

How to Design On-line Holiday and Flight Booking Services: Usability Guidelines

Introduction

In an independent study, Serco Usability Services evaluated a range of famous holiday and flight booking web sites with potential customers. The services provided by the sites included flight ticketing, accommodation and package holiday booking. The study revealed a number of issues, which are important to the design of online holiday booking sites and are presented here as a set of general guidelines to assist those developing such sites.

The Guidelines

Getting Users to Trust Your Site

- Ensure that all information on your site is current and updated regularly. Inform users that this is the case so they may be confident in using your site. Outdated information may lead to a lack of trust and confidence in your site.
- Provide reassurance and confirmations to users that information provided in search results pertains only to available holidays and flights. For example, users who are not asked for details such as number of people travelling will start to doubt whether their chosen holiday is indeed available.

Booking Online

- Research how your customers make decisions about buying holidays and flights and structure your site to support this. For example, users may want to easily compare features and pictures of holiday resorts, prices and involve others in the decision making process.
- Communicate the scope of your web site's functionality clearly. For example, failure to inform users that they cannot complete their holiday booking online leads to disappointment and frustration after they have invested time in the site.
- Provide contact numbers during the booking process as some customers may prefer to support their booking with telephone assistance.
- Make it easy for the customer to buy your holiday or flight - if users cannot easily find booking pages then they will not buy. Provide links from pages such as timetables, travel guides, destinations and special offers to the online booking page and consider carrying the details of the destination or offer to the booking form.

Timetables

- Use letters or meaningful abbreviations on timetables. Avoid unusual conventions such as numbers to represent days of the week.

Search Mechanisms

- Provide meaningful error messages when a search fails so that users can understand how to improve their searches.
- Help users to carry out successful searches. Customise search forms so that users are prevented from choosing holidays or flights that do not exist. Make search mechanisms more intelligent to suggest alternative dates or other criteria that would improve the results for the user and consider enabling users to search on different variables such as cost.
- Avoid asking users to specify their exact holiday destination too early in the search process. Users may have several areas in mind of equal preference.
- If users have expressed a particular preference in the search criteria, ensure that all the results returned are in accordance with this preference.
- Match user expectations. If a user needs to perform a similar search more than once, they expect the search form to hold their previously entered information intact. Users were frustrated at having to re-enter their requirements more than once.

Additional Features

- Provide additional features that are relevant to the context and content of the site and add value. For example, interactive calendars and travel guides were deemed to be useful whereas “fun” areas were not.

Terminology

- Avoid the use of technical terminology or provide a clear explanation of its meaning as this can cause confusion. For example, some users who failed to understand the meaning of ‘SSL’ chose to proceed with their payment without security.