Flights Online: Ensuring Your Site Takes Off

Online travel usability report 2010

webcredible

user experience • research • design • training

Contents

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 Europe[1].

With UK, Germany and France approaching maturity in the sector, competition is fierce and consumers now not only use the web for travel bookings, but also for researching and planning their holidays. In 2007 alone, an estimated 41% of UK travellers preferred going online to research, but 70% preferred to make their bookings off line[2].

Given the sector's continued forecast growth in the European online travel market size to US$108bn[3] 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. This is particularly important for highly transactional travel agent and airline carrier sites.

About this report

In April 2010, 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 p4.

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 trying to sell flights and related travel services online, including: marketing managers, Internet managers and web developers. Although our analysis focused on travel websites, the guidelines are highly transferable to other websites. The report assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge.

Methodology

Webcredible analysed the websites of 20 UK online travel agents and airline carriers in April 2010.

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 a clear results page
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 through 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

Results

Summary

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

2010 rank	2009 rank	Website	2010 score	2009 score
1	1	British Airways (www.britishairways.com)	78	71
2	15=	Easyjet (www.easyjet.com)	77	50
3	2=	Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)	75	70
4	-	Travel Republic (www.travelrepublic.co.uk)	73	-
5	4=	BMI (www.flybmi.com)	70	65
6=	2=	Expedia.co.uk (www.expedia.co.uk)	68	70
6=	4=	Travelocity (www.travelocity.co.uk)	68	65
8	20	Ryanair (www.ryanair.com/en)	66	41
9	10=	Ebookers (www.ebookers.com)	65	56
10	6	Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk)	64	62
11=	12	Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk)	63	54
11=	13	FlyBE (www.flybe.com)	63	53
11=	18=	Monarch (www.flymonarch.com)	63	47
14=	10=	Netflights (www.netflights.com)	62	56
14=	8	Lastminute (www.lastminute.com)	62	59
16	17	Jet2.com (www.jet2.com)	60	49
17=	9	STA travel (www.statravel.co.uk)	56	58
17=	15=	First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk)	56	50
19	14	Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com)	52	51
20	18=	Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)	47	47
		Average score	**64.4**	**55.2**

With an increase from 3 to 5 websites scoring 70 and above, and an increase in the total average score from last year, it's definitely a good sign to see that travel companies have been putting effort into making improvements to increase the usability of their websites.

Still, with 11 websites scoring 60 points and above and 4 websites scoring between 40 to 50 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.

Travel agent vs. carrier websites

Splitting up the websites into travel agents and carriers reveals the following rankings:

Travel agent website	2010 score	2009 score
Travel Republic (www.travelrepublic.co.uk)	73	-
Expedia.co.uk (www.expedia.co.uk)	68	70
Travelocity (www.travelocity.co.uk)	68	65
Ebookers (www.ebookers.com)	65	56
Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk)	64	62
Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk)	63	54
Netflights (www.netflights.com)	62	56
Lastminute (www.lastminute.com)	62	59
STA travel (www.statravel.co.uk)	56	58
Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)	47	47
Average score	**62.8**	**58.7**

Carrier website	2010 score	2009 score
British Airways (www.britishairways.com)	78	71
Easyjet (www.easyjet.com)	77	50
Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)	75	70
BMI (www.flybmi.com)	70	65
Ryanair (www.ryanair.com/en)	66	41

FlyBE (www.flybe.com)	63	53
Monarch (www.flymonarch.com)	63	47
Jet2.com (www.jet2.com)	60	49
First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk)	56	50
Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com)	52	51
Average score	**66.0**	**54.7**

The main differences observed between travel agents and carriers were:

- There's a significant disparity across some criteria between travel agents and carriers such as showing prices early on, easy refinement of searches, displaying a contact telephone number, 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.

- 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.

- Travel agents are typically more transparent with call centre contact details during the searching and booking process (this could be due to differences in the types of commercial businesses and their approach to customer service).

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 based and how customers will 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 p33 for a full breakdown of scores.

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

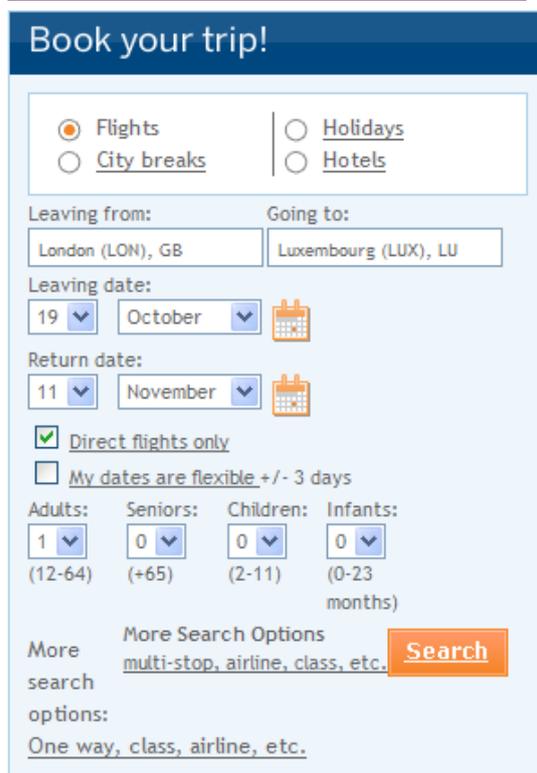| **Overall average**	**Travel agent average**	**Carrier average**
4.1 out of 5 (2009: 3.9)	**4.4 out of 5 (2009: 2.3)**	**3.8 out of 5 (2009: 3.9)**

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.

> **Travelocity had standard flight-search as the default option which was clearly indicated on the top of the search form.**

> **First Choice scored poorly by having unfamiliar default search options without providing clear alternative search options (e.g. search by flights).**

The websites generally fared well for this guideline, with 11 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	Travel agent average	Carrier average
2.9 out of 5 (2009: 2.3)	**3.0 out of 5 (2009: 3.3)**	**2.4 out of 5 (2009: 1.3)**

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 not wanting any changeovers). 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
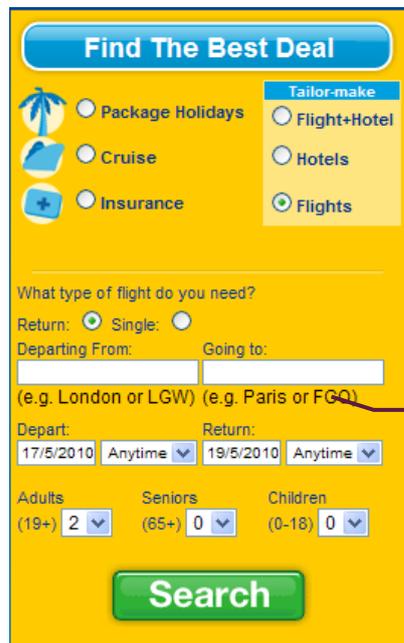
Expedia obtained top scores for having several options to help site visitors search for flights.

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

The websites generally scored poorly for this guideline, with just 6 out of 20 websites achieving 4 or 5 points out of 5.

Travel agents offering flights from various airlines were more likely to offer a good choice of search options. Budget carriers didn't offer many options because they usually operate point-to-point, economy-only flights. Still, larger airlines could do more to help their customers find their ideal flights.

3. Provide an effective calendar

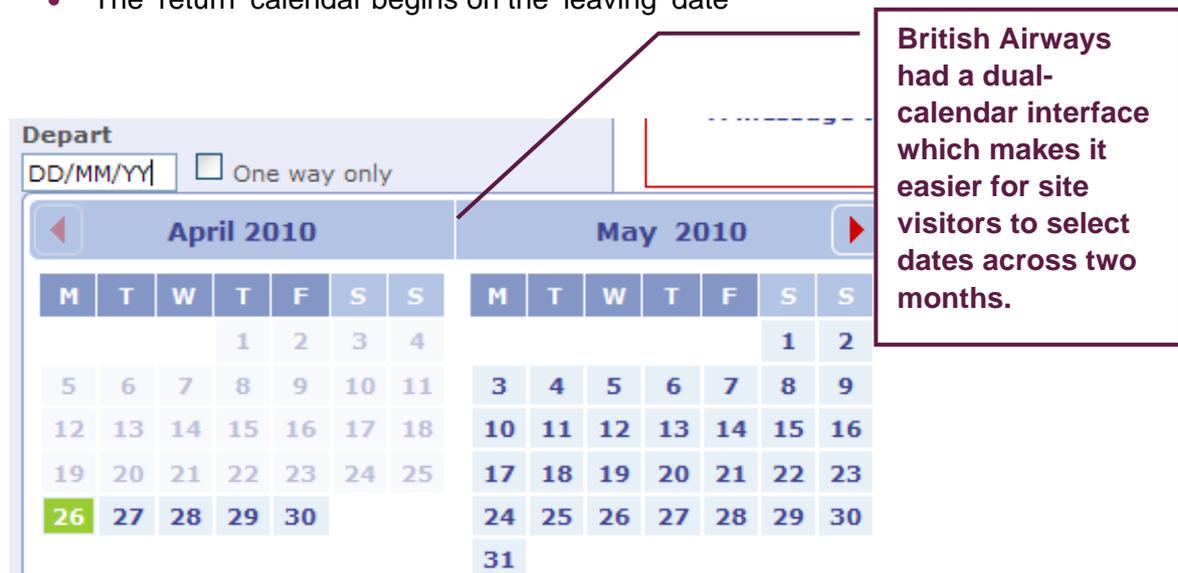| Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
3.5 out of 5 (2009: 3.1)	**3.8 out of 5 (2009: 3.3)**	**3.3 out of 5 (2009: 2.9)**

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 the 'leaving' date

British Airways had a dual-calendar interface which makes it easier for site visitors to select dates across two months.

19 of the 20 sites offered the calendar feature, but this doesn't mean all calendars were equally good, with only 12 out of 19 websites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5. The majority fell short on 1 or 2 of the above guidelines.

4. Allow flexibility when completing the first step
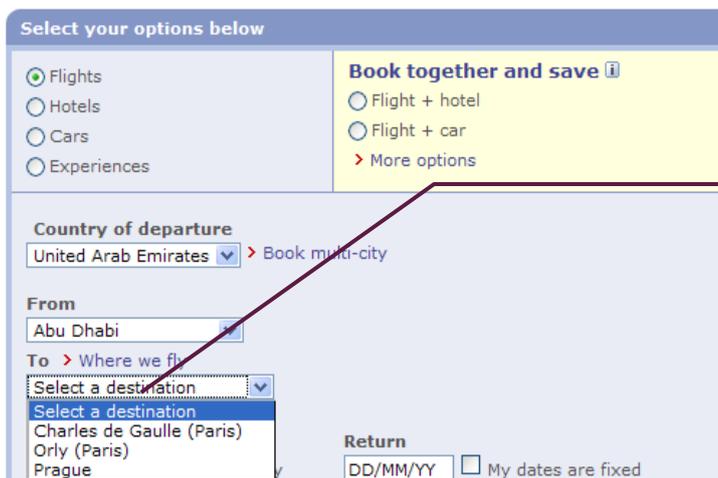
Overall average
3.6 out of 5 (2009: 3.8)

Travel agent average
3.1 out of 5 (2009: 3.2)

Carrier average
4 out of 5 (2009: 3.8)

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.

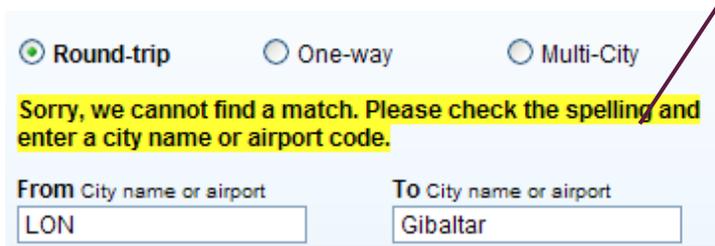**British Airways intelligently provides the closest options when a place name has been misspelled.**

Ebookers scored poorly again on this guideline because it didn't provide any help to customers who may have misspelt 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. All 10 carrier sites as opposed to only 7 travel agent sites allowed site visitors to either select a destination from a dropdown list or by having an auto-complete function.

5. Provide a clear results page

Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
3.3 out of 5 (2009: 3.9)	**3.3 out of 5 (2009: 3.5)**	**3.3 out of 5 (2009: 4.3)**

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.

Travel Republic had a clear and well-organised results page which sorted flights by price.

It also provided a quick overview of the best available fares per airline by highlighting flight prices that included baggage.

Although both travel agents and carrier websites had identical average scores for this guideline, travel agent websites had lower scores in general. This was due to travel agent websites having to display more options which increased the clutter on the screen. Better use of colour and typography can help communicate the hierarchy of information on such pages and make them appear less cluttered.

6. Allow sorting & manipulation of the results

Overall average	**Travel agent average**	**Carrier average**
4.2 out of 5 (2009: 4.2)	**3.3 out of 5 (2009: 3.3)**	**5 out of 5 (2009: 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.
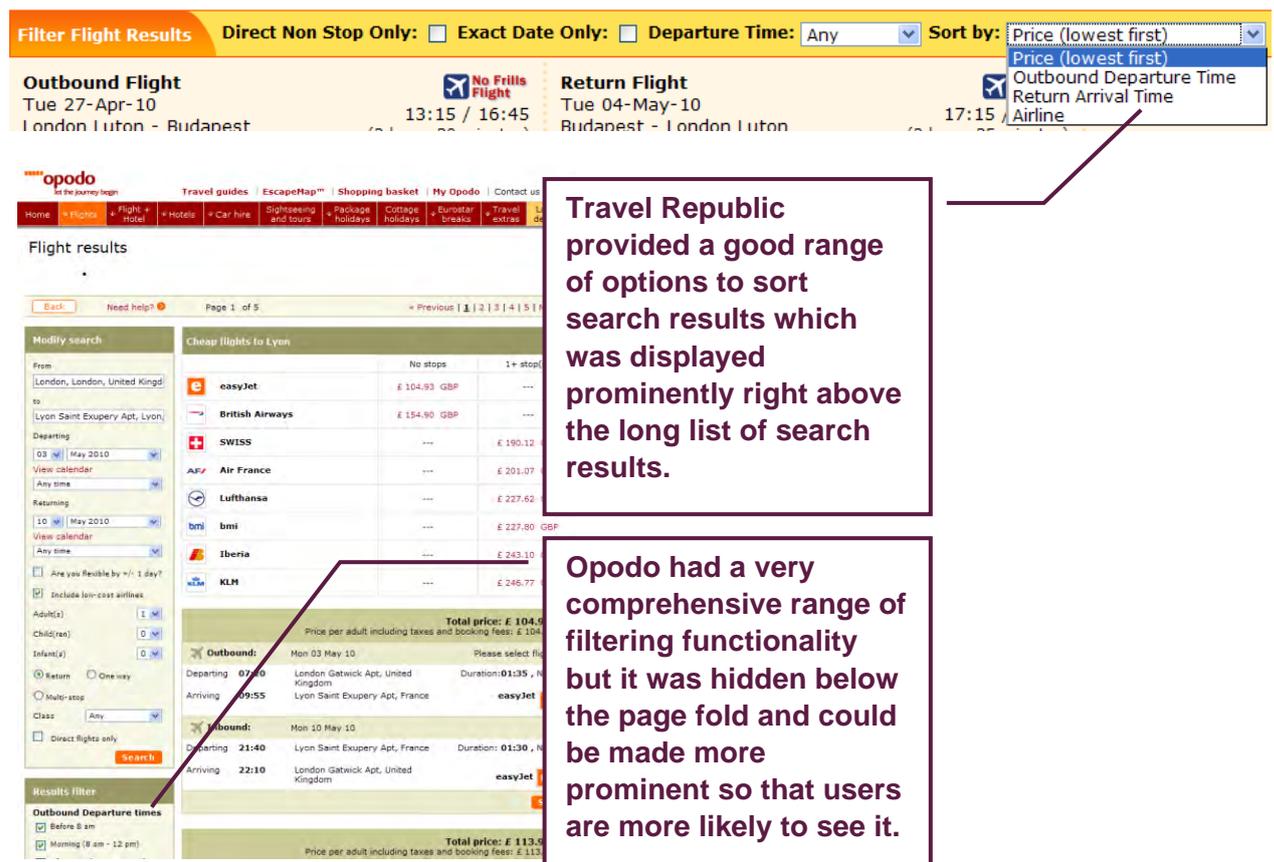
Travel Republic provided a good range of options to sort search results which was displayed prominently right above the long list of search results.

Opodo had a very comprehensive range of filtering functionality 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, only 1 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	Travel agent average	Carrier average
2.3 out of 5 (2009: 2.4)	**2.1 out of 5 (2009: 1.9)**	**2.5 out of 5 (2009: 2.8)**

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 between friends and family so it's important that your site supports users by letting them print off pages. Ensure your web pages print in an easy-to-read format and without cutting off any important information.

Sites could even offer an 'email a friend' feature which would include a link to a 'refreshed' version of that same search at any time. Such a 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'.
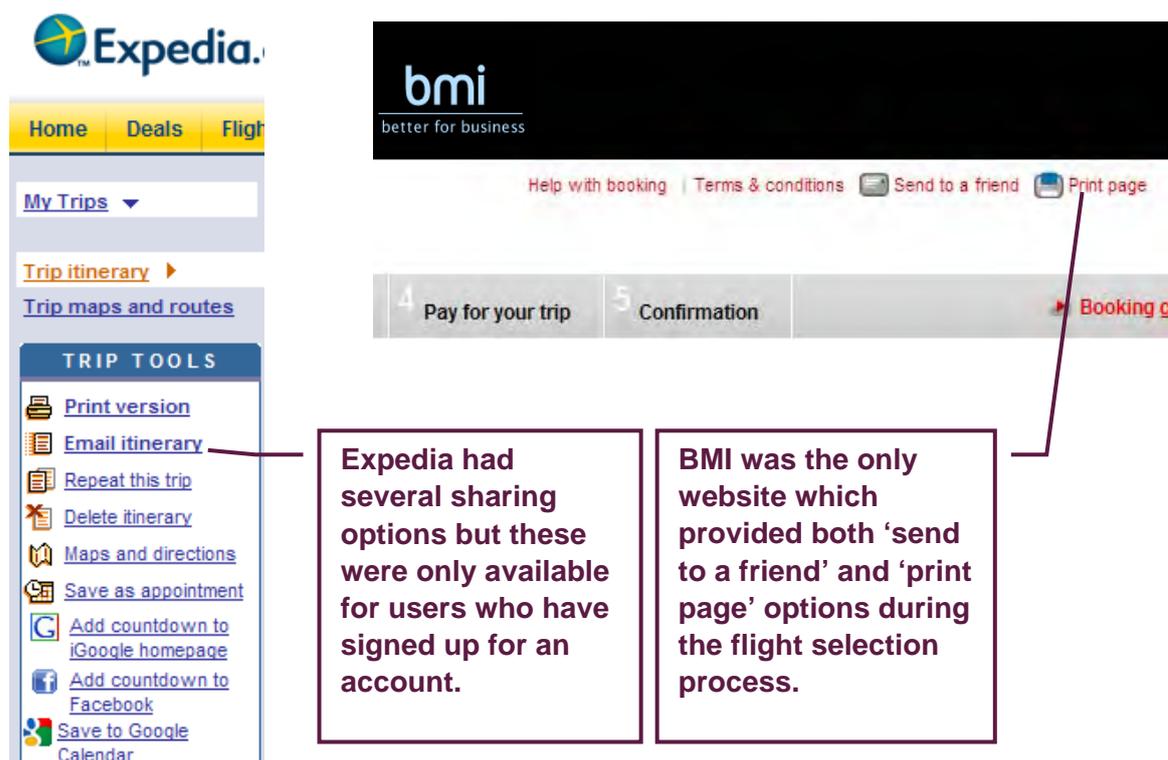
Expedia had several sharing options but these were only available for users who have signed up for an account.

BMI was the only website which provided both 'send to a friend' and 'print page' options during the flight selection process.

The websites scored decidedly averagely for this guideline, with only 3 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.

With the growth and acceptance of Web 2.0 in recent years (in particular social media and user-generated content) it's surprising that our travel sites haven't embraced the spirit of this guideline more forcefully.

8. Support comparison shoppers

Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
1.8 out of 5 (2009: 0.7)	**1.9 out of 5 (2009: 0.8)**	**1.7 out of 5 (2009: 0.6)**

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 coming 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 user 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.

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.

Only 1 out of the 20 sites saved users' recent searches, and only 3 out of the 20 sites have a search results page with a URL that can be bookmarked to repeat the search.

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

Overall average	**Travel agent average**	**Carrier average**
3.4 out of 5 (2009: 3.1)	2.4 out of 5 (2009: 3.6)	4.3 out of 5 (2009: 2.5)

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.

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.
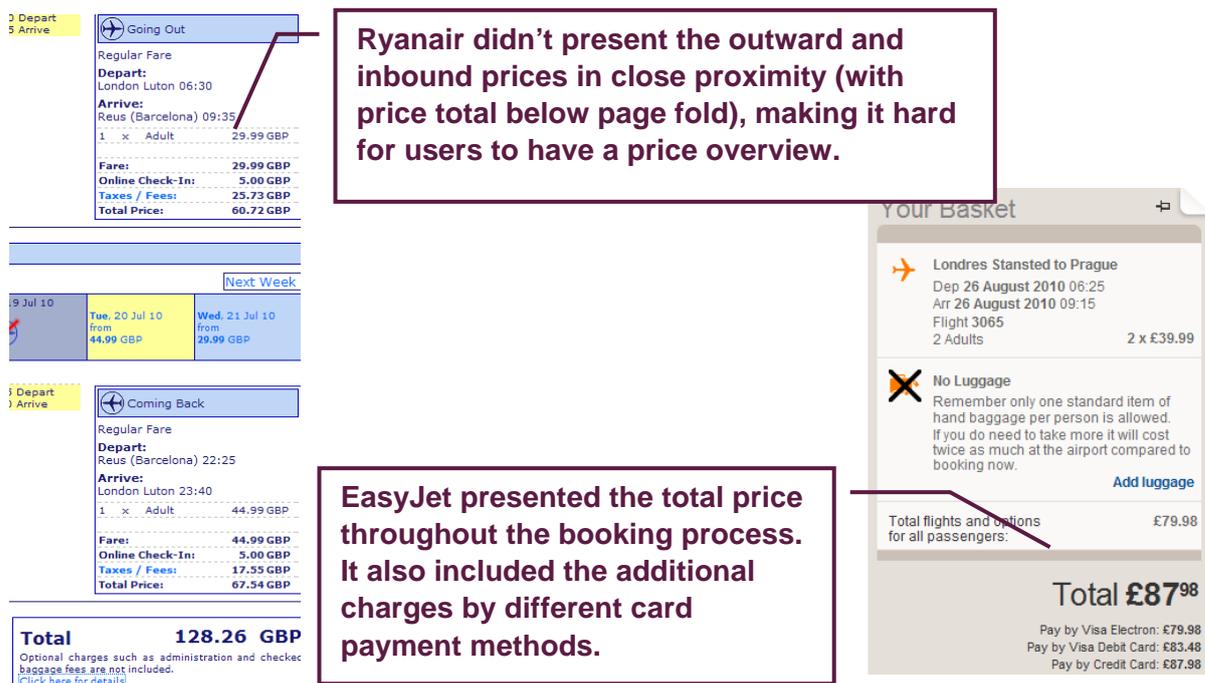
Ryanair didn't present the outward and inbound prices in close proximity (with price total below page fold), making it hard for users to have a price overview.

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

Carrier sites 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.

Carrier sites have had to include most 'fixed, non-optional' costs in the initial price after action from the Office of Fair Trading. However, some still find creative ways of introducing charges later on in the booking process (e.g. charges for pre-selecting a seat).

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

Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
3.7 out of 5 (2009: 3.2)	4.3 out of 5(2009: 4.2)	3 out of 5 (2009: 2.2)

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 - make 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.

> **Netflights 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.**
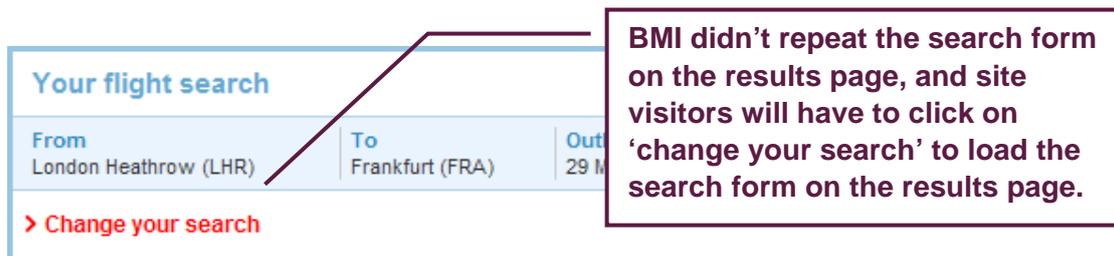
> **BMI didn't repeat the search form on the results page, and site visitors will have to click on 'change your search' to load the search form on the results page.**

All travel sites provided some way to refine and repeat a search. However, there was another marked difference between travel agents and carriers. Carrier sites lost marks for losing users' previously entered search criteria and forcing customers to go back to the search page in order to repeat their search.

11. Provide information on each airport

Overall average   **Travel agent average**   **Carrier average**
1.2 out of 5 (2009: 1.1) **0.9 out of 5 (2009: 0.7)**   **1.5 out of 5 (2009: 1.4)**

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 the transport links (public and otherwise) are

- How long it takes to get there from the original location/final destination

This has become more of an issue recently since airlines are now flying to many new and unfamiliar airports. Despite this, many websites fail to provide information on where airports are or how to get there.
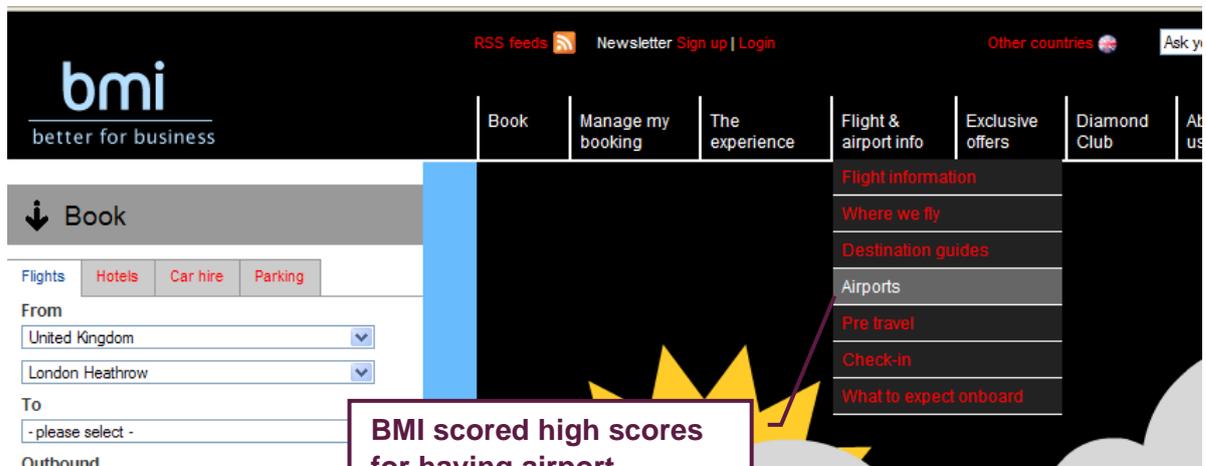
BMI scored high scores for having airport information displayed under a very clear heading, which made it easier to find than on other websites.

With 7 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.

12. Use a clear flight confirmation page

Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
4.1 out of 5 (2009: 4.3)	**4.1 out of 5 (2009: 4.6)**	**4 out of 5 (2009: 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 what to do to continue their booking.

Type	Details		Qty	Price	
Flight:	London Heathrow to Prague		1	96.00	
Taxes:	Actual Tax		1	81.27	
Fees:	Flight Booking Fee		1	5.00	🗑
	🛈 Rules		Subtotal:	182.27	Remove

Outbound: 28-Oct-2010

London Heathrow (LHR)   Prague (PRG)   British Airways BA854
Depart: **07:55**   Arrive: **10:55**

Duration: 2hr   Class: Economy   Aircraft: AIRBUS A320   Miles: 637

Inbound: 30-Oct-2010

Prague (PRG)   London Heathrow (LHR)   Bri
Depart: **08:00**   Arrive: **09:15**

Duration: 2hr 15min   Class: Economy   Aircraft: AIRBUS A320   Miles: 637

Total: GBP 182.27   GO TO CHECKOUT ❯

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

14 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 through the booking process

Overall average	**Travel agent average**	**Carrier average**
2.0 out of 5 (2009: 2.3)	**3.2 out of 5 (2009: 3.4)**	**0.8 out of 5 (2009: 1.1)**

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.

10 out of the 20 travel sites scored 0 or 1 out of 5 on this guideline, which is a significant issue. 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.

One possible reason for the difference in scoring between travel agents and carriers could be due to their diverse commercial models and associated method of servicing their customers.

14. Use appropriate up-selling

Overall average	Travel agent average	Carrier average
4.3 out of 5 (2009: 4.0)	4.7 out of 5 (2009: 4.4)	3.9 out of 5 (2009: 3.5)

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 users. 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.

> Jet2.com lost marks for having either automatic 'opt-in's such as insurance, and also by including extras without explicitly informing users about it.
>
> For example the seat selection process didn't explicitly state that it costs £3.99 to select a seat.
>
> Site visitors that notice the additional charges in the 'running total' box will need to restart the process by opting out from the different extras.

It's a positive sign that so many sites have scored so highly for this guideline. With 16 out of 20 of the sites scoring 4 or 5 out of 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
2.9 out of 5 (2009: 2.7)

Travel agent average
1.7 out of 5 (2009: 2.4)

Carrier average
4.1 out of 5 (2009: 2.9)

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

- Use easy-to-understand labels

- Highlight users' current location

- Have the appearance of a process flow

British Airways provided a prominent progress bar with simple labels and clear highlighting of the current step.
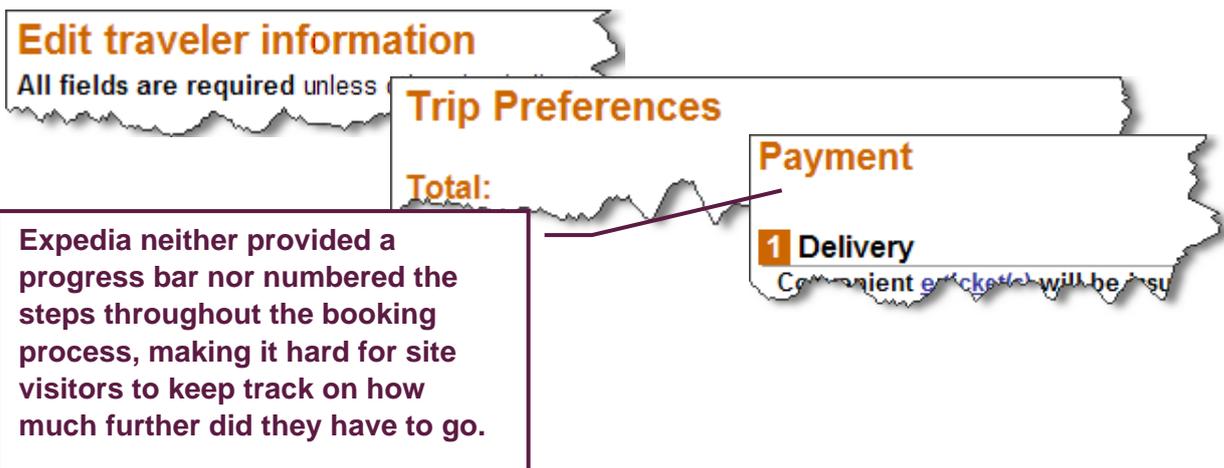
Expedia neither provided a progress bar nor numbered the steps throughout the booking process, making it hard for site visitors to keep track on how much further did they have to go.

19 out of the 20 travel sites provided a progress bar, but with an average score of just 2.7 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.
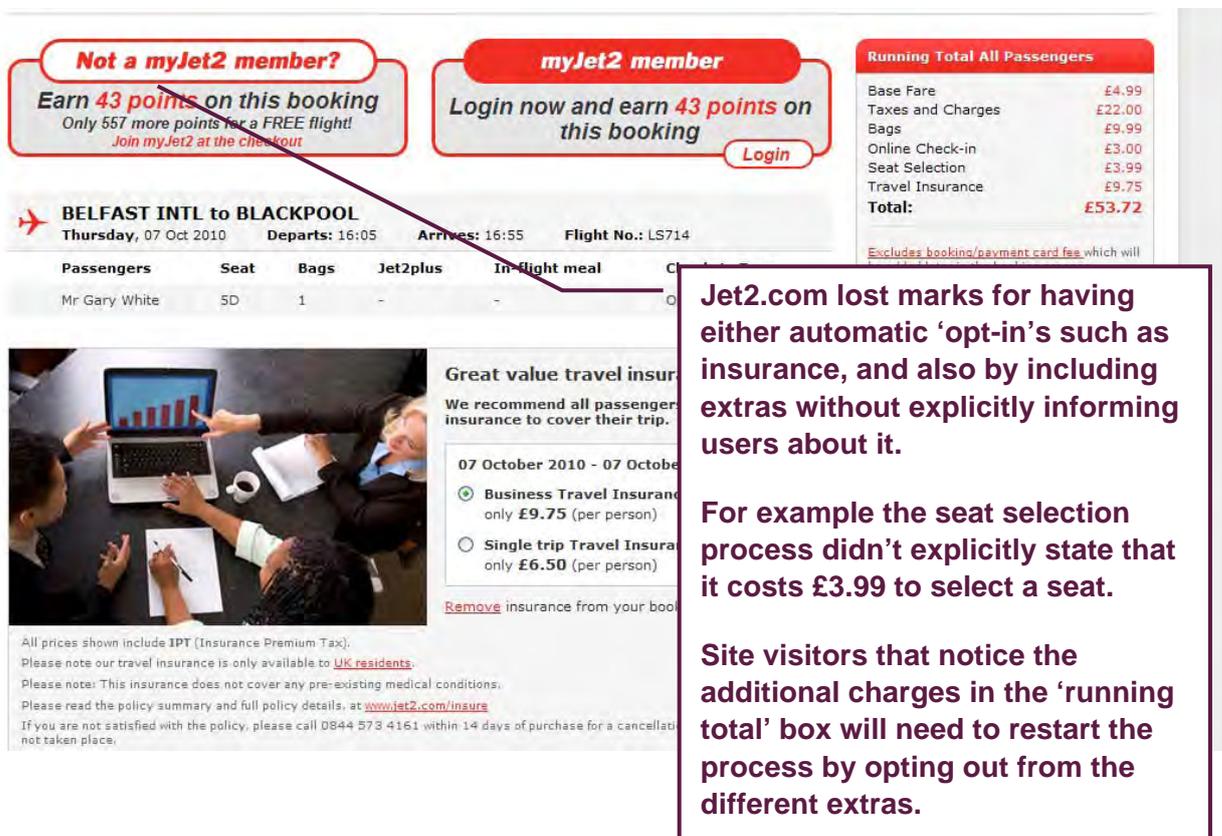
16. Ensure cancellation/change rules are clear & findable

Overall average
3.2 out of 5 (2009: 3.0)

Travel agent average
3 out of 5 (2009: 2.7)

Carrier average
3.3 out of 5 (2009: 3.2)

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 users 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.
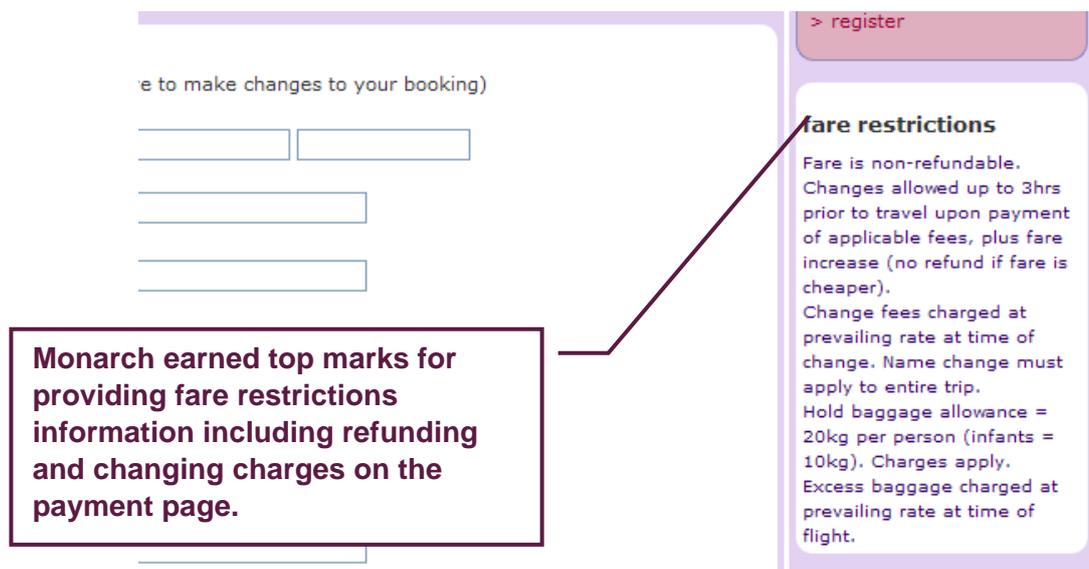
> register

e to make changes to your booking)

fare restrictions

Fare is non-refundable. Changes allowed up to 3hrs prior to travel upon payment of applicable fees, plus fare increase (no refund if fare is cheaper).
Change fees charged at prevailing rate at time of change. Name change must apply to entire trip.
Hold baggage allowance = 20kg per person (infants = 10kg). Charges apply. Excess baggage charged at prevailing rate at time of flight.

Monarch earned top marks for providing fare restrictions information including refunding and changing charges on the payment page.

Whilst all 20 travel sites provided their terms and conditions of booking on the site, only 8 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 out of 5 (2009: 3.0)

Travel agent average
2.8 out of 5 (2009: 2.4)

Carrier average
3.1 out of 5 (2009: 3.5)

Users will make errors when filling out forms – it's as simple as that. 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.

→ **Please review the following message(s)**

- Please enter a valid date of birth. The required format is dd/mm/yyyy
- Please enter Title for traveller.
- Please enter first name for traveller.
- Please enter surname for traveller.
- Please enter email address for traveller.
- Please enter mobile number for traveller.

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

BMI didn't provide an error summary or an error alert box on the top of the page, so users will have to scroll all the way down before they realise that something went wrong.

Only 9 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	Travel agent average	Carrier average
3.2 out of 5 (2009: 2.1)	**2.7 out of 5 (2009: 2.8)**	**3.6 out of 5 (2009: 1.4)**

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.

STA provided an error summary on the top of the page but didn't highlight any of the erroneous areas to help users identify where an error has been made.

It's very disappointing that 5 out of the 20 sites didn't highlight at all the form fields that need correcting, and 3 out of 20 only used an asterisk to indicate a section that needs to be completed. 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
3.6 out of 5 (2009: 0.8)

Travel agent average
3.6 out of 5 (2009: 1.1)
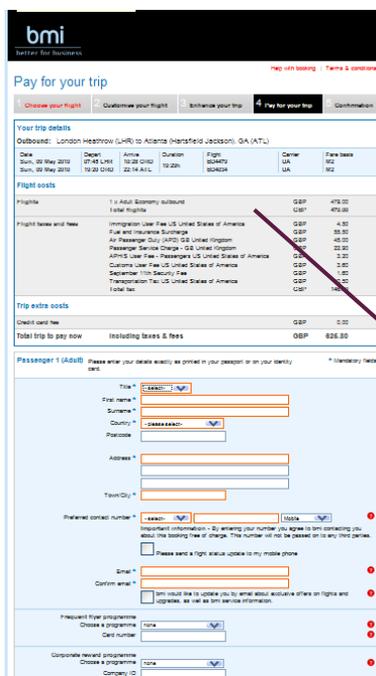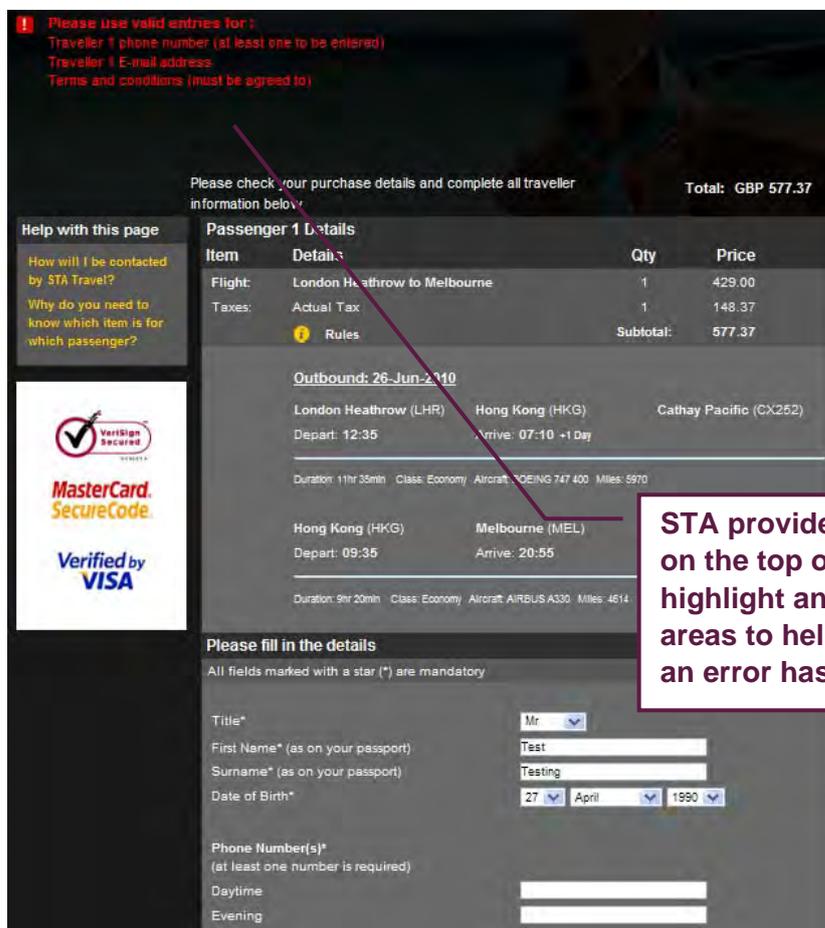
Carrier average
3.6 out of 5 (2009: 0.5)

No matter how much travel sites try to prevent it, users will make mistakes during the booking process. 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

- Avoid using words like 'error' or 'mistake'

- Steer clear of long words and/or jargon

> **STA doesn't explain errors explicitly which potentially leaves the user confused if they don't know how to rectify the problem.**
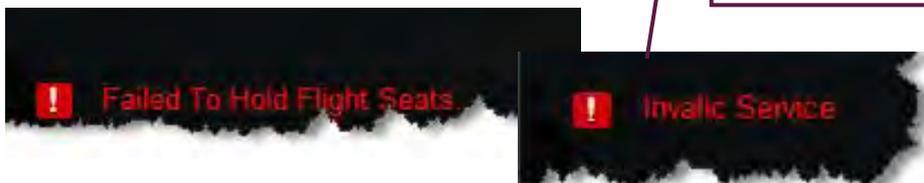
dy
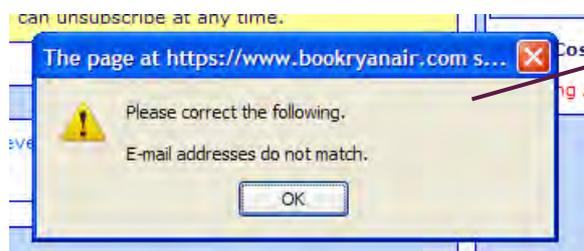
> **Although provided in a pop-up alert, Ryanair explains the error so that site visitors know how to rectify the problem straight away.**

13 out of 20 sites scored 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	**Travel agent average**	**Carrier average**
4.3 out of 5 (2009: 4.1)	**4 out of 5 (2009: 3.8)**	**4.6 out of 5 (2009: 4.4)**

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 include (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.

Phone numbers:

	Country:	Area:	Phone#:
Home:	44		
Work: (optional)	44		

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

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

Trends

In addition to the criteria evaluated above, we've increasingly noticed a number of websites using novel techniques that help both to increase their revenues and to make life easier for their customers.

Showing scarcity

Showing the scarcity of goods has helped drive sales on most ecommerce websites, and it's encouraging that a few travel sites have now started using this sales technique. In previous research, we've found that customers can sometimes be indecisive when booking their holidays, and they've often missed good deals. Showing scarcity can perhaps help them make up their minds quicker.

Price	Depart	Arrive	From	To	Flight Operating	Class of travel
£232 ⊙	07:35 17 Apr	07:55 17 Apr	Charles de Gaulle (Paris)	Heathrow		
	Only 3 seat(s) left at this price, book now to avoid disappointment					

BA displays this notice when there's a limited number of seats at a specific price.

Cross-selling and up-selling

Cross-selling and up-selling has usually been restricted to the last steps of the booking process. However, a few travel sites have now realised that their customers may be flexible at the beginning of the booking process, and have started offering recommendations for different flights and destinations at this point. Thus, customers who aren't satisfied with the first results that they get can easily search for something else rather than leave the site and visit a competitor.

More choices

People who looked at Paris also looked at:
> Amsterdam
> New York
> Rome

BA provides suggestions for alternative destinations, based on the past booking behaviour of their customers.

Monarch's suggestion for alternative departure airports will be appreciated by customers who may not have been aware that they had a choice.

1. choose flights > 2. who's flying &

select your flights to A

Don't Forget
We also fly to Alicante from **Birmingham Intl**, **London Gatwick** and **Manchester**.

Smart form defaults

While a lot can be done to help customers avoid mistakes when filling in forms, a few websites have realised that it's even better to minimise form entry where possible. One way to do so is to pre-fill form fields with "smart defaults", i.e. choices that are likely to be close to what the customer would enter in the first place.
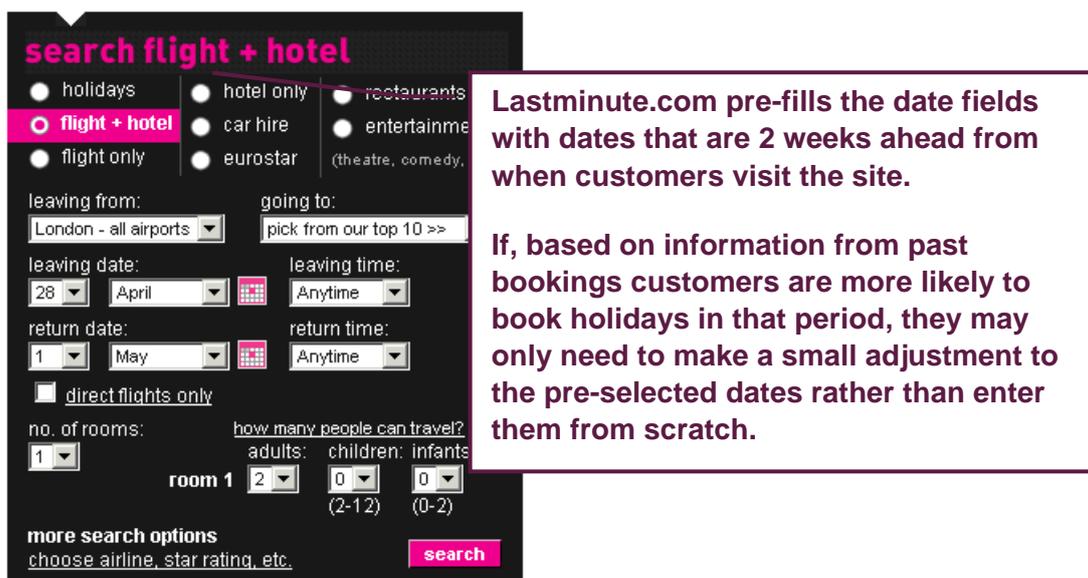
search flight + hotel

○ holidays   ○ hotel only   ○ restaurants
● flight + hotel   ○ car hire   ○ entertainme
○ flight only   ○ eurostar   (theatre, comedy,

leaving from: going to:
London - all airports ▼   pick from our top 10 >>

leaving date: leaving time:
28 ▼ April ▼   Anytime ▼

return date: return time:
1 ▼ May ▼   Anytime ▼

☐ direct flights only

no. of rooms: how many people can travel?
1 ▼   adults: children: infants
room 1   2 ▼   0 ▼   0 ▼
(2-12)   (0-2)

more search options
choose airline, star rating, etc.   **search**

Lastminute.com pre-fills the date fields with dates that are 2 weeks ahead from when customers visit the site.

If, based on information from past bookings customers are more likely to book holidays in that period, they may only need to make a small adjustment to the pre-selected dates rather than enter them from scratch.

Alternative travel

There's been a lot of talk about encouraging travelers to make more eco-friendly travel choices, such as a taking the train instead of flying. However, this often meant shopping around more than most travelers were prepared to do. Lastminute.com has taken a first step towards making this process easier, and is now showing by default Eurostar fares alongside airline fares when customers search for flights to Paris:

Travel disruptions

Following the most recent Iceland volcanic eruption 100,000 flights were cancelled4 over a period of six days across Europe. Under these circumstances it's important that travel websites provide information on travel disruption to guide and reassure their customers and help them make alternative plans. Similarly, when the heavy snow during the 2009/2010 winter resulted in flight cancellations and delays, passengers were anxious to find out about their flight information before they travel.

Webcredible performed a quick evaluation on the 20 sites on April 16th, two days after the volcanic eruption. We found that only 3 out of the 20 sites didn't provide any alert information on their homepage, which is a good start. Some good examples such as First Choice had a very prominent alert box with a link to more information displayed across the homepage which was easily spotted.

However, not all of the sites which provided a 'volcanic ash disruption' alert displayed them prominently on the homepage. For example, the information was hidden amongst other text on the Virgin-Atlantic homepage.

Overall, it's a good sign to see that travel websites make an effort to display crucial information on their homepages. More websites can improve on this by making the information more prominent and easy to find.

Conclusion

Overall, the UK travel sites featured in this report have showed improvements since last year's evaluation. However, many of them still aren't doing enough to maximise their share of the potential revenue in this highly contested marketplace. Though the average usability score has increased from 56.7% to 64.4% since last year, key guidelines that still need improvement include supporting comparison shoppers, making pages 'share-friendly', providing airport information, displaying clear progress bars, and providing contact numbers during the booking process.

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 online.

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.

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 complete typical tasks on your website (see www.webcredible.co.uk/testing for more details).

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

4. BBC News (2010, April 27). Volcano ash: Europe puts pressure on airlines. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8645981.stm

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	
British Airways	5	3	4	4	4	5	2	0.5	3	5	1	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	78
easyJet	5	3	4	5	4	5	0	0.5	5	5	3	5	0	5	4	3	5	5	5	5	77
Virgin Atlantic	5	4	3.5	4	5	5	4	3	3	2	3	3	1	5	4	0	5	5	5	5	75
Travel Republic	3	3	4.5	5	5	5	2	1.5	3	5	3	5	4	5	5	2	1	1	5	5	73
BMI	5	2	2	3	4	5	5	5	5	0	4	5	1	5	5	4	0	5	0	5	70
Expedia	5	5	4	3	2	3	3	3.5	3	5	3	3	3	5	0	3	1	5	5	3	68
Travelocity	5	5	4	3	3	3	2	3	1	5	1	5	4	5	2	4	3	0	5	5	68
Ryanair	3	3	4.5	4	4	5	2	1.5	3	3	1	5	2	4	3	3	2	5	5	3	66
Ebookers	5	4	2.5	1	4	4	2	2	5	2	0	4	3	5	3	4	1	5	5	3	65
Opodo	4	5	3.5	5	5	4	3	0.5	2	5	0	5	1	4	0	2	5	5	3	2	64
Travelbag	5	2	5	3	3	3	2	2	2	5	0	4	4	5	5	3	2	1	2	5	63
Flybe	2	1	0	4	3	5	2	0.5	5	3	1	5	0	5	3	3	5	5	5	5	63

Monarch	3	3	4.5	4	3	5	2	0.5	5	5	1	2	0	4	5	5	1	5	0	5	63
Netflights	5	3	4.5	3	2	2	2	2.5	2	5	0	5	5	5	2	4	4	0	1	5	62
Lastminute	4	5	4	3	3	3	2	2	3	1	1	3	3	3	0	2	5	5	5	5	62
Jet2.com	5	3	2.5	4	2	5	2	1	5	3	1	2	1	1	3	3	5	1	5	5	60
STA Travel	5	2	2.5	3	4	3	1	1	3	5	0	5	4	5	0	2	5	0	0	5	56
First Choice	1	1	4	4	3	5	3	2	5	2	0	4	1	3	4	3	1	0	5	5	56
Thomsonfly	4	1	4	4	1	5	3	2	4	2	0	4	1	2	5	4	2	0	1	3	52
Thomas Cook	3	0	3	2	2	3	2	0.5	0	5	1	2	1	5	0	4	1	5	5	2	47
TOTAL	**82**	**58**	**71**	**71**	**66**	**83**	**46**	**35**	**67**	**73**	**24**	**81**	**40**	**86**	**58**	**63**	**59**	**63**	**72**	**86**	
Average score	**4.1**	**2.9**	**3.5**	**3.6**	**3.3**	**4.2**	**2.3**	**1.8**	**3.4**	**3.7**	**1.2**	**4.1**	**2**	**4.3**	**2.9**	**3.2**	**3**	**3.2**	**3.6**	**4.3**	**64.4**

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.