

Flights Online: Ensuring Your Site Takes Off

Online travel usability report
2011



webcredible

user experience • research • design • training ●●●

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Introduction

The market opportunity

The European online travel market has seen considerable growth over the last 5 years with an estimated 30% of travel bookings now made online across Europe¹.

With the UK, Germany and France approaching maturity in the sector, competition is fierce and consumers now not only use the web to make travel bookings, but also to research and plan their holidays. In 2007, an estimated 41% of UK travellers preferred going online to research, but 70% preferred to make their bookings off line².

Given the sector's continued forecast growth in the European online travel market size to US\$108bn³ and the clear gap in travellers researching holidays compared to actual booking online, there is a clear opportunity for developing online web presence for maximum competitive advantage. Usability has been proven to deliver commercial benefits to businesses by helping to reduce the risk of drop-offs, increase return visits and ultimately loyalty to the brand. This is particularly important for highly transactional travel agent and airline carrier sites.

About this report

In April and May 2011, Webcredible investigated the usability of 20 travel websites in the UK, evenly split between travel agents and airline carriers. Scores were assigned to all the websites based on a pre-specified list of guidelines as listed on page 4. The report also provides a short analysis of mobile-based sites and apps in the travel industry and provides some key insight into this area of business.

This year Virgin Atlantic saw a huge improvement in their usability score compared to the results from 2010, giving them the highest rating and pushing them above British Airways in the league table. Increasing the usability of a travel website will increase the success users have in finding and booking flights – it's as simple as that. Improved usability will also lead to an increase in loyalty and return site visitors, and an improvement in the perception of the online and offline brand. Usability is particularly important for those travel brands that rely entirely on their online channel to sell their products and services.

Who is this report for?

This report is aimed at anyone involved with a website selling flights and related travel services online, including: marketing managers, Internet managers and web developers. Although our analysis focuses on travel websites, the guidelines are highly transferable to other websites. The report assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge

Methodology

Webcredible conducted an expert review and analysed the websites of 20 UK online travel agents and airline carriers in April and May 2011. The results were also benchmarked against the 2010 results to track industry trends.

Each website was evaluated against 20 best practice guidelines and assigned a score of 0 to 5 for each guideline, with 5 being the maximum. With 20 guidelines in total, websites were assigned a total Web Usability Index rating out of 100.

The guidelines against which we benchmarked the 20 travel sites were:

Flight search

1. Provide a clear & well designed 'first step'
2. Offer functionality to aid the booking process
3. Provide an effective calendar
4. Allow flexibility when completing the first step

Search results and flight summary

5. Provide clear results pages
6. Allow sorting & manipulation of the results
7. Make pages "share friendly"
8. Support comparison shoppers
9. Display the price (or an estimate) as early as possible
10. Make it easy to refine search or look for another flight
11. Provide information on each airport
12. Use a clear flight confirmation page

Booking pages

13. Provide a contact number throughout the booking process
14. Use appropriate up-selling
15. Display a clear progress bar
16. Ensure cancellation/change rules are clear & findable

Errors and error handling

17. Provide a clear error summary
18. Ensure errors are clearly highlighted next to fields
19. Provide explicit instructions on how to correct errors
20. Ensure the system is able to cope with common errors

Summary

Online travel league table

The 20 travel websites received the following scores in total, out of 100:

2011 rank		2010 rank	Website	2011 score	2010 score
1	↑	3	Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)	82	75
2	↓	1	British Airways (www.britishairways.com)	80	78
3	↓	2	Easyjet (www.easyjet.com)	77	77
4	↑	5	BMI (www.flybmi.com)	76	70
5	↑	6=	Travelocity (www.travelocity.co.uk)	73	68
6	↓	4	Travel Republic (www.travelrepublic.co.uk)	71	73
7=	↓	6=	Expedia.co.uk (www.expedia.co.uk)	68	68
7=	↑	10	Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk)	68	64
7=	↑	11=	Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk)	68	63
7=	↑	14=	Netflights (www.netflights.com)	68	62
11	↑	14=	Lastminute (www.lastminute.com)	66	62
12	↓	9	Ebookers (www.ebookers.com)	64	65
13	↓	11=	FlyBE (www.flybe.com)	63	63
14	↑	17=	STA travel (www.statravel.co.uk)	62	56
15	↑	16	Jet2.com (www.jet2.com)	63	63
16	↓	11=	Monarch (www.flymonarch.com)	59	63
17	↓	8	Ryanair (www.ryanair.com/en)	58	62
18	↓	17=	First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk)	56	56
19	=	19	Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com)	52	52
20	=	20	Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)	50	47
			Average score	65.7	64.4

This year 6 out of 20 websites have scored 70 and above. There is a slight increase in the total average score from last year and all of the websites received half marks or above, which is definitely a good sign that shows travel companies have been putting effort into making improvements to the usability of their websites.

Still, with 9 websites scoring between 60-69 points and 5 websites scoring below 60 points, there's still plenty of room for improvement for these websites to make it easier for their customers to search and book flights as well as obtain travel-related information. Key areas for improvement include, page sharing functions, further potential for comparisons and the provision of airport info and contact numbers.

Travel agent vs. carrier websites

Splitting up the websites into travel agents and carriers to ensure like for like comparison reveals the following rankings:

Travel agent website	2011 score	2010 score
Travelocity (www.travelocity.co.uk)	73	68
Travel Republic (www.travelrepublic.co.uk)	71	73
Expedia.co.uk (www.expedia.co.uk)	68	68
Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk)	68	64
Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk)	68	63
Netflights (www.netflights.com)	68	62
Lastminute (www.lastminute.com)	66	62
Ebookers (www.ebookers.com)	64	65
STA travel (www.statravel.co.uk)	62	56
Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)	50	47
Average score	65.9	62.8

Carrier website	2011 score	2010 score
Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)	82	75

British Airways (www.britishairways.com)	80	78
Easyjet (www.easyjet.com)	77	77
BMI (www.flybmi.com)	76	70
FlyBE (www.flybe.com)	63	63
Jet2.com (www.jet2.com)	60	60
Monarch (www.flymonarch.com)	59	63
Ryanair (www.ryanair.com/en)	58	66
First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk)	56	56
Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com)	52	52
Average score	65.6	66.0

The main differences observed between travel agents and carriers were:

- Travel agents are typically more transparent with call centre contact details. Having contact numbers and call centre opening timings is a must. This will not only aid visitors during the search and booking process but also to bring a feeling of reassurance when dealing with technical or other queries.
- Carrier sites ensured cancellation and refund rules were clearer compared to the agent sites. It was noticed that this information was buried away in site terms and conditions in the agent sites, which made it very hard to find.
- Due to the smaller volume of flights available, carrier sites have less need to offer more sophisticated features for manipulating search results by sorting and filtering.
- Although there appears to be little disparity in the scores of travel agent sites and carrier sites on the whole travel agents lag behind when it comes to criteria such as showing prices early on, easy refinement of searches, and showing a clear progress bar during the flight booking process.
- Carrier sites are still generally less transparent when it comes to total pricing, choosing to add additional costs later during users' booking journey, despite customer backlash about this practice.

In addition, with the growing number of airlines flying to new airports which many customers may not be familiar with, many of the sites aren't giving sufficient information about where they're located and how customers can get there. This kind of information is critical when planning a flight and it's essential that travel sites support users in achieving their goals. Please consult the appendix on p32 for a full breakdown of scores.

Results

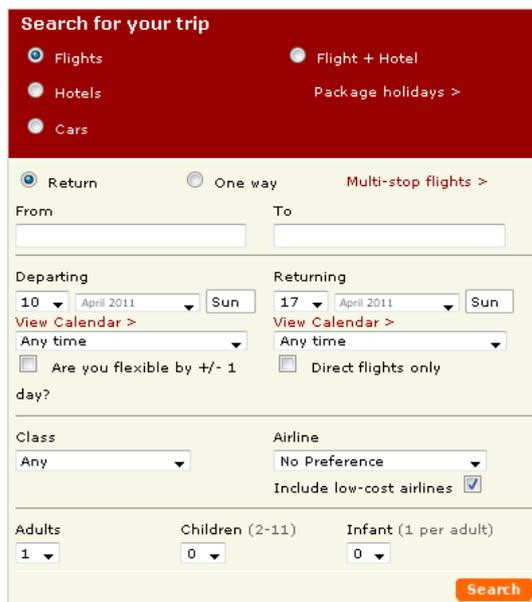
1. Provide a clear & well designed 'first step'

Overall average
4.5 out of 5 (2010: 4.1)

Travel agent average
4.7 out of 5 (2010: 4.4)

Carrier average
4.4 out of 5 (2010: 3.8)

Many web users arriving on a travel site aren't looking to browse around – they usually have a target destination, and want to immediately find out how much it'll cost to get there. By displaying the start of the booking process on the homepage, travel sites clearly communicate how users can start on this journey and give users the chance to get going straight away.



Search for your trip

Flights Flight + Hotel
 Hotels [Package holidays >](#)
 Cars

Return One way [Multi-stop flights >](#)

From: To:

Departing: 10 April 2011 Sun
[View Calendar >](#)
 Any time

Returning: 17 April 2011 Sun
[View Calendar >](#)
 Any time

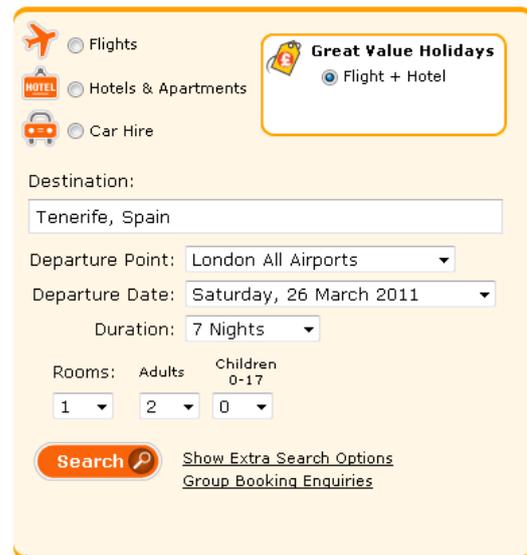
Are you flexible by +/- 1 day? Direct flights only

Class: Any Airline: No Preference
 Include low-cost airlines

Adults: 1 Children (2-11): 0 Infant (1 per adult): 0

Search

Opodo provided users with standard flight search option which was clearly indicated on the top of the form.



Flights Flight + Hotel
 Hotels & Apartments
 Car Hire

Great Value Holidays

Destination: Tenerife, Spain

Departure Point: London All Airports

Departure Date: Saturday, 26 March 2011

Duration: 7 Nights

Rooms: Adults: 1 Children 0-17: 0

Search [Show Extra Search Options](#)
[Group Booking Enquiries](#)

Travel Republic scored poorly by having unfamiliar default search options without providing clear alternative search options (e.g. Destination and Departure point).

The websites generally fared well for this guideline, with 13 out of 20 scoring 5 out of 5. The majority of marks lost were for not having a clear or familiar default option and showing a cluttered search form with poor grouping of options.

2. Offer functionality to aid the booking process

Overall average
3.0 out of 5 (2010: 2.9)

Travel agent average
3.5 out of 5 (2010: 3.0)

Carrier average
2.6 out of 5 (2010: 2.4)

A person booking a flight through a high street travel agent can make special requests that are taken into account when searching for flights (such as wanting to travel in business class, or only wanting direct flights). People booking online have the same needs, which should be supported through the booking process.

The following options should be provided:

- Flexible dates
- Direct flights only
- Multi-flight trips
- Cabin Class e.g. First Class, Business Class



The screenshot shows a flight search form with tabs for Holiday, Flights, Hotel, Flight+Hotel, and Cruise. The 'Flights' tab is active. The form asks 'What type of flight do you need?' with a 'Return:' radio button set to 'Single:'. It has fields for 'Departing From:' and 'Going To:' with examples '(e.g. London or LGW)' and '(e.g. Paris or PAR)'. There are also 'Depart:' and 'Return:' date fields. A 'direct flight only' checkbox is checked. Below this are dropdowns for 'adults (13+)', 'children (2-12)', and 'infants (<2)', with 'Seats' set to 2, 0, and 0 respectively. A green 'Search >' button is at the bottom.

Thomas Cook doesn't provide any additional functionality to help site visitors search for flights through the search engine.



The screenshot shows a flight search form with tabs for 'Find a flight', 'Book a room', and 'Car Rental'. The 'Find a flight' tab is active. It has radio buttons for 'Round Trip' (selected) and 'One Way', with links for 'More options' and 'Flight Connector'. Fields include 'Where are you flying from?' (New York All), 'Departing' (dd/mm/yy), 'Cabin' (Economy (lowest)), 'Going to?' (London All), 'Returning' (dd/mm/yy), and 'Cabin' (Economy (lowest)). There are also dropdowns for 'Adults (12+)', 'Children (2-11)', and 'Infants (<2)'. At the bottom, there are radio buttons for 'Lowest fare +/- 3 days', 'Exact dates/stopover', 'Miles Plus Money', and 'Spend Miles', along with a purple 'FIND FLIGHTS' button.

Virgin Atlantic obtained top scores for having several options to help site visitors search for flights.

The websites generally scored poorly for this guideline, with just 5 out of 20 websites achieving 5 points out of 5.

3. Provide an effective calendar

Overall average
3.1 out of 5 (2010: 3.5)

Travel agent average
3.2 out of 5 (2010: 3.8)

Carrier average
3.1 out of 5 (2010: 3.3)

Entering dates into websites can be an erratic business – it's very easy to enter the wrong date without noticing, and people can't easily calculate future dates without a calendar. Most booking forms now allow date entry through a calendar, but unless this feature is properly designed it can put off rather than help customers.

A calendar feature should adhere to the following good usability principles:

- A clear and understandable button is used to launch the calendar
- The next and previous links are in the same place for each month
- The calendar is easy to close
- The calendar does not obstruct the date field that it's populating
- The calendar should be closely associated with the relevant date field
- Users can enter a date manually if they don't want to use the calendar
- The 'return' calendar begins on or after the 'leaving' date



19 of the 20 sites offered the calendar feature, but this doesn't mean all calendars were equally good, with only 8 out of 29 websites scoring 4 or above out of 5. The majority fell short on 1 or 2 of the above guidelines.

4. Allow flexibility when completing the first step

Overall average
3.4 out of 5 (2010: 3.6)

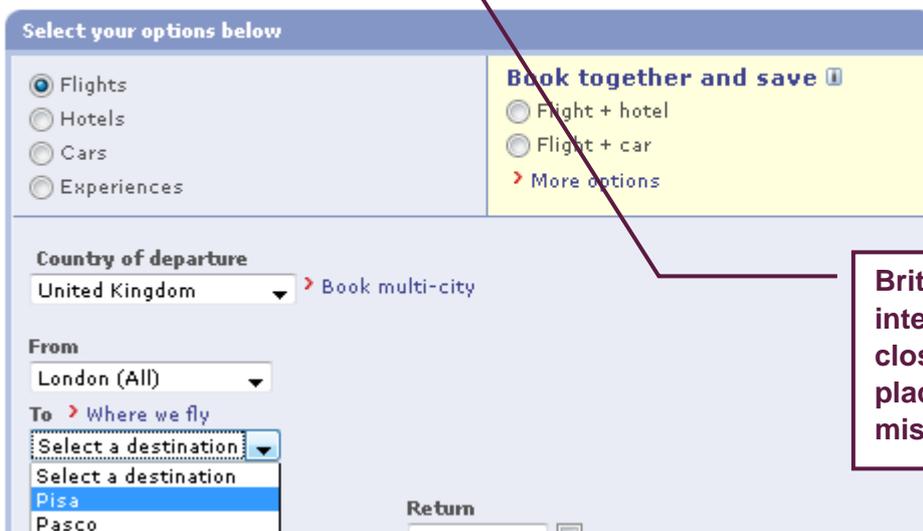
Travel agent average
3.1 out of 5 (2010: 3.1)

Carrier average
3.7 out of 5 (2010: 4)

People are liable to make errors when completing the first step of the flight search. For example many sites require people to type in their flight destination, and spelling foreign place names correctly can be a real struggle. People often don't know an airport's exact name or that there's more than 1 airport at their destination. Despite this, many websites force people to specify an airport, rather than allowing them the flexibility of just naming a city.

Error

- There are several close matches for your airport name. Please select the one you require from the pull down menu and resubmit your request.



Select your options below

- Flights
- Hotels
- Cars
- Experiences

Book together and save

- Flight + hotel
- Flight + car
- [More options](#)

Country of departure: United Kingdom [Book multi-city](#)

From: London (All)

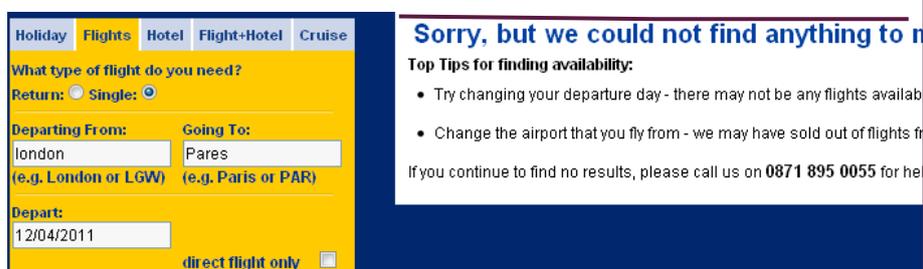
To: [Where we fly](#)

Select a destination

- Select a destination
- Pisa
- Pasco

Return

British Airways intelligently provided the closest options when a place name had been misspelled.



Holiday Flights Hotel Flight+Hotel Cruise

What type of flight do you need?

Return: Single:

Departing From: london Going To: Pares
(e.g. London or LGW) (e.g. Paris or PAR)

Depart: 12/04/2011

direct flight only

Sorry, but we could not find anything to match your search criteria.

Top Tips for finding availability:

- Try changing your departure day - there may not be any flights available for the dates you have selected.
- Change the airport that you fly from - we may have sold out of flights from the airport you have selected.

If you continue to find no results, please call us on 0871 895 0055 for help.

Thomas Cook scored poorly on this guideline because it didn't provide any help to customers who had misspelled a city name.

Carrier sites scored better than travel agent sites in general for allowing more flexibility in completing the first step of a flight search. Only 8 out of these 20 carriers and agent site scored a 4 or 5.

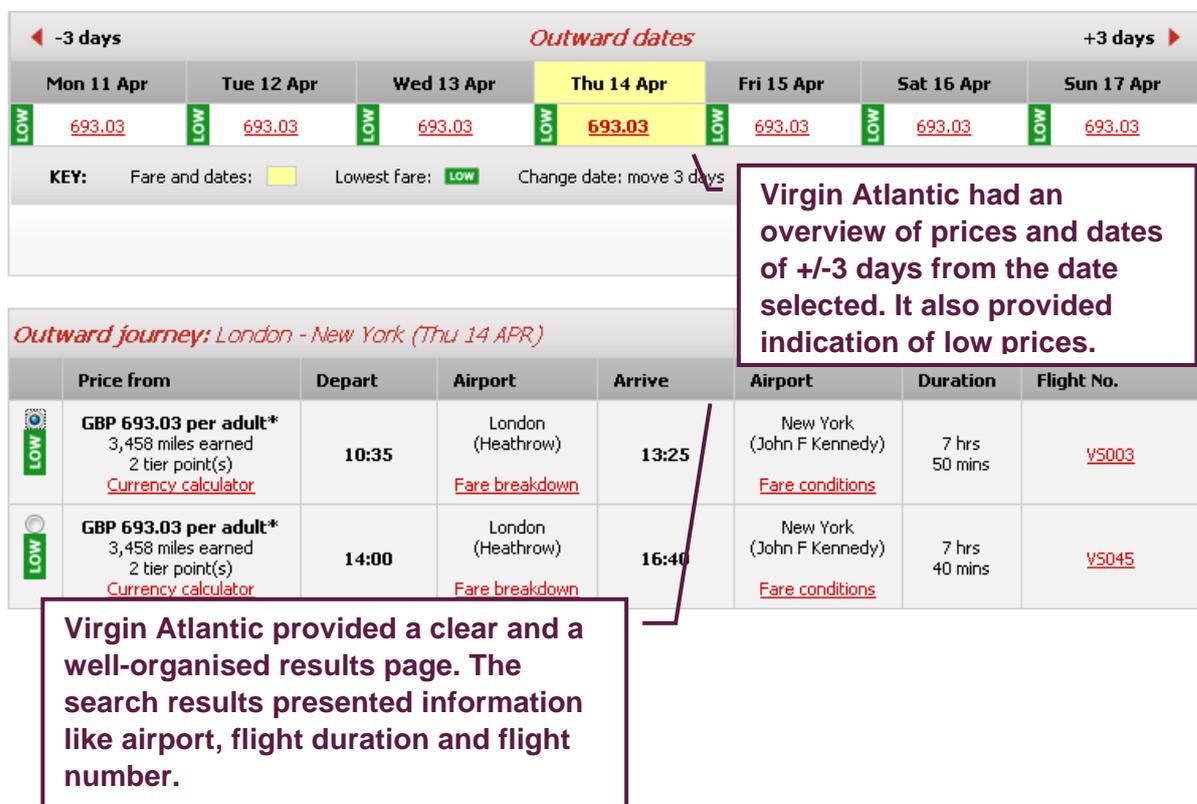
5. Provide clear results pages

Overall average
3.4 out of 5 (2010: 3.3)

Travel agent average
3.3 out of 5 (2010: 3.3)

Carrier average
3.5 out of 5 (2010: 3.3)

Often, search results pages contain a large amount of information – it's essential that the information is presented to users in a clear and easily digestible manner. If users struggle to understand the results, they might not proceed further.



Outward dates

Mon 11 Apr	Tue 12 Apr	Wed 13 Apr	Thu 14 Apr	Fri 15 Apr	Sat 16 Apr	Sun 17 Apr
LOW 693.03						

KEY: Fare and dates: Lowest fare: LOW Change date: move 3 days

Outward journey: London - New York (Thu 14 APR)

	Price from	Depart	Airport	Arrive	Airport	Duration	Flight No.
	GBP 693.03 per adult* 3,458 miles earned 2 tier point(s) Currency calculator	10:35	London (Heathrow) Fare breakdown	13:25	New York (John F Kennedy) Fare conditions	7 hrs 50 mins	Y5003
	GBP 693.03 per adult* 3,458 miles earned 2 tier point(s) Currency calculator	14:00	London (Heathrow) Fare breakdown	16:40	New York (John F Kennedy) Fare conditions	7 hrs 40 mins	Y5045

Virgin Atlantic had an overview of prices and dates of +/-3 days from the date selected. It also provided indication of low prices.

Virgin Atlantic provided a clear and a well-organised results page. The search results presented information like airport, flight duration and flight number.

Although both travel agents and carrier websites have close average scores for this guideline, carrier sites had higher scores in general. This was because carrier websites had fewer options to display on the screen when compared to agent sites. Carrier sites have comparatively used better colour and typography to help in communicating the hierarchy of information on such pages and make them appear less cluttered.

6. Allow sorting & manipulation of the results

Overall average
4.5 out of 5 (2010: 4.2)

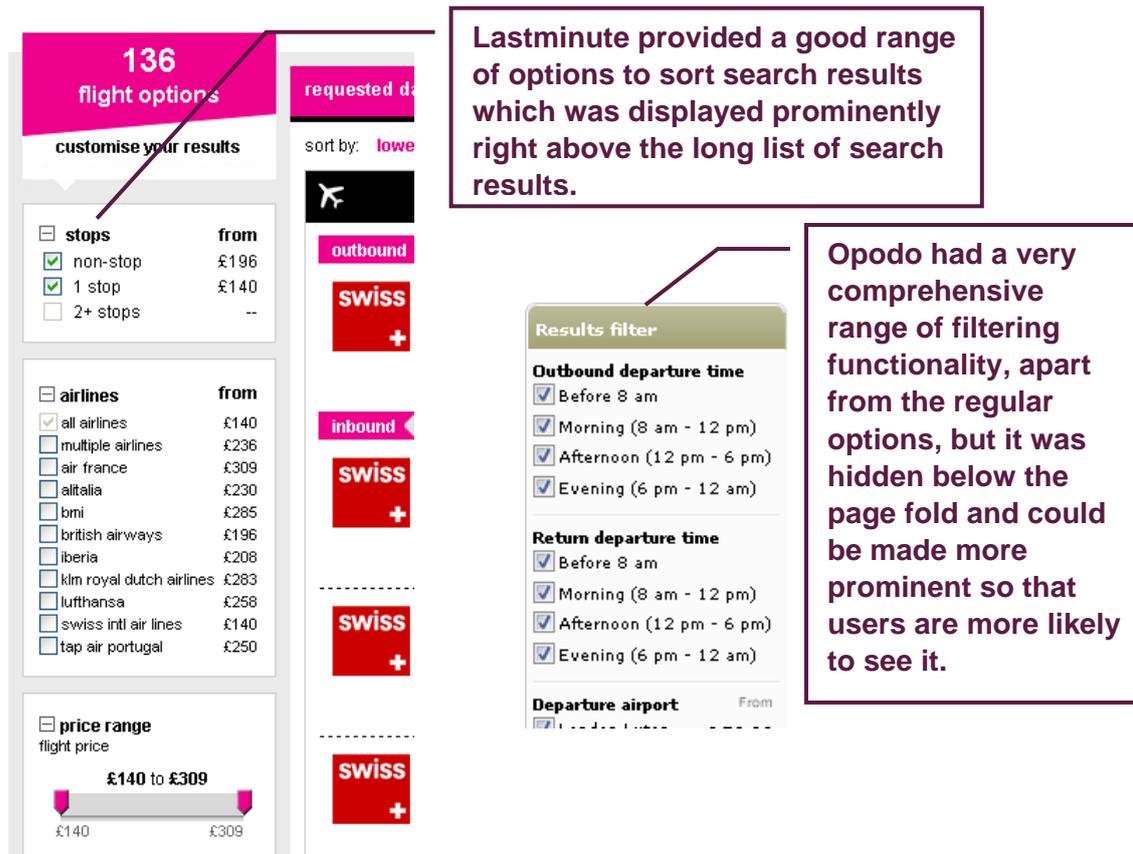
Travel agent average
4.0 out of 5 (2010: 3.3)

Carrier average
5.0 out of 5 (2010: 5.0)

If users are provided with a long list of results then it's crucial they're able to manipulate this list in order to find the exact flight they're after.

Sorting a long list allows users to bring products with certain criteria to the top of the page. This is particularly useful for users who aren't exactly sure what they want. Travellers usually want to sort by price to bring the cheapest flights to the top. Business travellers may also want to sort by departure and arrival time.

Filtering on the other hand lets users reduce the number of items in the list by filtering out products that don't conform to a certain criteria. This is often more useful for travellers who have specific requirements such as a preferred carrier or a direct flight.



136 flight options
customise your results

requested d
sort by: lowe

stops from
 non-stop £196
 1 stop £140
 2+ stops --

airlines from
 all airlines £140
 multiple airlines £236
 air france £309
 alitalia £230
 bmi £285
 british airways £196
 iberia £208
 kin royal dutch airlines £283
 lufthansa £258
 swiss intl air lines £140
 tap air portugal £250

price range
flight price
£140 to £309
£140 £309

outbound
swiss +

inbound
swiss +

swiss +

swiss +

swiss +

Results filter

Outbound departure time
 Before 8 am
 Morning (8 am - 12 pm)
 Afternoon (12 pm - 6 pm)
 Evening (6 pm - 12 am)

Return departure time
 Before 8 am
 Morning (8 am - 12 pm)
 Afternoon (12 pm - 6 pm)
 Evening (6 pm - 12 am)

Departure airport From

Lastminute provided a good range of options to sort search results which was displayed prominently right above the long list of search results.

Opodo had a very comprehensive range of filtering functionality, apart from the regular options, but it was hidden below the page fold and could be made more prominent so that users are more likely to see it.

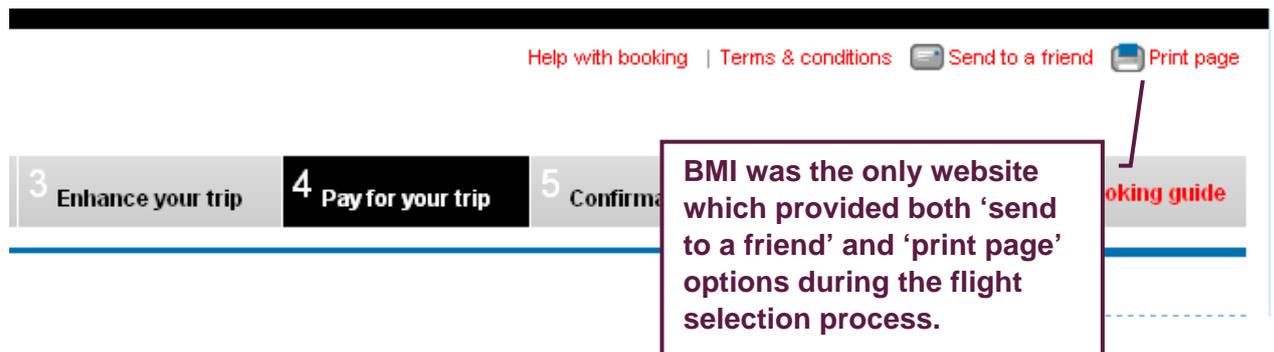
The 10 carrier sites didn't need to offer the ability to manipulate search results because the number of flights offered was, in general, too small for such requirements. Among the travel agent sites, many offered a range of filtering options, but only 4 offered comprehensive filtering options, but many sites now allow customers to change the sort order or show flights from their preferred airline only.

7. Make pages “share friendly”

Overall average 1.7 out of 5 (2010: 2.3)	Travel agent average 1.6 out of 5 (2010: 2.1)	Carrier average 1.9 out of 5 (2010: 2.5)
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Not every user that embarks on a booking process will want to book a flight there and then. Some may simply be checking out prices or investigating flight times. Agreeing on a flight is often a joint decision (for e.g. between friends and family) so it’s important that your site supports users by letting them share pages.

Sites should even offer an ‘email a friend’ feature which would include a link to a ‘refreshed’ version of that same search at any time. This type of feature adds significant value to the user experience by offering a quick and easy method for users to actively seek out feedback from their ‘friend’ or ‘family member’, who are likely to be other decision makers in the process.



Most of the websites scored poorly for this guideline, with only 2 out of 20 websites providing a sharing option either via email or social networking tools. In addition, not all sites provided good printable pages, and pages from a few sites were illegible when printed.

8. Support comparison shoppers

Overall average
2.0 out of 5 (2010: 0.7)

Travel agent average
2.4 out of 5 (2010: 1.9)

Carrier average
1.5 out of 5 (2010: 1.7)

Most people will compare times and prices across several travel websites, making it unlikely that they'll book a flight on their first visit to any site.

This 'comparison shopping' behaviour is well understood in e-commerce. It's well known that travel sites experience the highest level of comparison shopping among the leading e-commerce sectors: 1 in every 4 visits to travel websites come from another site in the same category.

Given how users naturally behave, it's disappointing that so few of the sites we evaluated provide users with features designed to support this form of behaviour.

Sites should ensure searches are saved across sessions – allowing users to visit another site and return without the need to re-enter their search criteria again.

Your flight search

<p>From Show departures</p> <input type="text" value="London Heathrow, United Kingdom (UK), LHR"/> <p>To Show destinations</p> <input type="text" value="Bahrain Intl, Bahrain, BAH"/>	<p>Outbound</p> <input type="text" value="Sat, 26 Mar 2011"/> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> One way</p> <p>Return</p> <input type="text" value="Sat, 26 Mar 2011"/> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Flexible dates</p>	<p>Adults <input type="text" value="1"/> Children (2-11) <input type="text" value="0"/> Infants (under 2) <input type="text" value="0"/></p> <p>Cabin <input type="text" value="Economy"/></p> <p>Promotional code <input type="text" value="Enter code here"/></p> <p style="text-align: right; color: red;">Search again</p>
--	---	---

▼ Your recent searches

	From	To	Depart	Return	Cabin	Price	
1	London Heathrow (LHR)	Beirut (BEY)	26 Mar	28 Mar	Economy	From £410	Retrieve >

BMI was the only website which provided a summary of site visitors' recent searches.

Travel websites don't generally offer persistent features for results pages either. Half the sites remember the search criteria for the next visit, but that applies only to the latest search.

Agent sites scored 2.4 on average while carrier sites scored a lower average of 1.5.

9. Display the price (or an estimate) as early as possible

Overall average
3.7 out of 5 (2010: 3.4)

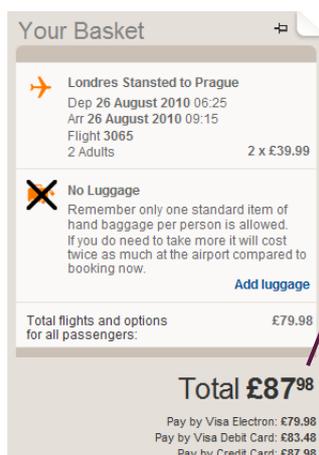
Travel agent average
3.2 out of 5 (2010: 2.4)

Carrier average
4.2 out of 5 (2010: 4.3)

Users often get frustrated with extra taxes and charges part-way through a booking process. This is obviously true for any e-commerce checkout process. If users have previously been affected by extra charges then they're likely to be particularly wary of such methods. The pricing of flights should be absolutely clear and broken down as much as possible to show the contributing cost factors to build a higher level of trust from the user.

It's essential that you're as up-front as possible and display prices in full (including all extra costs) as early in the booking process as possible.

Users can only make a decision on various options once they feel they've got all the pricing information available – if they're then presented with further charges they'll be forced to re-consider their options. This guideline is particularly important as people tend to react very negatively if they've paid for something they weren't aware of.



Your Basket

✈️ Londres Stansted to Prague
Dep 26 August 2010 06:25
Arr 26 August 2010 09:15
Flight 3065
2 Adults 2 x £39.99

✖️ No Luggage
Remember only one standard item of hand baggage per person is allowed. If you do need to take more it will cost twice as much at the airport compared to booking now. [Add luggage](#)

Total flights and options for all passengers: £79.98

Total £87⁹⁸
Pay by Visa Electron: £79.98
Pay by Visa Debit Card: £83.48
Pay by Credit Card: £87.98

EasyJet presented the total price throughout the booking process. It also included the additional charges by different card payment methods.

Flybe displayed the total price in the first step of flight selection mentioning explicitly that the price was inclusive of all taxes.

Departing

Lowest fare	Flybe Economy Plus	
Aberdeen (ABZ) to Frankfurt (FRA) < Previous 3 days Next 3 days >		
Wed 13 Apr 2011	Thu 14 Apr 2011	Fri 15 Apr 2011
Dep 08:40, Arr 18:20 £ 205.25 Inc Tax	Dep 08:40, Arr 18:20 £ 205.25 Inc Tax	Dep 08:40, Arr 18:20 £ 217.25 Inc Tax

Carrier sites usually scored better than travel agent sites on this guideline which can be explained by the fact that travel agent websites tend to have less information on additional charges from each airline. However, travel agents should at least indicate what is/isn't included on the results page.

10. Make it easy to refine search or look for another flight

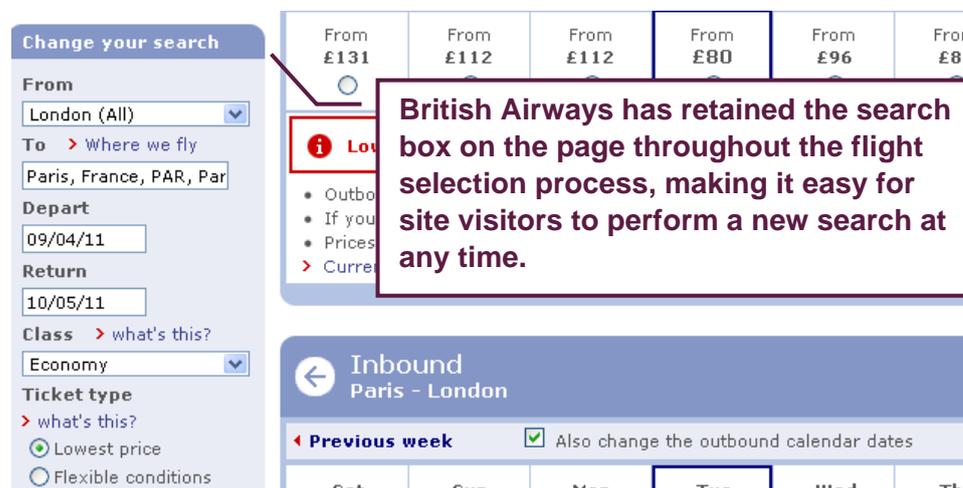
Overall average
3.9 out of 5 (2010: 3.7)

Travel agent average
4.3 out of 5 (2010: 4.3)

Carrier average
3.5 out of 5 (2010: 3)

A booking process shouldn't assume that users will be happy with the results of their search. It's crucial that if users aren't happy, the booking process helps them keep looking for an appropriate flight - making it difficult for them to perform a subsequent search and they're unlikely to hang around for too long.

The easiest way to do this is to allow users to start a new search directly from the results page. All the previously entered search criteria (such as dates, airports and the number of people) should be maintained.



Change your search

From: London (All)

To: Paris, France, PAR, Par

Depart: 09/04/11

Return: 10/05/11

Class: Economy

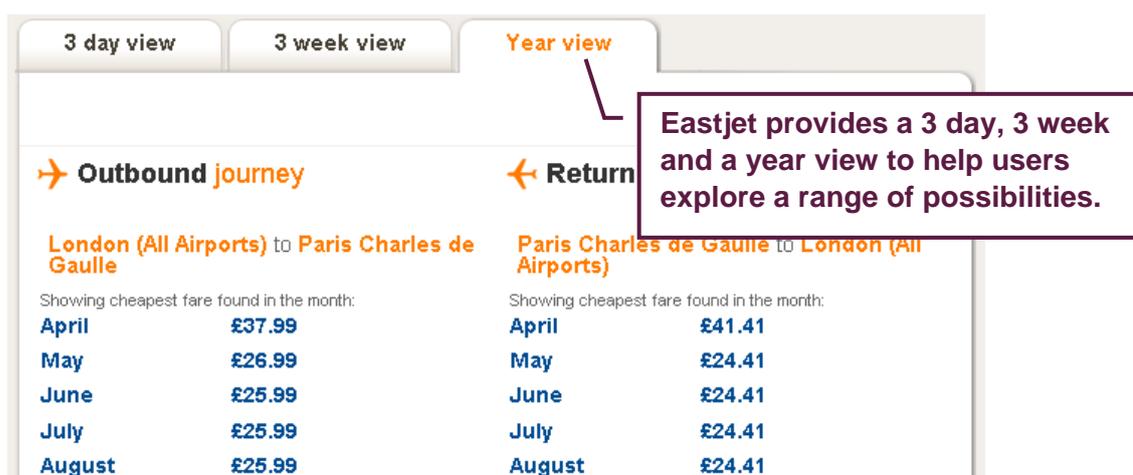
Ticket type: Lowest price

From: £131, £112, £112, £80, £96, £81

British Airways has retained the search box on the page throughout the flight selection process, making it easy for site visitors to perform a new search at any time.

Inbound Paris - London

Previous week Also change the outbound calendar dates



3 day view | 3 week view | **Year view**

Outbound journey | **Return**

London (All Airports) to Paris Charles de Gaulle | **Paris Charles de Gaulle to London (All Airports)**

Showing cheapest fare found in the month:

Month	Outbound Fare (£)	Return Fare (£)
April	£37.99	£41.41
May	£26.99	£24.41
June	£25.99	£24.41
July	£25.99	£24.41
August	£25.99	£24.41

Eastjet provides a 3 day, 3 week and a year view to help users explore a range of possibilities.

All travel sites provided some way to refine and repeat a search. However, carrier sites provided fewer and limited number of options which were insufficient. Further, fewer carrier sites maintained the previous search options.

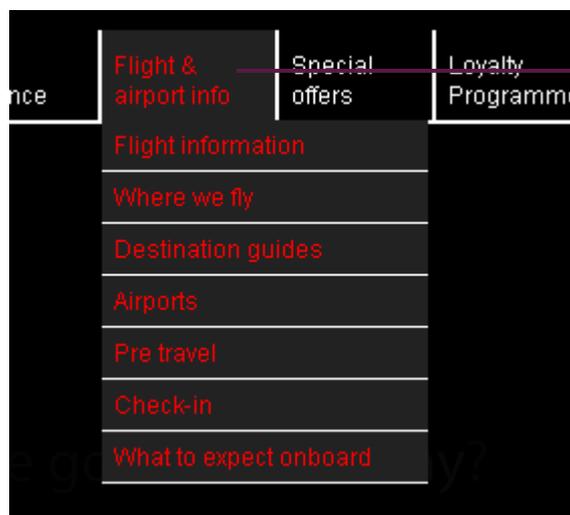
11. Provide information on each airport

Overall average 1.4 out of 5 (2010: 1.2)	Travel agent average 1.6 out of 5 (2010: 0.9)	Carrier average 1.3 out of 5 (2010: 1.5)
--	---	--

People are less likely to book a flight to or from a specific airport if they aren't certain:

- Where it is
- How to get there
- What are the transport links (public and otherwise)
- How long it takes to get there from the original location/final destination

This has become more of an issue since airlines started flying to many new and unfamiliar airports. Despite this, many websites fail to provide information on where airports are or how to get there.



BMI scored points for having airport information displayed under a very clear heading but lost marks for not placing it contextually.

Netflights provided useful options like airport parking and stopover guides but they were found below the fold.



With 5 out of 20 sites having no airport or destination information and the rest “hiding” such information in obscure places, there’s clearly a significant problem here. This is unfortunate because users are likely to go elsewhere if they don’t know where they’re going or how to get to and from the airport and may ultimately book on another site.

12. Use a clear flight confirmation page

Overall average
4.0 out of 5 (2010: 4.1)

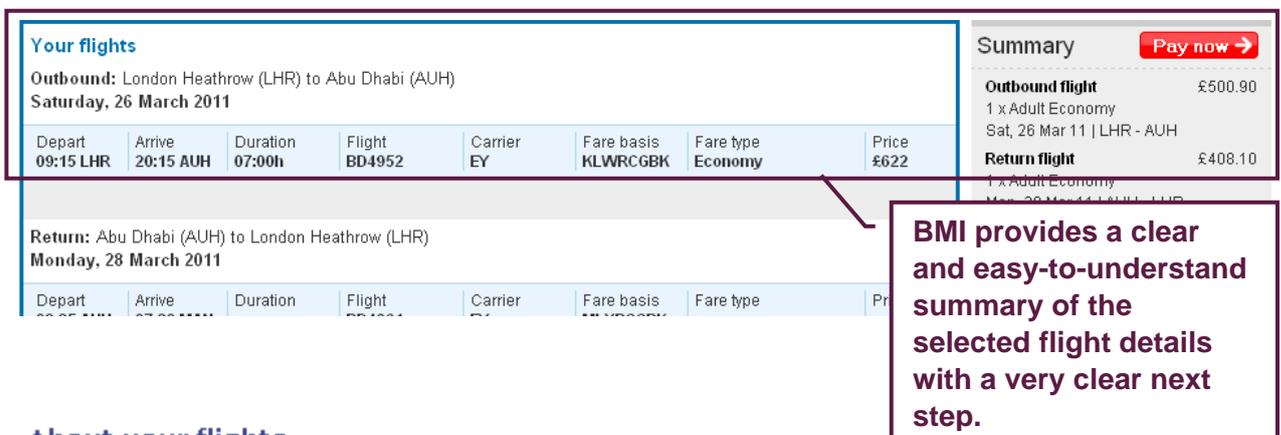
Travel agent average
4.3 out of 5 (2010: 4.1)

Carrier average
3.7 out of 5 (2010: 4.0)

After selecting flights from the search results page it's crucial that a summary page is provided. This is so users can review the flight details they've selected before proceeding with the booking. This confirmation page needs various pieces of information presented clearly to help them reach their final decision:

- Full price, clearly displayed above the page fold
- Clear 'to' and 'from' locations with the airports' names in full
- Any additional prices for extras not included in the price quoted
- Relevant flight information, times of departure and arrival and extras included

A clear next step should also be included, to ensure users know exactly how to continue their booking.



Your flights

Outbound: London Heathrow (LHR) to Abu Dhabi (AUH)
Saturday, 26 March 2011

Depart	Arrive	Duration	Flight	Carrier	Fare basis	Fare type	Price
09:15 LHR	20:15 AUH	07:00h	BD4952	EY	KLWRCGBK	Economy	£622

Return: Abu Dhabi (AUH) to London Heathrow (LHR)
Monday, 28 March 2011

Depart	Arrive	Duration	Flight	Carrier	Fare basis	Fare type	Price
08:55 AUH	07:30 LHR	07:35h	BD4951	EY	KLWRCGBK	Economy	£408.10

Summary [Pay now](#)

Outbound flight £500.90
1 x Adult Economy
Sat, 26 Mar 11 | LHR - AUH

Return flight £408.10
1 x Adult Economy
Mon, 28 Mar 11 | AUH - LHR

BMI provides a clear and easy-to-understand summary of the selected flight details with a very clear next step.



About your flights

Flight

Fare conditions

Changes
Time/date changes permitted at any time before each flight departure for a change fee of £ 60 or an upgrade fee of £ 60 plus

Additional features

- Operated by British Airways
- > 1 piece of checked baggage at 23kg (51lbs)

British Airways provides a little more detail about the flight and its additional features.

13 out of 20 sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5 on this guideline, which is a good result. However, some sites lost marks because they didn't provide a clear summary and next step. For example, some sites had 2 options to continue to the next step, ('login to proceed' and 'proceed without logging in') which weren't clearly explained and can potentially confuse users.

13. Provide a contact number throughout the booking process

Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
2.6 out of 5 (2010: 2)	3.9 out of 5 (2010: 3.2)	1.4 out of 5 (2010: 0.8)

Some travellers are unwilling to research and book flights completely online whilst others will simply research the best deals and then get straight on the phone to book. Customers who face technical issues or have further queries may also want to call for help.

As such, it's essential that a phone number is clearly visible both before and during the search and booking process. Users should feel reassured they can pick up the phone at any point, especially if they get stuck.



Netflights remained the only website which provided both their contact number and call centre opening hours on the header.

Only 6 out of the 20 travel sites got a low score of 0 or 1 out of 5 on this guideline, which is an improvement over last year's scores. Those users that aren't 'e-confident' may struggle to complete the booking process and may decide to abandon their booking if they can't pick the up phone and speak to someone.

It's also important to consider that a phone number on your site will reassure your users that you're a trustworthy company but this needs to be followed through with a good experience from the call centre for the goodwill to be fulfilled.

14. Use appropriate up-selling

Overall average
3.9 out of 5 (2010: 4.3)

Travel agent average
4.3 out of 5 (2010: 4.7)

Carrier average
3.6 out of 5 (2010: 3.9)

It's well known that there's limited profit margin in selling flights, which is why so many travel sites are keen to cross and up-sell other products to customers. However, many sites approach up-selling in a clumsy manner, potentially increasing the chances of drop-offs.

All extras offered should be 'opt-in' – users shouldn't be automatically signed up to any of the extras offered.

Passengers, Bags & Sports Equipment

Please select how many bags EVERYONE will need to travel with. [Save up to 50% on airport prices!](#)

Title	Forename	Surname	Baggage	Skis/Boards	Golf Bags
Mr	Tom	Jenkins	Hand Baggage Only	0	0

[Add Bags for All](#)

Please select the type of check-in you wish to use:

Online Check-in **Airport check-in**

Enter your passport details online and print your own boarding pass. | Check-in and receive your boarding pass at the airport desk.

[Show/hide](#) important info

The cost so far - for everyone

✈️ **EDINBURGH to Prague**
 Dep Thu 21 Apr 2011 09:00
 Arr Thu 21 Apr 2011 12:20
 Flight **LS825**

1 Adult	1 x	£93.49
Taxes and Charges	Included	
Sub-total		£93.49

[Show breakdown](#)

Baggage

Hand Baggage Only	FREE
-------------------	------

Total: £93.49

Jet2.com lost marks for not providing upfront information about options which cost extra. For example: It wasn't made clear that Online check-in would cost extra.

Meal options

In-flight meals not required

In-flight meals required

Meal allocation

Adults
Required flight meal

1	Adult meal @ £6.00
2	Adult meal @ £6.00

Thomson flights lost points for having pre selected options.

Thomson flights lost points for having pre selected options.

For two years in a row, this guideline is being followed well by nearly 15 companies who have scored a 4 or 5. It's clear that more and more sites understand the importance of transparent pricing.

Unfortunately, several sites automatically included travel insurance into their booking packages and automatically add charges for meals, carbon offsetting and seat options, and even world care fund donations.

15. Display a clear progress bar

Overall average
3.0 out of 5 (2010: 2.9)

Travel agent average
2.0 out of 5 (2010: 1.7)

Carrier average
4.1 out of 5 (2010: 4.1)

During the booking process, users must be clearly informed of where they are and how much further they have to go. This is usually achieved with a progress bar.

The progress bar should:

- Be very easy to spot
- Have easy-to-understand labels
- Highlight users' current location
- Have the appearance of a process flow

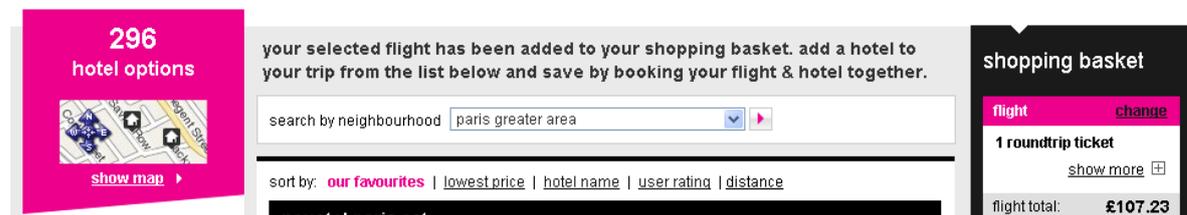


Thomsonfly provided a prominent progress bar with simple labels and clear highlighting of the current step.

Lastminute lost points for not providing a clear progress bar.

your trip to **paris, france**

london (lon) - paris (par) | sat 16 apr 2011 - thu 28 apr 2011 | 1 adult | [change your search](#)



16 out of the 20 travel sites provided a progress bar, but with an average score of just 3.1 out of 5 overall there's clearly room for improvement. The most common problems were progress bars that didn't stand out from the rest of the page or didn't cover the entire booking process.

16. Ensure cancellation/change rules are clear & findable

Overall average
2.8 out of 5 (2010: 3.2)

Travel agent average
2.3 out of 5 (2010: 3)

Carrier average
3.3 out of 5 (2010: 3.3)

The nature of travel means people often want to know the rules and conditions surrounding changes to/cancelling their flights – even if this is just for peace of mind.

Many sites made this information very hard to find – burying it in the site terms and conditions. A summary of the rules should be displayed directly on the page during the booking process – this transparency is good, showing customers there’s nothing to hide and ensuring users are aware of any restrictions early on.

Several of the sites use complex ‘legalese’ within their refund rules meaning many users will be left none-the-wiser after reading the information (if they bother to read it at all). The rules should be explained in plain English, using no more than a few sentences in bullet points to explain the basics. Links to further explanations should also be included where required.

Outward Flight Details

Depart		Arrive
Outward 09:30 Sun 17 APR 2011 London Heathrow Airport (LHR)	 9 hrs 05 mins	23:05 Sun 17 APR 2011 Mumbai Chhatrapati Shivaji

Virgin Atlantic earned top marks for providing fare condition information, including cancellation and changing charges on search results as well as the flight details page.

Outward Fare Conditions Summary ▼ [Fewer details](#)

Please note. If the fare conditions differ for your outward and return flights, the most restrictive condition applies.

Fare not guaranteed until payment is made and accepted.
 Passenger name changes are not permitted.
 If the fare permits date changes, additional charges may be incurred depending on seasonality, availability and any applicable rule conditions still being met.
 Cancellation or change fees are charged per person.
 Administration fees may apply in the event of cancellation.
 Changes are not permitted to be made to flights from 0000 local time on the same day of departure.

London to Mumbai

[Full fare conditions](#) 

Outward Baggage Allowance ▶ [More details](#)

Whilst all 20 travel sites provided their terms and conditions of booking on the site, only 5 out of the 20 scored 4 or 5 out of 5 for this guideline. With current economic conditions making customers more likely to check the small print before they buy, that’s definitely an area where sites could improve.

17. Provide a clear error summary

Overall average
3.3 out of 5 (2010: 3.0)

Travel agent average
3.3 out of 5 (2010: 2.8)

Carrier average
3.4 out of 5 (2010: 3.1)

Users will make errors when filling out forms – it’s inevitable. Error handling is an essential yet often overlooked part of any online form process. If users have made an error on a form they need to be informed immediately that there’s a problem. This should be in the form of a written description at the top of the page.

Regardless of how the error summary is provided, the most important thing is it’s the very first thing users see after submitting a form.



Travelocity provided a clear summary at the top of the page explaining what customers need to do to correct errors.




Note: Fields marked with a ***must** be completed.

Travel Republic didn’t provide an automatic error summary, so users have to scroll down to identify what went wrong.

Only 8 out of the 20 travel sites scored top marks, and 4 sites still use popup alerts to show errors, which can frustrate users. It’s clear that many sites still need to address this well-established usability guideline, so that their customers won’t have to hunt around to uncover and correct the errors.

18. Ensure errors are clearly highlighted next to fields

Overall average
3.2 out of 5 (2010: 3.2)

Travel agent average
3.1 out of 5 (2010: 2.7)

Carrier average
3.4 out of 5 (2010: 3.6)

In addition to instantly informing users that errors have been made and what the errors are, a helpful message should be provided next to each erroneous item to highlight the error.

This is because if the error occurs in a form item below the fold then when users scroll down they'll be unable to see the error summary at the top of the page. Likewise, if the error summary is provided as a pop-up alert then there's no reminder as to what the error was when the alert is closed.

Passenger Details - All passenger names must match those in the passport/accepted travel documents

1 Title ▾ First name Last name 0 Bags ▾

Beat the queues, buy priority boarding: Yes No

Buy travel insurance View policy benefits Please select a country of residence ▾

If you do not wish to buy insurance select No Travel Insurance in the drop down menu.

Ryanair and BMI highlighted relevant areas to help users identify where an error had been made.

Title * - select - ▾ Please select a title

First name *

Surname *

Country * - please select - ▾

Postcode

5 out of the 20 sites scored less than 2 as they didn't highlight all the form fields that needed correcting. Also, some sites only used an asterisk to indicate a section that needed to be completed and in a long and complex form field it is hard to identify these asterisks amongst a sea of entry boxes and text.

19. Provide explicit instructions on how to correct errors

Overall average
4.5 out of 5 (2009: 3.6)

Travel agent average
4.4 out of 5 (2010: 3.6)

Carrier average
4.6 out of 5 (2010: 3.6)

If users can't immediately work out the error and how to fix it, they may be unwilling (or even unable) to continue with the booking process.

By providing them with highly visible and informative error messages, users can correct mistakes and continue through the booking process. If users find it difficult (or even impossible) to correct their mistakes they'll likely go to a website that helps them all the way.

Instructions on fixing errors should:

- Be explicit in explaining what's wrong and how to fix it
- Not assign any blame to users and avoid using words like 'error' or 'mistake'
- Steer clear of long words and/or jargon

Payment Details

Cardholder Name: *

Card Type: * 

Card Number: *  Please enter the card number without any spaces or dashes

Card Start Date:

Card Expiry Date: *

Travelbag provided detailed instructions on how to correct errors.

16 out of 20 sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5 for this guideline, a huge improvement from last year's results. It also indicates that travel agents are aware of the importance of this guideline.

Given that site visitors can't proceed to the next step when there's an error, all websites should strive to provide clear and explicit instructions on how to correct errors so that they're able to complete their flight booking process without too much struggle.

20. Ensure the system is able to cope with common errors

Overall average
3.8 out of 5 (2010: 4.3)

Travel agent average
3.5 out of 5 (2010: 4.0)

Carrier average
4.1 out of 5 (2010: 4.6)

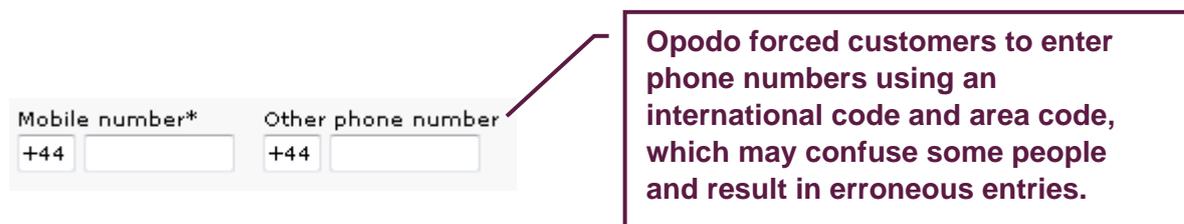
Although users will typically make errors when going through the booking process, some of these errors can be avoided through the clever use of technology. For example, a phone number can be submitted in a number of ways, all of which should be allowed:

- (020) 7423 6320
- 020-7423-6320
- 020 7423 6320

The booking process should allow all these combinations, stripping out any brackets, hyphens or spaces. Other items that can be entered in a number of different ways (e.g. with spaces vs. no spaces, slashes vs. no slashes etc.):

- Credit card numbers
- Date of birth
- Postcode
- Names

A website can be proactive in explicitly stating the required format but should still allow different formats to be submitted.



Mobile number* Other phone number

+44 +44

Opodo forced customers to enter phone numbers using an international code and area code, which may confuse some people and result in erroneous entries.

7 out of 20 sites scored 5 out of 5 for this guideline. Websites that had lower scores lost marks mainly by not catering for some of the alternative ways of entering information that were mentioned above.

Mobile apps and websites

In addition to the criteria evaluated above, we're increasingly seeing travel companies attempt to engage their customers across channels, across the travel lifecycle (not just during the booking phase) and across different contexts of use.

The benefits for carriers and online travel agents include broadening the types of locations and situations in which customers can use their service and interact with their brand. This can include searching for flights during the booking stage to writing reviews after the holiday, and anything in between.

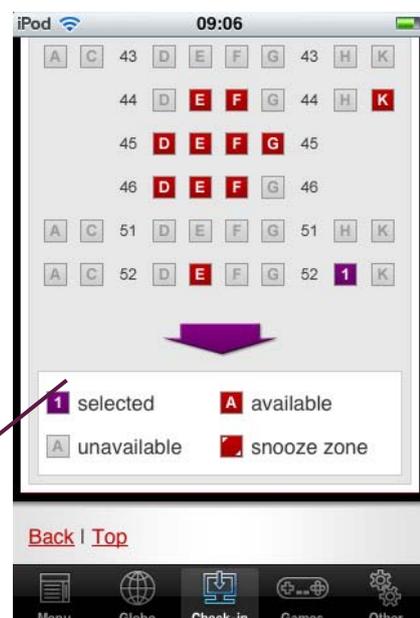
Booking

While many carriers and online travel agents have apps, they aren't as advanced as the apps produced by other sectors. Many don't provide a large amount of functionality, particularly for booking flights. For example, some only allow customers to perform simple tasks such as to check their flight's status. Another typical shortcoming is that the apps will simply show the mobile website through an in-built browser.

Online check-in

Nevertheless, there is a move towards allowing customers to perform more tasks while they're on the move. Virgin Atlantic lets customers check-in and choose a seat using their mobile website and app. This is a very useful service to provide on mobile phones as customers are often away from their home or office PC when check-in opens. Even while abroad, customers could check-in using wifi in a hotel or café.

Using Virgin Atlantic's iPhone app customers can check-in, including selecting their seat.



Mobile boarding passes

British Airways lets customers use their phone during the next stage in their trip. Customers can use their smartphone app to download their boarding pass (for some flights) to their mobile and then take it along to the airport. This is convenient for all travellers who have one less piece of paper to carry, but travellers will appreciate this most when they're abroad and don't have access to a printer.

BA customers can use their iPhone app as a boarding pass.



During the trip

Other brands have focussed more on engaging customers with their brand during their holiday or business trip. Lastminute.com has created a set of phrasebook apps with a mixture of useful and fun content.

Lastminute.com has produced phrasebooks for smartphone users to use during their trips.



Conclusion

Overall, the UK travel sites featured in this report have showed only minor improvements since last year's evaluation. Travel sites still aren't doing enough to maximise their share of the potential revenue in this highly competitive marketplace. Though the average usability score has increased from 64.4% to 65.7% since last year, key guidelines that still need improvement include offering functionality to aid the booking process, making pages share friendly, supporting comparison shoppers, providing information on airports, providing contact numbers through the booking process and ensuring the flight cancellation/change rules are clear and findable

Usability is essential so that site visitors can find the flights they're looking for quickly and intuitively. A poor user experience could lead to customers going elsewhere and could also make customers reluctant to complete other transactions online, such as checking-in.

The online travel market is highly competitive with many companies offering the same flights and packages at similar prices, and if customers find one site difficult to use, they will often seek out a competitor.

While many travel sites have created mobile versions of their sites and smartphone apps many don't take advantage of the platform. However, some leading carriers and online travel agents have started to create more useful mobile offerings.

The usability guidelines presented in this report represent just the start to achieving excellent usability and an outstanding user experience. The use of usability guidelines is essential, but they should always be used in conjunction with usability testing on a regular basis. Usability testing involves analysing typical site visitors completing typical tasks on your website (see www.webcredible.co.uk/testing for more details).

As consumers become more and more demanding in the digital space, the travel industry will need to be more dedicated to the usability and user experience across all of their channels to gain customers and build loyalty.

References

1. Size of the Online Travel Market (Online Travel Intermediaries-International) – Travel & Tourism Analyst No.14, August 2009
2. Eyefortravel Research 2007
3. Mintel (www.mintel.com) – Forrester Research

Appendix: Full results

The full list of websites audited, and the score they achieved for each guideline is as follows:

Website	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Virgin Atlantic	5	5	3.5	4	5	5	4	1.5	3.5	5	2	3	2.5	4	4.5	4	5	5	5	5	81.5
British Airways	5	3	5	4	5	5	2	0.5	3	5	1	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	79.5
EasyJet	5	3	4	5	4	5	0	0.5	5	5	3	5	0	5	4	3	5	5	5	5	76.5
BMI	4.5	2.5	2	3.5	4	5	4	4	4	3	3	5	3	4	5	4	2.5	5	3.5	4	75.5
Travelocity	5	5	4	3.5	4	3.5	0	2	5	5	1	5	4	5	0	1	5	5	5	5	73
Travel Republic	3	3	2	5	4	5	2	3	3	5	3	5	4	5	5	2	1	1	5	5	71
Expedia	5	5	3.5	2	2	4	2	3.5	3	5	3	4	3	5	0	3	2	5	5	3	68
Opodo	5	5	3	3	4	5	3	5	3.5	4	0	5	3	2	0	4	3	3	4	3	67.5
Travelbag	5	2.5	3.5	4	3	3	2	2	5	3	2	4.5	4	5	3	3	3	3	4	3	67.5
Netflights	5	2	4	3.5	2	4.5	1	1.5	2.5	3.5	4	5	5	5	4	2	3	2	4	4	67.5
Lastminute	5	5	3.5	3	4	5	1.5	1.5	3.5	4	1	3.5	3.5	2	0	3.5	5	2.5	5	4	66
Ebookers	5	3.5	4	1	4	3	0.5	2	3.5	3	1	4	4	4	4	2	3.5	3.5	5	3	63.5

Appendix: Full results (Contd.)

FlyBE	2	1	0	4	3	5	2	0.5	5	3	1	5	0	5	3	3	5	5	5	5	62.5
STA travel	5	3	2.5	4	4	2	1	1.5	3	5	1	5	4	5	2.5	1	5	1.5	3	3	62
Jet2.com	5	3	2.5	4	2	5	2	1	5	3	1	2	1	1	3	3	5	1	5	5	59.5
Monarch	5	3	4	3	3	5	0	1	5	3	0	2	1	4	4	5	1	1	5	4	59
Ryanair	4	2	4	3	2.5	5	2	1	3.5	2	0	3	1	4	3	3	1.5	5	5	3	57.5
First Choice	4	2	2	3	3	5	2	4	4	2.5	1	2.5	3	2	4	2	2	2	3.5	2	55.5
Thomsonfly	4	1	4	3	3	5	1	1	4	3.5	0.5	4	1.5	1.5	5	1	2	0	3.5	3	51.5
Thomas Cook	3.5	1	1.5	1.5	2	5	2.5	2	0	5	0	2	4	5	1	1.5	2	4	4	2	49.5
TOTAL	90	61	63	67	68	90	34	39	74	78	29	80	53	79	60	56	67	65	90	76	
Average score	4.5	3.0	3.1	3.4	3.4	4.5	1.7	2.0	3.7	3.9	1.4	4.0	2.6	4.0	3.0	2.8	3.3	3.2	4.5	3.8	65.7

About Webcredible

Webcredible is a user experience consultancy, offering a range of usability, accessibility, design & training services based around your specific requirements:

User-centered design

- Information architecture
- Interaction design

User research

- Usability testing
- Interviews & focus groups
- Persona creation

Accessibility

- Accessibility testing
- Accessible web design

Training & mentoring

- Usability & accessibility courses
- Online copywriting courses
- Web development courses

Webcredible is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and respected user experience consultancies in the UK. Our 200+ research articles and reports have been re-published on 100s of websites and we receive 250,000 visitors to our website each month.

We believe in taking a proactive approach with clients, whilst maintaining a regular open line of communication. We believe that we are being paid for our expertise and as such always take the initiative and offer our recommendations for any course of action. We are:

- **Focused on client needs** – Our aims are to optimise conversion rates for companies and ensure public sector organisations effectively disseminate information.
- **Passionate** – The team here at Webcredible loves what they do and we only recruit staff passionate about usability and accessibility.
- **Approachable** – We're friendly and jargon-free. Consultants, despite being highly educated and experienced, only communicate in a user-friendly manner.

Clients include Airmiles, Asda, BBC, eBay, EDF Energy, Filofax, I Want One Of Those, JD Sports, Laura Ashley, Liz Earle, Lloyds TSB, More Th>n, Sony and T-Mobile.