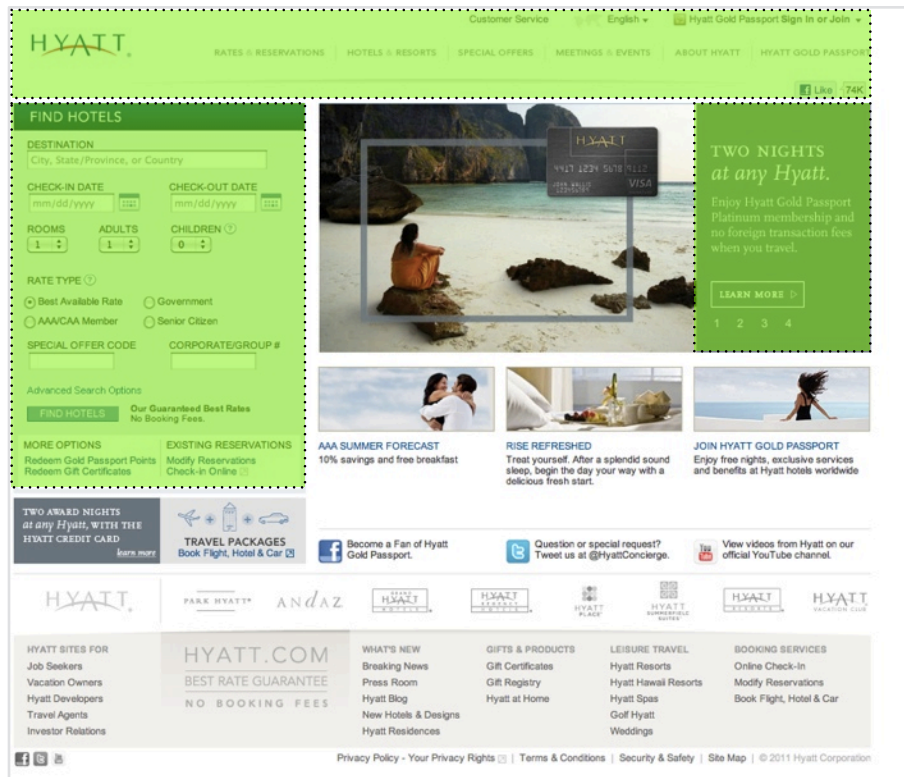
In three case-studies a total number of 800 participants performed simple tasks and gave feedback on sites in three different segments of the travel sector. First, we will look at the hotel case study comparing feedback on the websites of *five leading worldwide hotel chains*. Second, we will benchmark the homepages of *eight major airlines*, and lastly, we will close this case study by looking at feedback on *five travel comparison sites*.

Hotels

A first look

For the hotel case study we selected five leading worldwide hotels comparable in class and size: Sheraton, Hilton, Hyatt, Marriott and Westin.

Having a first look at the five homepages, it seems they share a lot of common design patterns. The header contains the logo of the hotel and provides the main navigation. They all have a form with check-in and checkout fields upfront making it is easy to look for and book a room. On every page we tested, some promotional advertising or text tries to lure visitors to click on exclusive deals of some sort. This promotional content gives the impression that the operators of the sites not only want to provide a basic "search and book" function, but also want to sell packages or deals that are beneficial for them. We expect that this will clash with users needs from time to time.

The header, search box, and promotional content on the homepage of Hyatt.

Setting up the test

We quickly set up a Usabilla test with two tasks the participants had to answer:

▸ Click on the things that make you trust this website and explain why with a note.
▸ Click on the things that you like and explain why with a note.

We made a version with the first two hotels, and a version with the three remaining ones in order to avoid a learning effect, and to keep the tests short and snappy. We received tons of feedback from the 190 participants who participated in the tests about the site. Some feedback confirms existing beliefs and some points out interesting details. We analyzed each task separately by focusing on specific hotspots with the help of the scatterplots and heatmaps Usabilla generates. The hotspots accelerated the analysis, by quickly recognizing patterns, and offered us more time to dig deeper and gain more insights from the participants.

Take a look at a sample testcase.

What makes visitors trust a hotel's homepage?

Trust is a key factor for creating a successful user experience on the web. Credible pages have the power to persuade their users to:

▸ Change attitudes by making users feel comfortably interacting with the website.
▸ Change behaviors such as registering information and completing transactions.

Quoting B.J Fogg, the guru on changing human behavior:

"To increase the credibility impact of a website, find what elements your target audience interprets most favorably and make those elements most prominent."
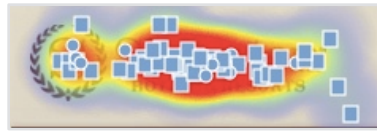
So we did, and we present to you the best practices that were common among the five pages we tested.

The Logo

Let's start with the obvious – the logo itself. The high brand awareness of the five hotels inspired trust to the participants who left comments like the following ones:

"Reputable, well established brand, inspiring trust."

"Professional logo and look."

A cloud of notes and clicks hovers over Sheraton's logo.
53% of the participants indicated the logo as an important trust factor.

Affilliations

Showing the affiliations of the hotel in the bottom of the page received a lot of clicks and notes from our participants. The range of hotels that the Starwood Group (Sheraton, Westin, W Hotel, etc.) covers is an extra credit of trustworthiness, which is exactly what a participant stated about Sheraton's affiliations:

"Showing hotels associated with the website make me feel more secure with my decision."

The same counts of course for the HHonors (Hilton) and Hyatt. In the case of Marriott, the number of places where the hotel is located (indicated in the bottom of the page) also serves as a credibility factor.
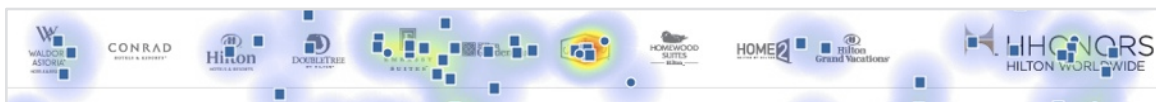
Ease of access to support

Users are more confident towards a page that shows a support link in a prominent location on the page. This can be either a toll-free number as in the case of Sheraton (users love it!) or a support/help page.

"Phone number builds trust because you can reach them directly."

"Online help adds to the site's trustworthiness."

Copyright info and privacy statements

It might not be a user's first priority to go and check the privacy statements or the copyright info when they browse a website, however this does not mean they don't value them. Privacy policy, terms & conditions, security and safety add trust, validity and transparency to a page and should be easily accessible.

"Copyright info for legal details provides confidence."
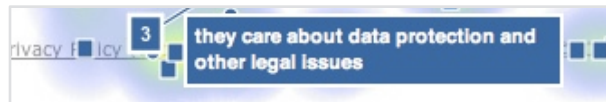
Sign in

A private account that requires a user to sign in comforts users about the site's security and validity. Users expect their data will be stored and protected by a trustworthy page. An extension to the sign-in process is a club membership which also adds exclusivity and reinforces a trust feeling.

"I trust it as it looks like there is a sort of community/other members who are involved."

Social Media

Social Media is the hot stuff, but depending on the context people might love you or hate you for utilizing them. Hilton, for instance, uses a Twitter "Follow Us " widget inviting users to stay up-to-date with Hilton showing a more customer-centered policy that builds trust. Hyatt is the only one with a link to their Youtube channel directly on their homepage. This is a very popular feature among users as they can watch videos of the hotel's facilities before booking a room. This is a reassuring option that definitely adds to trustworthiness. Next to YouTube a Facebook widget showing 74,000 fans of Hyatt adds to the hotel's trustworthiness. Marriott highlights a blog written by Bill Marriott, adding a personal touch and showing that the chairman of the hotel is present and cares for his customers.
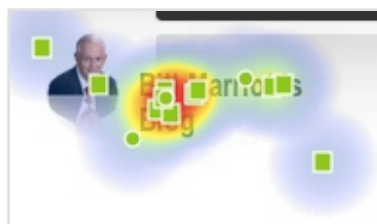
"The owner giving his thoughts invites trust."

"Videos provide visual proof that the Hyatt is a quality hotel."

"Number of likes is representative of whether or not something is good."

Hyatt's ingenious choice to promote YouTube on its homepage as a channel for its customers has 1,878,563 views and counting.

Bill Marriott's blog convinces users that they'll be carefully serviced

Best rate guarantee

This is a feature that is warmly welcomed by users and builds trust, as they know that they will not have to pay extra rates and fees. Place it somewhere that is highly visible such as the hotel's check-in / checkout or reservation form – but certainly not in the footer.

> "Guaranteed rates make me trust their site."

> "Guaranteed best rate is good with no booking fees. Hope there are no other hidden fees either."

Professional Design

Design that is appealing to the user by its simplicity, great layout, good use of copy and images, but also outstanding usability, makes a website trustworthy. It goes without saying that in the case of these high-class hotels all the designs were professional. They only differed in style. Some played more to the emotional side by touching users with outstanding copy and images, some others on the functional appeal. In all cases though, users loved that they could search for a hotel upfront by making use of a simple, yet effective check-in / checkout or reservations form on the homepage.

Thumbs up: What did participants like?

The mass adoption of Facebook has led us to use "thumbs up" and 'Like' as an indication of satisfaction or approval. But, what do users particularly like in a homepage? Usabilla provides the context-sensitive feedback we seek. In this case, trust and appeal go hand-in-hand because the same principles that work for one also work for the other. After all, we all like what we trust, don't we?

Outstanding copy

Users love to feel welcome and intimate on the site they visit. Like a good salesman in a retail shop that makes clients feel like home, the same warm feeling should also appear on a website. Sheraton is following the tricks of the trade by welcoming visitors to their site with a "Hello, and welcome to our community" phrase. This is effective way as we tell from the comments we received:

"I love the greeting. It sticks out and it's catchy!"

"Love the welcoming homey feeling of the greeting"
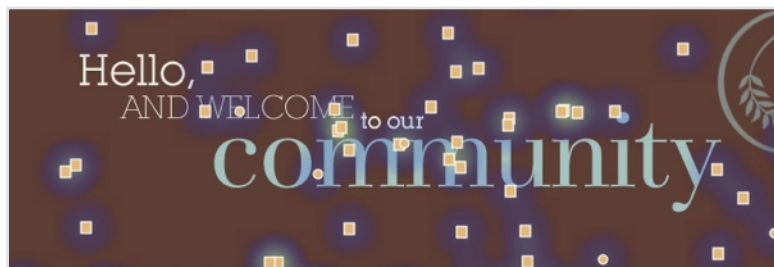
Stunning images

Beautiful, stunning images add some drama and emotion to an otherwise functional page. They inspire and reassure customers about the destination they want to choose, while they offer a space for the eyes to rest from the clutter of copy and information.

Hilton provides an image of a father having joyful moments with his daughter and son – an image that makes families feel welcome in the Hilton hotels:

"The image speaks volumes and screams family atmosphere."

"Happy family, seems warm and inviting."

Hyatt is using the calm and serene image of a woman on a beach staring at the sea to inspire tranquility and make visitors daydream about the next place they would like to visit.

"A professional picture with dramatic scenery, not a cheesy touristic picture."

"It's a pretty picture. Not a picture of the hotel or resort, but the actual place you'd visit when staying at a hotel and it's not just a cheesy tourist beach, there are big dramatic rocks. I like it!"
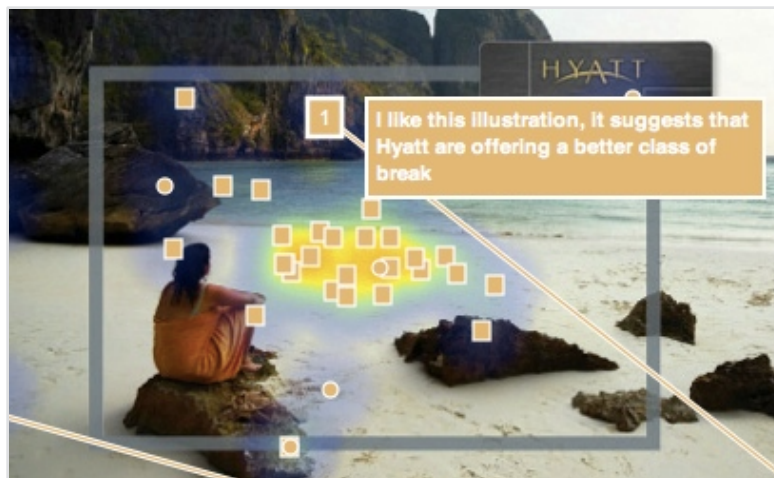
Westin's homepage is primarily occupied by a beautiful image of the Westin hotel at Plaza de las Cortes in Madrid. The comments from participants indicate that they love it:

"Love this image. Very classy!"

"This picture is gorgeous. It makes me want to travel. And makes me think that Westin has good quality, nice hotels in exotic locations."

What makes a great hotel page?

We learned that factors like outstanding design, copy, layout and ease of use are essential to convince users about the hotel's credibility. Next to them, a footer with the hotel's affiliations, the page's privacy statement, policy and other links that add to transparency build trust. Ease of access to a phone number, help section or support email are also very important for the user to rely on the hotel's service in any case. Social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), add a personal touch and comfort users that there will always be somebody close by to help them, and a great number of Facebook fans adds to a website's credibility.

As far as appeal is concerned, great professional design that screams simplicity and ease of use is the most important factor. Amazing, relevant images are very much welcome, inspire users and add a space for the eyes to rest or daydream. A simple, easy-to-use check-in/check out or reservations form on the homepage is of key importance as booking a hotel is the primary reason why users visit a hotel's homepage. Last but not least, offers and best rate guarantees should be highlighted because they are also what most users seek.

Airlines

Airlines is another part of the travel case study we're conducting. We selected the homepages of eight major airline companies: KLM, Lufthansa, Air France, British Airways, Singapore Airlines, United, Delta and American Airlines. We invited participants to give us feedback on the following two questions:

▸ Where would you click to get your boarding pass?
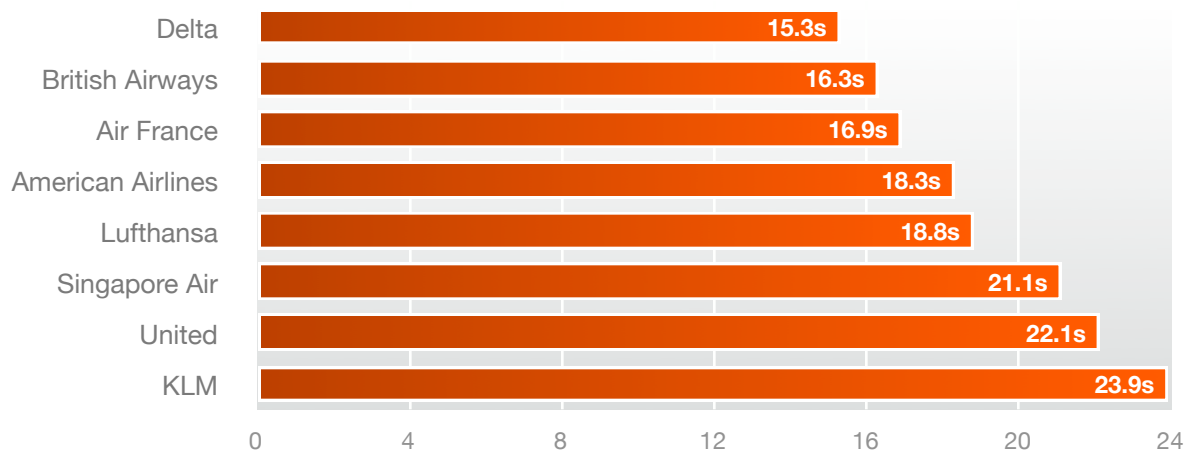▸ Mark the things that you think Airline "X" should improve. Please explain why with a note.

You can click here to preview an example test.

Can you get your boarding pass?

Getting your boarding pass online is a key task that users should be able to perform flawlessly on the website of an airline. Travelers want to quickly and easily print their boarding pass and get to the airport to catch their flight. We used a one-click task to test performance, meaning participants could only click once to provide their answer. In this way, we could measure the response time and the accuracy of the users' answers.

Response time

As we can see from the graph below, Delta has the shortest response time with 15.3 seconds, while KLM trails with 23.9 seconds. This is 56% longer than the time of Delta.

Airline	Response time
Delta	15.3s
British Airways	16.3s
Air France	16.9s
American Airlines	18.3s
Lufthansa	18.8s
Singapore Air	21.1s
United	22.1s
KLM	23.9s

What is causing these big differences in time? Before answering this question let's first have a look how did the eight airlines score on task accuracy.

Task accuracy

To measure task accuracy, we identified the generated hotspots by users' clicks and we calculated the number of clicks on each hotspot. For instance, here are the generated hotspots for KLM's homepage with the accuracy rates on "Where would you click to get your boarding pass?":

Check-in online	39%
Manage my booking	17%
Plan and book	6%
Book a flight	5%
Prepare for travel	5%
Search	5%
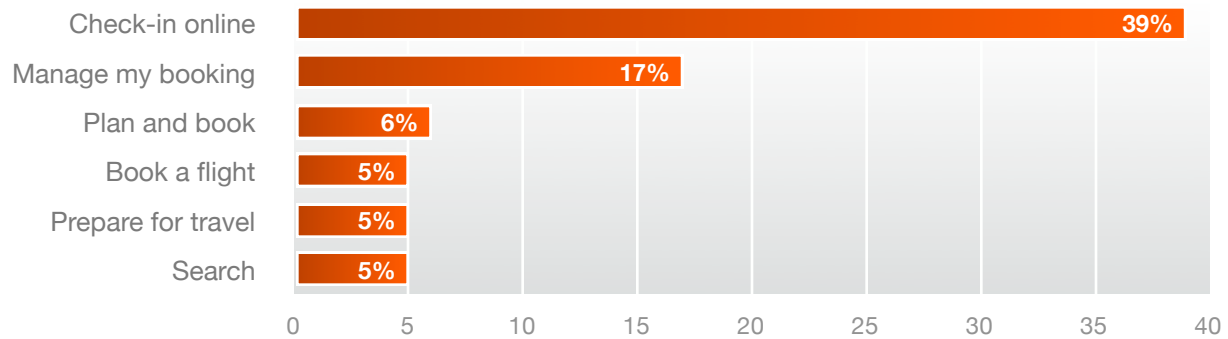
Example accuracy rate KLM: 'Where would you click to get your boarding pass?'

KLM (http://www.klm.com/travel/us_en/index.htm)

In the case of KLM, 39% of the participants gave the correct answer 'check-in online'. Doing the same for every homepage, we managed to benchmark the eight homepages on where users would click to get their boarding pass:
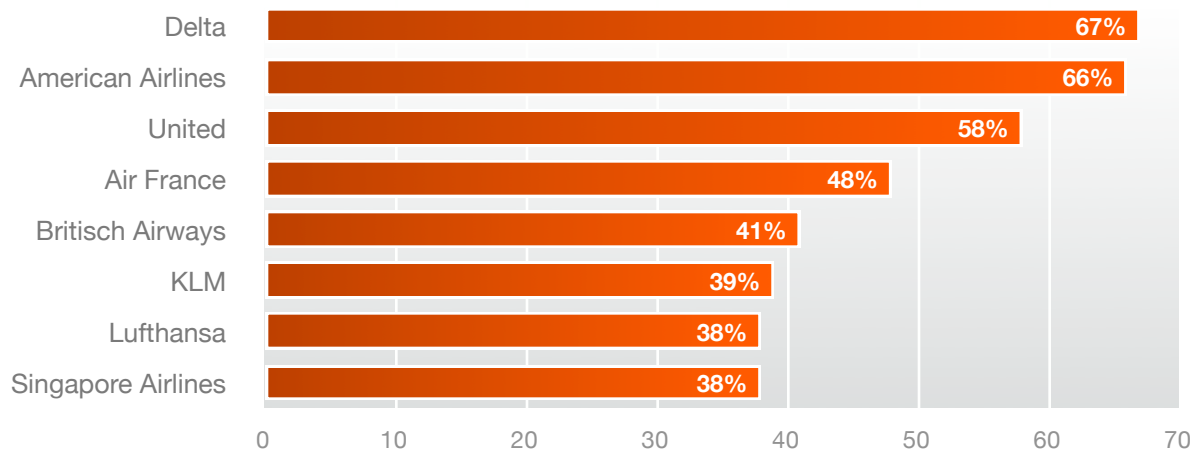
Task's accuracy: Users that clicked on the right spot to get their boarding pass

The following table offers an overview of how the eight airlines scored on our task. We assigned the same weight to 'time to get boarding pass' and 'accuracy to get boarding pass', and we calculated the ranking for each airline (lower scores are better). For instance, KLM got 13 points by achieving the 8th and 5th position.

Airline	Rank: Time	Rank: Accuracy	Total points
Delta	1	1	2
American Airlines	4	2	6
Air France	3	4	7
British Airways	2	6	8
United	7	3	10
Lufthansa	5	6	11
KLM	8	5	13
Singapore Air	6	7	13

The big winner in our test is Delta getting the first position in both tasks. The clear and prominent call to action 'Check In', as well as the clean design of the homepage didn't confuse the users comparing to KLM, where the two main menus confuse the user and delay him to choose.

DELTA's homepage
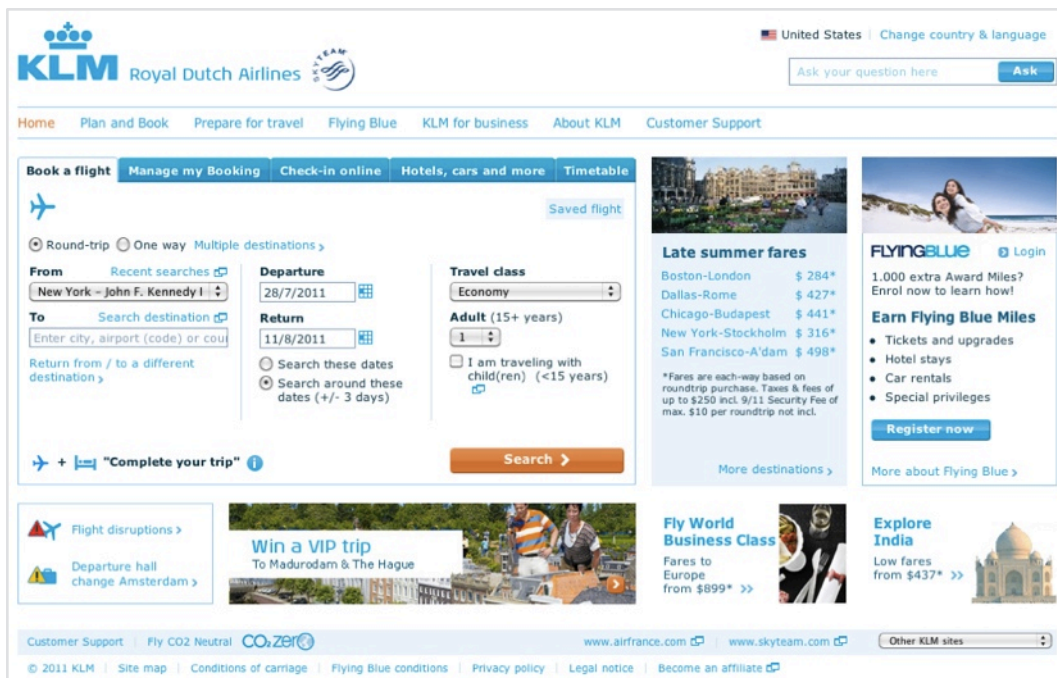
KLM's homepage

What would you improve?

This was a daunting, but very rewarding task to analyze. People love to comment and suggest improvements when they have the chance to do so. The participants in our study left more than 200 notes on the page of each airline. Presenting them all here is impossible, but we want to showcase some of the comments that stick out and scream for some attention.

KLM

Some quick take away tips for KLM:

Ads do not add to your site

Users complained about the internal ads that add to the clutter and make the page more confusing.

> "Advertisements make the page visually chaotic."

> "The advertising is distracting and annoying. I would much prefer actual useful information, like destination weather, tourist bureau links, blank screen, just about anything else."

"Additional ads turn a lot of customers away."

KLM blue

KLM blue looks great on the wings of KLM's airplanes, but on a website? That's another question. Our participants gave their vote by complaining about the poor readability of the light blue links suggesting they'd like more contrast and a bigger font. At the moment the font is too small making it worse for readability:

"The text is too light, making it hard to read."

"Need bigger text."

"The entire page is much too white and blue. I get that that is your KLM color scheme, but it just looks like windows XP to me, and that reminds me of websites from the year 2000."

Better wording

Participants got confused with some of the wording that is used on the website. For instance,

"What does 'Prepare for travel' mean?"

"What is 'Complete your trip'? It looks like it means hotels and flights, so it should just say that."

"What does 'Flying Blue' mean?"

"More wording that might be better phrased for the American market - 'Conditions of carriage' doesn't mean anything to me."

Lufthansa

Here are some of the participants' requests that really stand out:

Move the Flights Search box to the left

People are used to reading from left to right, following a zig-zag flow as they move down a page in the Western world – which is the area and market this page addresses. Of course, this has implications on where users focus their attention. If we split the display into four quadrants, the first quadrant on the top left is the so-called "Primary Optical Area", followed by the "Strong Follow Area" on the top right, the "Weak Follow Area" on the bottom left and the "Terminal Area" on the bottom right. Placing the "Flights Search" box on the top left area would increase user's attention to the highest priority action: Booking a flight. Here are some of the participants comments:

> "Move this section to the left of the page giving it more priority and move the advertising down."

> "Make the 'Flights Search box' more prominent on homepage."

> "'Flight information' could be larger on the page."

Get rid of the asterisk * in prices

Indicating prices with an asterisk is not user favorite - especially on an advertisement. It makes the company look cheap and less credible.

> "Get rid of the asterisk. Give us a true ballpark, not a lowball figure to lure us in and then throw in another $300 in fees."

> "I really don't like headline prices that aren't actually the price you pay. It feels cheap and lowers the tone of the airline. Show a price including taxes, etc."

Quick links should be quick

Lufthansa has a nice quick links section with all the high priority tasks users take like checking online, checking arrivals and departures etc. Placing it as a box in a corner against the very prominent internal ads of the company, however, shows a less customer-focused page. Quick links should be easier to reach as a lot of our participants stated:

> "All of these features are the point of the site for most people. They need to be much more prominent. I had to squint around and search for them."

> "Primary task hidden in bottom right of page...Not easy to find."

> "Quick info links should be larger"

> "I think this would be more helpful, if this was more prominent on the page."

Air France

Communicate what matters to your customer

An announcement on red font, on the most visible part of the screen about "Maintenance staff industrial dispute" is not what really matters to most visitors of the pages. That's why a cloud of 31 notes and clicks flows over the announcement with comments like:

"I don't think this needed such a prime position as it is not relevant to everyone."

"This is confusing. Is it a news link? A random comment? Why is it placed so dominantly on the page?"

"What does this mean and how does it affect flights?"

Use space wisely

People don't like clutter. It makes browsing and finding what you're looking for a pain in the neck. Occupying at least one third of the page with "Our best offers", using sketchy images and graphics is not what people really want.

"The mobile has more prominence space than the passenger service, but why when this is not the main income earner."

"Clutters the home page."

"There seems to be a lot of homepage real estate devoted to an uninformative and cluttered graphic."

"Spread things out a bit more. Everything seems small and crushed together."

Arbitrary add-ons don't look nice

Users don't have to be designers to sense when something has been arbitrarily added on the top of the page, and especially when this is a log-in box that have to frequently use.

"Doesn't look like a part of the page. Looks like a floating pop-up."

"This box looks out of place, as it shouldn't be there. Perhaps move it / resize it."

"It should be in a more prominent location."

British Airways

Don't clutter the homepage with internal ads

Almost half of all the notes are about the three banners positioned in the middle of the page. The prominent role of the banners irritated the users who were quite caustic on their comments:

> "The advertising that detracts from the available information is obnoxious. I am paying for a service, I shouldn't have to tolerate this much of the screen real estate being wasted on information that isn't helpful."

> "More space on homepage for booking your trip. Area seems small. Less advertising in center of page and more user-friendly functions."

"The ads are so in the middle of the page and colorful that they overrule the rest of the page and it becomes too cluttered."

"Ads draw attention away from task buttons and confuse the viewer."

"There's a lot of white space and wide ads here in the middle of the page, again devoting a LOT of homepage real estate to stuff that may not necessarily be what the user is looking for. I'd recommend making this column narrower (possibly 180px) and moving it over to the left side, and let the 'Create a trip' bar be more central and larger."

Is Facebook the right social medium for you?

There is a big craze about social media in general, and of course marketers try to capitalize on this and come closer to their customers, listen to them, and engage with them as part of their core business. The British Airways page offers a banner on the bottom of the page with the message 'Find us on Facebook', but it received quite some negative comments:

"Don't like the Facebook. Who wants to be friends with British Airways in Facebook?"

"I think the Facebook thing has gone too far. How will liking the page help me?"

"Who needs to follow an airline on Facebook. That's silly!"

The learning here is that if you are asking your users to like your product and be friends on Facebook, there needs to be a viable reason for them to do so, such as a contest, discount or special offer – and it needs to be explained. This can be done in a variety of other ways including email campaigns to members of frequent flier programs, for example.

Make contact information accessible

Lots of companies keep placing contact information and support on the bottom of a page. It might be for logistic reasons and minimizing support costs by making them less reachable. Anyhow, this is not what users want. Users want to have easy access to contact information on airline homepages.
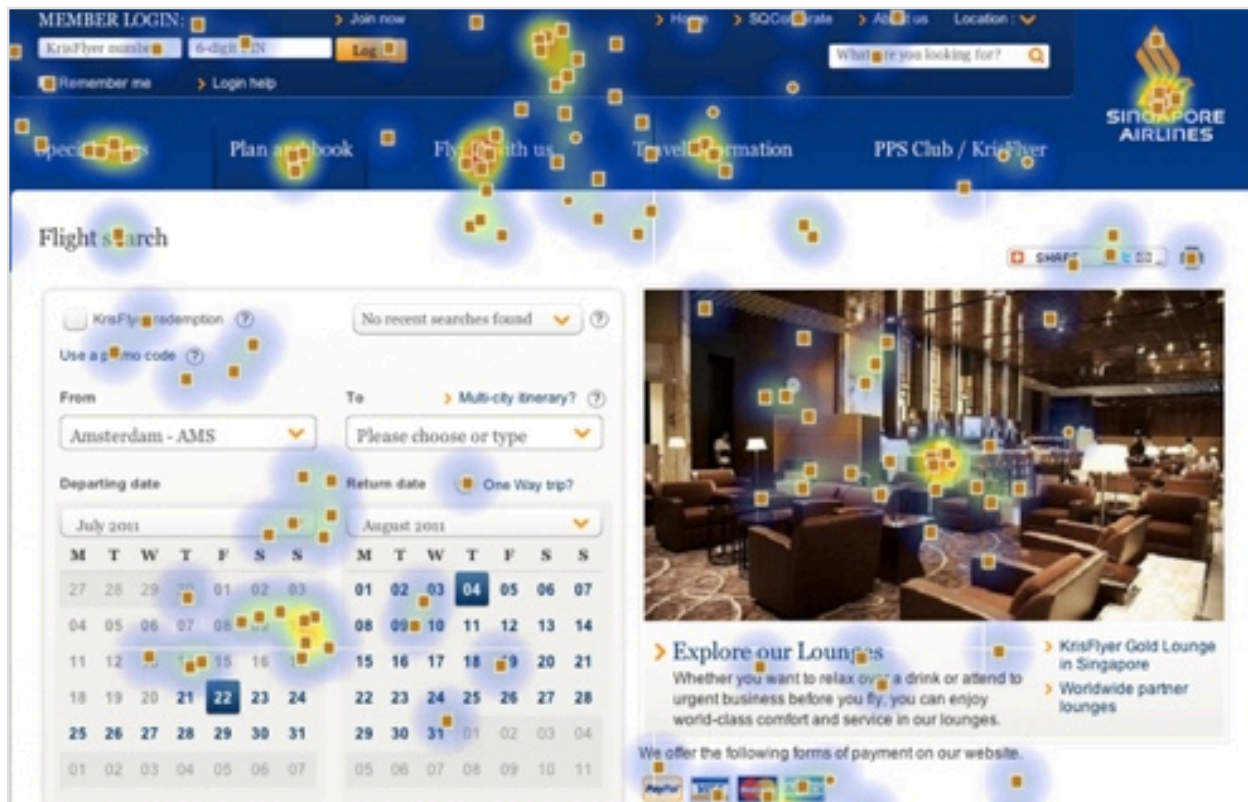
"You could add contact information on the top of the site. Most sites just have it at the bottom, but a lot of people would rather deal with things on the phone."

"Have a 1-800 number added."

"A contact number can be given."

"They should make contact info, especially phone numbers, more accessible."

Singapore Airlines

Be clear and simple with your copy

The copy and the clauses about the credit cards received quite some negative attention:

> "Quite negative - focuses on what they cannot accept rather than on what they can - would make me want to book elsewhere."

> "Too much text about paying details; not so relevant."

> "This is too convoluted and confusing for customers. If you can't accept a form of payment for all travel, do not accept that type of payment at all."

Place high priority tasks on a prominent place

The 'Manage my trip' and 'Check-in online' tabs – both two high priority actions – are hidden on the bottom of the page.

> "Had to search for a long time to find the 'Check in online' button."

> "Check in online is too far down on the page."

Be relevant

Market segmentation and targeted messages are key for successful online marketing. Addressing the same message to everyone does not work, as for instance with the 'Explore our Lounge' banner that takes up a significant space of the homepage.

> "Lounge seems kind of off topic when I'm trying to get a boarding pass. This page is not very user friendly."

> "I want safety, legroom and service. I really don't care how sumptuous the airport lounge is."

United

Don't clutter your homepage

Make your homepage, simple, appealing, an eye-candy for your users. Cluttering the homepage with links and internal ads confuses and irritates the users:

> "Should be less cluttered with text, too confusing."

> "Don't like to have an add right in the middle of the page."

> "Too much info in one section (about the news and deals section)."

> "Too much different information on one page - needs to simplify."

Log-in section should be prominent

The participants recommended to move the log-in section and place it somewhere else making it more prominent:

> "I think all of this special stuff should be on another page. This is just too busy."

> "Should be more obvious and stand out, place near the top of the page."

> "Log in should be more condensed and in an out of the way location, such as the top right corner."

Delta
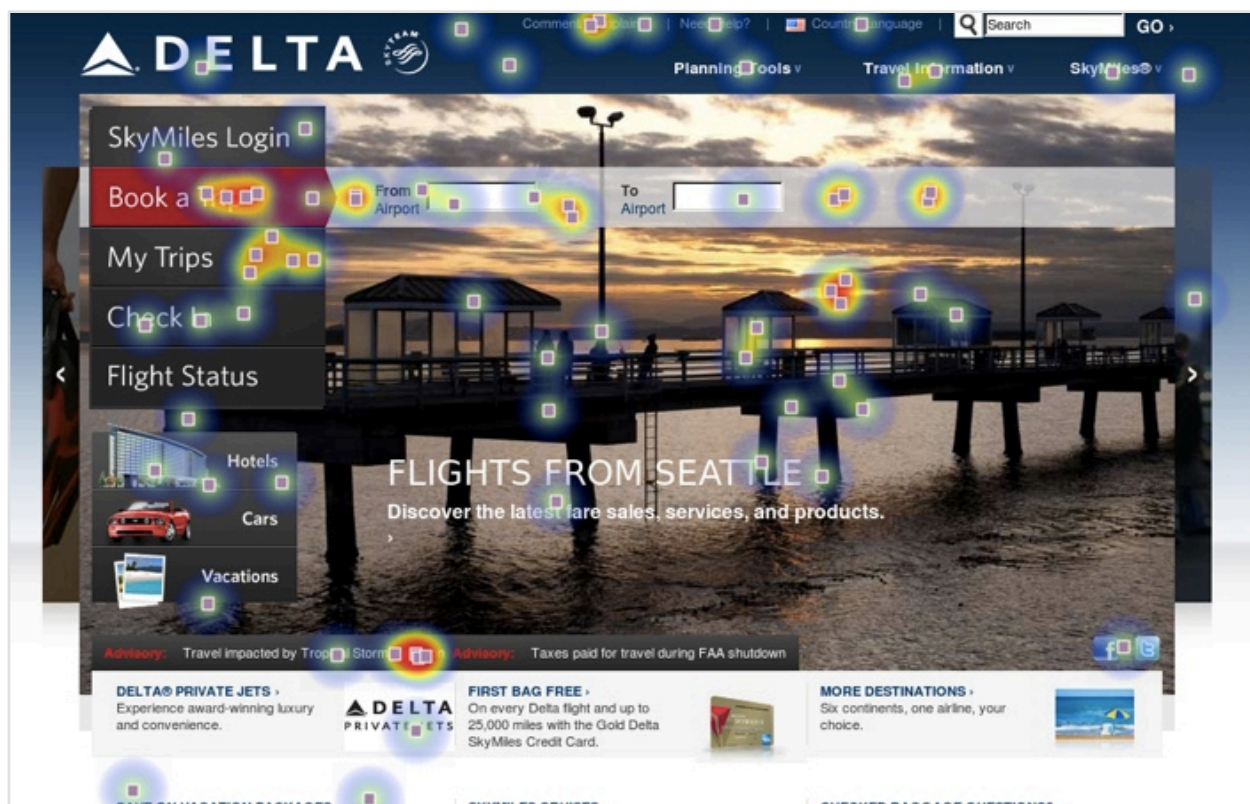
Make advisories stand out

Participants asked Advisories such as 'Travel impacted by Tropical Storm/Typhoon' or 'Taxes paid for travel during FAA shutdown' to be more visible:

> "This should be bigger I almost missed it."

> "Should be a scrolling bar at the bottom."

> "I would like to see advisory in a bigger font so I can see it better."

Use more contrast

Good design means also good contrast between text and background images. Delta's homepage is a nifty page, but it could be improved a bit more as our participants pointed out:

> "The text here is hard too read - there isn't enough contrast (about the header's menu)."

> "Put solid colorbox underneath "Flights from Seatle" to set apart from photograph."

American Airlines
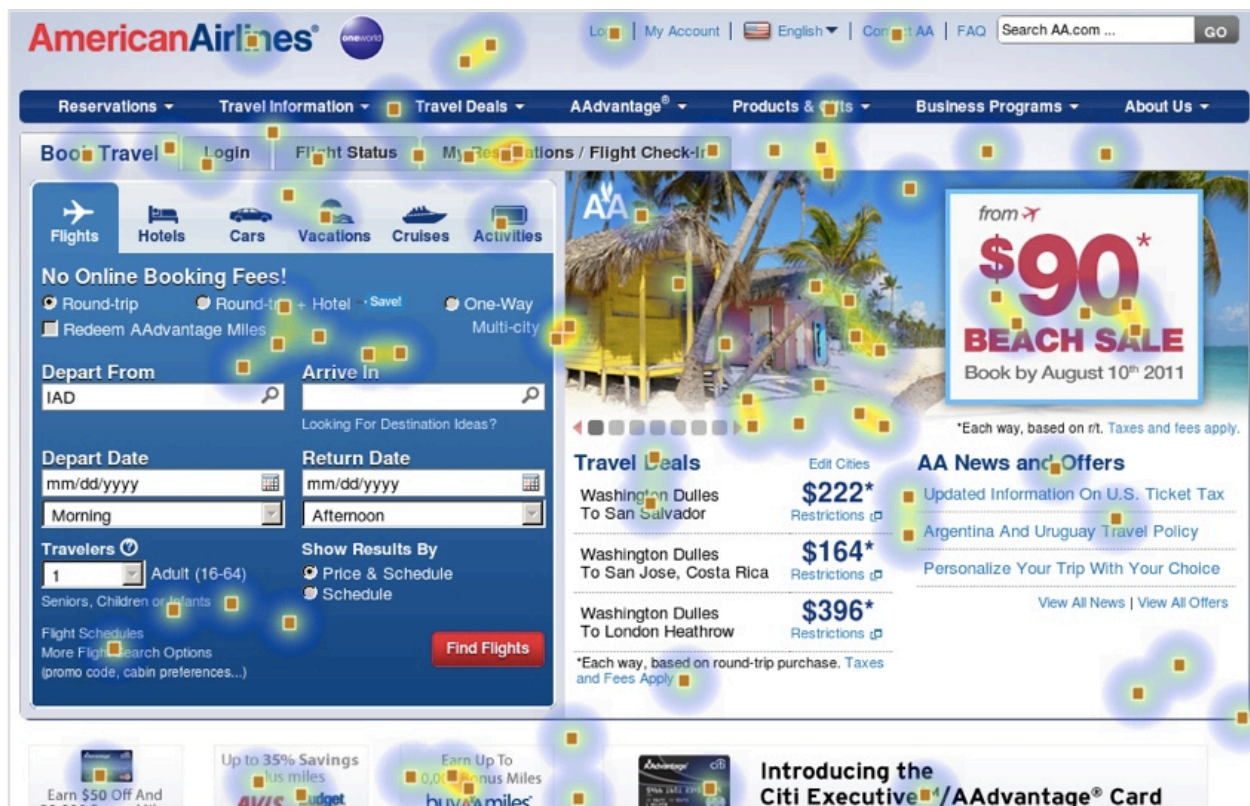
Use real prices without *

As it was mentioned previously in the case of Lufthansa, prices with * are regarded with distaste by users. They consider them as a way that companies try to trick them. Applying such practices reduces the companies credibility and trustworthiness:

> "Just include the price with taxes and fees. Otherwise it's cheating, stealing and lying the old American airline way. Not cool bro, not cool!"

> "I really dislike advertising prices which aren't really available. An airline that shows an all inclusive price would be great."

Comparison sites

The sites tested here provide a mix of booking options: you can book a flight, hotel, and sometimes both. We collected a lot of useful feedback on hotel and airline comparison sites. We asked the user to "click on the elements you like on this page" and to "click on the things you would remove from this page". This allows us to look at differences and similarities of design elements that are used on these sites. We use a heatmap to pinpoint the areas of interest, and provide a short analysis for each. Notes from the participants are also shown here.

Take a look at an example test.

EasyToBook.com

Click on the elements you like on this page

There is a lot to like here: points and notes are scattered all over the place. Highlights: phone number (15%), search (62%), the logo (19%), points of interest in Amsterdam (36%), and popular destinations (33%).

The header

The header is pleasant on the eyes. The combination of the logo and clear 'need help?' button stands out.

> "The logo catches my attention"

> "Positive name, suggests what they do well"

> "Love having a number that I can call for support"

> "Help is at hand and it's a free call"

The search area

The search area is clear and is credible due to the guarantee.

> "The booking box is the best part and easy to use"

"Great for finding a place that is in your currency"

"Simple"

Travel inspiration

The picture of the hotel and overview of popular destinations builds trust and gives people inspiration. It feels like you just can go anywhere within minutes.

"Great photo, rich and inviting"

"Maybe I'll make some new travel plans"

"I like the selection of popular destinations"

Extras

The 'Points of Interests' is also a nice touch. People can quickly scan points of interest so they can see if the city you are looking at has something in store for you.

"This allows me to imagine myself at the destination"

"This use of Google maps is a good way to show what you can do at your destination"

Click on the things you would remove from this page.

Oddly, the features and benefits on EasyToBook.com are on the nomination for removal (30%). The copy on the right scores low as well (28%).

Header

The 'Subscribe to Newsletter' button has no logical follow up to the preceding 'My Booking' and 'Group Bookings' buttons. It also doesn't feature a form line, so it's not clear what will happen if I click the link.

"Seems too pushy"

"No one wants 'news' anymore, they want the deals"

"This doesn't need its own tab"

"It's also asked below"

Ads and promotional content

The area which states how many people booked at EasyToBook.com (and why) doesn't provoke a good response. It also takes up a lot of screen real estate.

"Looks similar to paid advertising"

"Don't need this"

"Too much text"

Facebook

The Facebook 'Like' button is actually disliked by the participants. People want to quickly book a trip, not tell the whole world they like the site that just helps them achieve this. One idea would be to give people a chance to 'Like' your company once they have given positive feedback, e.g. via a survey after booking a ticket or completing a flight.

"I don't care how many people like the company on Facebook. This could be statistically wrong."

"Why the need to 'Facebook' everything, it makes it look tacky and desperate."

"When I see a bunch of Facebook crap on a page, it makes it look less professional."

Travelocity

Click on the elements you like on this page.

The likes are distributed along the page. Standouts are the header (39%), the search area (56%), the gnome (29% - yes, really!) and the 'Top Travel Destinations' area (44%).

Header

The header seems clear: the logo and greeting is liked, as is the navigation bar. Both elements are easy on the eyes, clear and have enough space. The telephone number and customer support button also score points: people like to choose when it comes to ways of having contact.

> "Simple logo, looks modern"

> "Nice greeting!"

> "Beautiful, simple menu"

"A real phone number, yeah!"

Search area

The search area is clear, spacious and the tone of voice is very helpful. People instantly see how it works and what it does.

"Well divided sections"

"Handy for saving money"

"Looks professional"

Popular destinations

Popular destinations are inspiring.

"Good marketing strategy, maybe I don't know where to go"

"Great to give people an idea of what to visit!"

Character

People like the gnome. Yes, really. Sometimes advertising campaigns can become part of a company's brand and image – like the Energizer Bunny or the Travelocity Gnome. Here is what users thought of the gnome:

"The gnome looks very appealing"

"Funny character"

Click on the things you would remove from this page.

Yes, alternatively there are also some people who dislike the gnome (19%). Other standouts are the 'Las Vegas' (13%) and Facebook 'Like' button in the menu (13%), the special deals and advertisements and 'Trending topics in travel' (20%).

Header

The 'Las Vegas' menu item seems out of place, it is not a logical follow-up to the buttons before it.

> "Doesn't seem like a general tab; rather specific"

> "Why just put Las Vegas here?"

Again, the Facebook 'Like' button is disliked by participants. Giving the button a prominent place can make you seem very insecure (Think about someone asking you, "Can you please tell me and your friends you like me?" at each real life meeting and you'll get the point).

> "Trying too hard"

> "I don't like it when companies push a connection"

> "Facebook makes it all infantile"

Advertisement

People use a site like this to take matters in their own hands and search for a good deal themselves. Bombarding them with package deals seems to counter intuitive to this. It also makes you wonder if a manual search gives you the best deal in the first place.

"I want more information, less ads"

"Again, an ad forcing pertinent information"

"Why call this an advertisement when this is for the site itself?"

Other

The phrasing 'trending topics in travel' comes across like the company is trying too hard.

"Trying too hard"

"I don't care where other people are going"

"Calling it 'Trending' seems to capitalize on social media which is obnoxious for adults. Why not 'popular' or 'top choices'?"

BookIt.com

Click on the elements you like on this page.

There is not an awful lot that is liked on this page. The search area (62%) and PayPal integration (23%) get the most votes.

Search area

Search area uses tabs and is clear and concise.

> "Tabs make for easy navigation between the forms"
>
> "Nice colors"
>
> "I like that you can customize your searches for just flights or hotels"

PayPal

BookIt.com promotes the ability to use PayPal which is well received by our participants.

"LOVE PayPal"

"PayPal is a plus"

"I love they accept PayPal"

Click on the things you would remove from this page.

Internal advertising elements get the most votes for removal on BookIt.com. As we have seen with more websites, the Facebook 'Like' banner (56%) gets a lot of negative feedback.

Promotional content

BookIt.com uses a lot of promotional content scattered across the page. Our participants could do without these elements. They are in your face and distract from the ability to search for your own hotel en flight deals.

"The clock represents pressure to book, and can be a consumer turnoff"

"Time ticking clock. High pressure sales technique. Don't like"

"Way, way too much advertising. It's hard to find what you're looking for"

Facebook

Again Facebook is used without an extra incentive.Explaining what people get out of it if they tell all their friends they like BookIt.com would help.
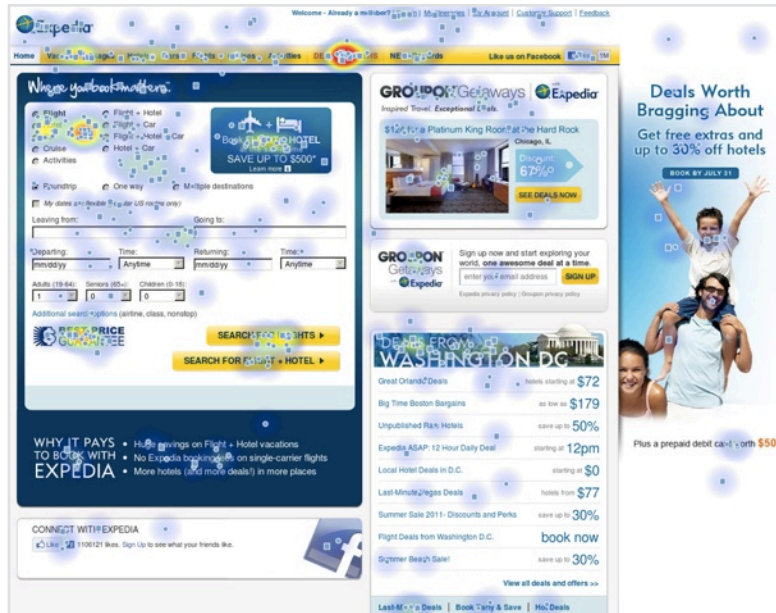
"I don't care who likes it on Facebook. All I care about are cheap deals"

"Hate the Facebook connection. I will never connect with a business on Facebook"

"I dislike Facebook references"

Expedia

Click on the elements you like on this page.

One thing that really stands out is the 'deals and offers' button (29%). While other sites score badly on promotional elements, test participants cited them as a strength for Expedia (42%). The search area is also well liked similar to other comparison sites (80%).

The search area

The search area is the most important screen on these sites. This one falls about in the middle: it could be styled better and use fewer elements, but overall it is clear and easy to use. What stands out is the ability to search for either a flight, hotel, or a flight and hotel. Also the "best guaranteed price" and promotional button stand out.

"Well-organized setup, seems easy to use"

"I like the simplicity, and it's prominent"

"Like the dropdown for different traveller types"

Promotional content

The 'deals and offers' button and promotional button in the search area show that you can score with promotional content without being disliked. The execution is excellent; it is sparse and not pushy. This way, people believe they can get more value, rather than being scammed.

"It advises me as soon I come on the page I can save!"

"Will help me if I want to book a complete trip"

"Deals grab attention"

"I like how the special deals stand out"

Click on the things you would remove from this page.

There are three clear standouts here: the Facebook 'Like' button (29%), the Groupon deals promotion (38%) and the huge ad on the right (51%).

Facebook

The Facebook 'Like' button just does not seem to work on travel sites. This site sports two of them – one at the top and one in a big box below the search area.

"I don't see why this needs a Facebook button. I would never like a company on Facebook"

"I hate hate hate the Facebook button"

"I am here to book a trip, not to market this company on Facebook"

"I would remove the Facebook box, unless people would benefit from liking Expedia"

"This one is repeated, already on the top"

Promotional content

People expect good value on the Expedia site, but they also get the option to leave behind an email address for more value through some type of Groupon / Expedia combo promotion. This is confusing and gives you the idea you might be missing out on a better deal

"I don't like the association with Groupon. They should be two seperate entities and I would not book travel with Groupon"

"Why have Groupon here when I want to do bussiness with Expedia?"

"A lot of clutter. Why two Groupon links?"

"Large Groupon ad takes up a lot of real estate"

The huge add is just not liked:

"This makes the site too busy"

"This is just too much, oversaturated"

"Looks like an ad for something else"

"This makes the site look cluttered"

Priceline.com

Click on the elements you like on this page.

Standouts are the 'last minute deals' button (22%), navigation elements and anything to do with the bidding options of the site. Also, the mobile apps are well received (32%). Not everyone is a big William Shatner fan: he's both liked (30%) and disliked (23%).

Promotional content

Last minute deals are perfect for these kind of sites: they are more trustworthy than general "better" deals. It's clear why deals can become cheaper at the last minute – e.g. if the hotel bed or plane seat will be empty. It otherwise pays off to fill them for less profit. People with no clear destination in mind rightly jump at the opportunity, while people with somewhere to go will often check them out of curiosity.

> "I like that the site helps me to find last minute deals. Makes me feel that I don't miss out"

> "Cool feature offering last minute deals"

"Last minute deals are easy to find."

The site is heavy on promotional content, but it all involves bidding, which seem to make it acceptable here. If your product is innovative and original, users will sway to temptation easier.

"I think this is an interesting concept and would like to try the 'name your own price' deal"

"I absolutely love this feature"

"Nice to have a bid option"

"Bid alert notice is a great tool for use"

The search area

The search area is liked (47%) and seems to work fine.

"Great you can choose flight, hotels, and both"

"Clear enough"

"Nice to see option for multi-stop trips"

"Easy to use tabs for different options"

Mobile apps

The banner to promote Priceline's free iPhone and Android apps has drawn some positive comments:

"Great, you can book on the go"

"Like they have an app and tell it like this"

"Good FYI. Not overwhelming, which is nice"

Click on the things you would remove from this page.

Hotspots are the VISA reward button, William Shatner and the internal banner on the right (39%).

Promotional content

The VISA reward program is confusing. People like messages that have context; asking people to join the program just before they are about to pay would be a much better option.

"Why is your VISA ad more prominent then the sign in page? Confusing"

"Too dense and too much information"

The advertising is a bit much and confusing:

"More advertising. Too much"

"Cheesy"

"These pictures don't entice me to click anything"

Conclusions

People go to sites like these to be able to quickly find a good deal for both flights and accommodation. In general, these sites do a good job providing this main selling point, and all of the search areas are uncluttered, clear and easy to use. Some sites try to diversify a bit by using tabs, or clever options, but the overall quality is consistent.

The ease of the navigation is less uniform. Some sites use a clear navigation without confusing elements, while some sites opt for a more busy approach, with scattered testimonials, buttons that don't fit in with the navigational structure, or that are really advertisements, and social media buttons are all generally frowned upon. The sites with a clear header area all standout in a positive way.

One detail that received very good reactions is the inclusion of easy contact options. A telephone number in particular seems to build trust: people have the feeling that the help of a real person is just a call away.
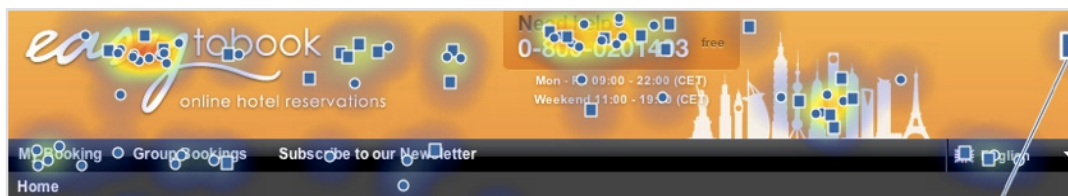
Positive feedback on EasytoBook's header with a toll-free phone number

Promotional content mostly comes in the form of ads promoting a function of the site itself. This almost never seems to get a lot of sympathy, and is often on the nominated list for removal. This is no surprise of course, advertisement can be beneficial even if only a small percentage of people react on it, and the benefits thus seem to justify the means.

There are notable differences however, how each sites goes about showing ads. Ads that are easy to identify and buttons that are really advertisements are irritating to site visitors. Although they could improve the bottom line, other sites show that there are more innovative ways to go about promoting special deals. Examples are a bidding system, last minute deals, and more realistic deals in general. People don't like the feeling that they need to click an ad to get more value from a site than they can get out of the basic functionality of the site.

One big thing that really stood out in the feedback is the reaction of website visitors to the Facebook 'Like' buttons which was overwhelmingly negative across the board. Sure some people approve of them, but most participants disliked the buttons with a passion. They really hate the pushy appearance of a company asking for an endorsement. Of course, people use 'Likes' differently as well: it is easy to stay updated on good content though the Facebook news feed. This can be communicated more clearly, as well as any other benefits one could get from 'Liking' the page (such as deals only for followers, for example). One might ascertain that companies in the travel sector are simply putting the Facebook 'Like' button on their homepage because "everyone else is doing it", however doing so without a clear social media

marketing strategy is counterproductive if you alienate site visitors and come across as pushy or 'begging' a user to 'Like' your company or brand.

Negative feedback on Facebook buttons (Expedia, BookIt, TraveloCity)

Lastly, participants found added value when there was some room for serendipity. Not everyone knows where they want to go, and some of the sites cleverly cater to them by showing popular destinations and points of interest in different cities.