

# Online Travel Sector Usability Report

Online flight booking



The usability & accessibility specialists

Report written and researched by Webcredible © 2006-2007.

## Introduction

The European online travel industry was worth a staggering \$34.5 billion in 2005, representing growth of 49% on 2004<sup>1</sup>. Currently over half of UK travellers use online travel agencies<sup>2</sup> and slightly more than half of business travel is now booked via the web<sup>3</sup>.

The market size is set to keep increasing too – it's estimated that by 2015 70% of travel will be booked online<sup>4</sup>.

Given the sector's huge growth, it's more important than ever that its players seize every possible competitive advantage, particularly given the competitive nature of the industry. A simple search for 'book a flight' on Google shows that no less than 114 companies are advertising for these keywords through Google Adwords. (Google Adwords are the adverts on the right hand side of the page in Google search results.)

By improving the usability of their website, companies can increase conversions by up to 100%<sup>5</sup>. With this in mind, usability experts Webcredible present ten key guidelines to help online travel companies significantly improve the user experience and effectiveness of their website.

This report focuses on designing an effective and user-friendly online flight booking process. However many of the guidelines are relevant and transferable to other online travel sectors, such as booking holidays, hotels or car hire. Practical advice and examples of best practice are provided throughout the report.

The guidelines in this report are based on a comprehensive study of online flight booking services conducted by Webcredible in July 2006.

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<sup>1</sup> eMarketer's Online Travel Worldwide 2005 ([www.emarketer.com/Report.aspx?travel\\_dec05](http://www.emarketer.com/Report.aspx?travel_dec05))

<sup>2</sup> Amadeus survey of 2000 UK holidaymakers in May 2005

<sup>3</sup> 2005/6 Barclaycard Business Travel Survey  
([www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information\\_centre/tibs/tibs2005\\_06\\_survey.pdf](http://www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information_centre/tibs/tibs2005_06_survey.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> 2005/6 Barclaycard Business Travel Survey  
([www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information\\_centre/tibs/tibs2005\\_06\\_survey.pdf](http://www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information_centre/tibs/tibs2005_06_survey.pdf))

<sup>5</sup> Return on Investment for Usability ([www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html))

## Summary

This report is aimed at anyone who is involved with the online travel sector: marketing managers, Internet managers and web developers. It assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge.

Many of the guidelines are transferable so even if you don't work within the travel sector there are certainly recommendations that will be applicable to your website.

The top ten usability guidelines for the online travel sector, along with two bonus ideas discussed in this document, are:

1. Provide a clearly-labelled 'first step' of the booking process
2. Provide a calendar
3. Encourage users to be flexible with their dates
4. Promote your cheapest fares and explain how to get them
5. Use a map to show where you fly to/from
6. Provide details on how to get to airports
7. Display prices in different currencies
8. Show the price in full as soon as possible
9. Make it easy to look for another flight
10. Make pages print-friendly

BONUS IDEA – Support comparison shoppers

BONUS IDEA – Support spur-of-the-moment decisions

## 1. Provide a clearly-labelled 'first step' of the booking process

The most important thing any travel site has to do is make it immediately obvious where and how you should look for and book a flight!

[www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

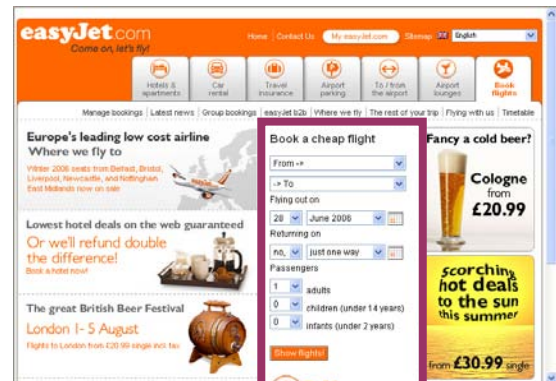
Most of the popular travel sites such as ryanair.com and easyjet.com (see screenshots, right) accomplish this by having a clearly-labelled 'first step' of the booking process on the homepage and above the fold (so users don't need to scroll in order to find it).

By displaying the start of the booking process on the homepage, travel sites clearly communicate how users should start booking and give users the chance to get going straightaway!

With the average Briton now spending £157 online each month<sup>6</sup> Internet users clearly aren't afraid to make large purchases (such as a flight) online. Hide this booking process first-step and frustrated users may be clicking the back button to return to their Google search results.



[www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)



//  
It's easy – it (the booking form) is right there – you can't miss it.  
//

- Comment on Ryanair


**Full guideline:** Provide a clearly-labelled 'first step' of the flight-booking process on the homepage, above the fold.

<sup>6</sup> IMRG, November 2005

## 2. Provide a calendar

Our extensive usability testing has shown time and time again that users like to be provided with a calendar when they are required to specify dates for a booking such as a flight or holiday.

This is because, unlike simple date dropdowns, calendars show users what day of the week a particular date falls on. It also means they don't have to get their diaries out to check a particular date. Even a minor irritation such as this could force visitors off your site and on to a competitors'.

A clickable graphical calendar element (like this ) works particularly well (see screenshot, right, from easyjet.com).

//

**It's thoughtful design to provide a calendar for users and it's often the small touches that count.**

- General comment

//

### [www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com) Book a cheap flight

From ->

-> To

Flying out on

28  June 2006

Returning on

no,  just one way


Passengers

1  adults

0  children (under 14 years)

0  infants (under 2 years)

[Show flights!](#)

However, BMI takes this one step further and offers a very handy feature (right). After the calendar has been closed, the booking form continues to provide confirmation of the days of the week the user has selected (like this )

### [www.bmi.com](http://www.bmi.com)

from  London Heathrow

to  select airport

depart Thu 29 Jun

return Fri 30 Jun

adults 1  children under 12 0  infants 0

[about young travellers](#)

[submit](#)

**Full guideline:** Provide a calendar (which can be accessed through a clickable graphical calendar element).

### 3. Encourage users to be flexible with their dates

One of the best-kept secrets concerning the booking of flights is that a little bit of flexibility on dates can result in big savings for travellers! Leaving slightly earlier in the day or staying for just one extra day can result in a significantly cheaper flight.

Although it might at first seem counterintuitive to offer cheaper prices, do bear in mind that online travel agencies experience the highest level of comparison shopping among the leading e-commerce sectors. A massive one in every four visits to travel agency websites come from another site in the same category<sup>7</sup>.

British Airways (right) allow users to be flexible about the day and time they fly, which is a useful feature. Unfortunately they don't really explain why this might be a good idea, nor what days/times tend to have the cheapest fares.

[www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)



The screenshot shows the 'Book return flights' form on the British Airways website. It includes fields for 'Country of Departure' (set to United Kingdom), 'Leaving From' (set to London (All)), and 'Going To'. There are also fields for 'Under 12, travelling without someone 16 or over?', 'Adults', 'Children', and 'Infants'. The 'Departing On' and 'Returning On' fields show dates (12 Jul and 19 Jul) with a '+/- 7 days' flexibility option. A 'Flight class' dropdown is set to 'Economy (lowest price)'. A red 'Get flights' button is at the bottom.

[www.airberlin.com](http://www.airberlin.com)

AirBerlin, in contrast, always returns at least two days of flights, with prices, to indicate the benefits of flexibility (right).

If your competitors are making it easy for users to find the cheapest flights, and you're not, it's pretty obvious which website is more likely to make the sale and which site users will return to again.

London - Stansted >> Germany West							
✈	from - to*	Flight no.**	Departure	via	Arrival	Seats	Fare
OUTBOUND FLIGHT			⬆ Previous flights ⬆				
📍	STN - DUS	AB 8893	Sun. 02.07.	07:30	09:45	> 9	£ 113
	STN - DUS	AB 8343	Sun. 02.07.	20:30	22:40	-	£ 211
📍	STN - FMO	AB 8821	Sun. 02.07.	21:10	23:20	> 9	£ 113
📍	STN - PAD	AB 8691	Sun. 02.07.	20:35	22:45	> 9	£ 113
📍	STN - DUS	AB 8893	Mon. 03.07.	07:15	09:15	> 9	£ 120
📍	STN - DUS	AB 8677	Mon. 03.07.	12:05	14:20	7	£ 141
📍	STN - DUS	AB 8747	Mon. 03.07.	17:15	19:25	> 9	£ 127
📍	STN - DUS	AB 8343	Mon. 03.07.	20:30	22:40	> 9	£ 141
📍	STN - FMO	AB 8821	Mon. 03.07.	21:10	23:20	> 9	£ 106
📍	STN - PAD	AB 8691	Mon. 03.07.	20:35	22:45	> 9	£ 106
			⬇ Next flights ⬇				

**Full guideline:** Allow users to specify their flexibility as early in the process as possible. Provide obvious access to an explanation of the benefits that flexibility can have.

<sup>7</sup> Hitwise UK (May 2005)

## 4. Promote your cheapest fares and explain how to get them

Web users booking flights, particularly consumers, can be highly price sensitive. Studies have unsurprisingly shown that price is the most important factor when choosing a flight<sup>8</sup>. It can therefore make lots of sense to promote your cheapest fares on the homepage.

The yellow box (right) is from the Ryanair homepage and clicking either a destination's name (e.g. 'Marseille Provence') or the price (e.g. '£0.99') takes you to a page that very obviously explains how to get the cheapest fare (below).

Don't forget that online travel agencies experience the highest level of comparison shopping among the leading e-commerce sectors. You must immediately show that you offer competitive prices or users may be unlikely to return.

[www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

FLY FROM LONDON (STANSTED)	
fares are exclusive of taxes fees & charges which do not exceed £15.20	
	from
<b>Marseille Provence</b>	<b>£0.99</b>
<b>Montpellier</b>	<b>£1.79</b>
<b>Limoges</b>	<b>£2.79</b>
<b>Carcassonne</b>	<b>£2.79</b>
<b>Bergerac</b>	<b>£2.79</b>
<b>Biarritz</b>	<b>£2.79</b>
<b>Pau (Pyrenees)</b>	<b>£3.79</b>
<b>Dinard</b>	<b>£3.79</b>
<b>Grenoble Lyon</b>	<b>£7.99</b>
<b>Nantes (Brittany)</b>	<b>£7.99</b>
<a href="#">Click here for more routes</a>	

[www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

**Marseille Provence**  
**from £0.99**

Fares are exclusive of taxes fees & charges which do not exceed £15.20

<b>Booking Period:</b>	<i>Tue 27th Jun - Thu 29th Jun</i>
<b>Travel Period:</b>	<i>Wed 08th Nov - Sat 06th Jan</i>
<b>Applicable Days:</b>	<i>Mon - Thurs &amp; Sat (subject to availability)</i>
<b>Flight must be purchased:</b>	<i>14 Days in advance</i>
<b>Blackout Period:</b>	<i>Limited availability during School Breaks</i>
<b>Notes on this fare:</b>	<i>All Holidays, School Breaks and major sporting events are excluded from this offer</i>

**Full guideline:** Promote your cheapest fares on your homepage – and make it obvious how the user can find out how to get them.

<sup>8</sup> YouGov survey of 1,955 people (May 2005)



## 5. Use a map to show where you fly to/from

You may not fly to or from the exact airport that users want, so allow them to look at a map of your routes to see if there are any suitable – or more convenient - alternatives.

Easyjet provides a very useful map on its website, allowing users to easily see all the locations that the carrier flies to and from (right) and the routes available. As a result, if a user lives in London and wants to fly to Dortmund he can see that he can't fly there from Stansted with EasyJet. However, he can use the route map to find an alternative see that Luton might suit his needs.

Web rage<sup>9</sup> can all too easily set in on the Internet – if you don't allow users to easily find an alternative flight to what they're after it's unlikely they'll hang around too long on your site.

[www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)



// How can I find out which airports fly to Dortmund? Oh I see – there a map – that's good.

- Comment on Easyjet //

**Full guideline:** Provide an interactive route-map that lets people find where you fly to and from.

<sup>9</sup> [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1829944.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1829944.stm)



## 6. Provide details on how to get to airport

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

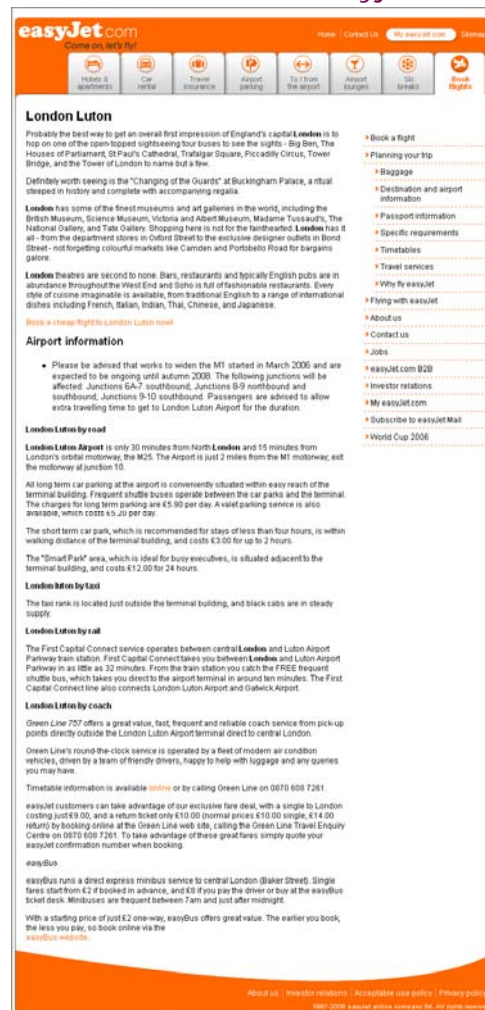
- Where it is
- How to get there
- How long it takes to get there from the city centre

This has become more of a problem recently as, in order to save money, airlines are flying to 'alternative airports', many of which are unfamiliar to travellers.

Despite this, many websites fail to provide information on where airports are or how to get there. This is probably a hangover from the days when there were fewer airports running passenger-carrying flights. The numbers of airports are increasing all the time and you can't assume that people know where they are (either on the 'Origin' or 'Destination' end of the flight).

EasyJet provides some great content (right) on how to find London Luton airport. Unfortunately it's only available through their route map and not during the booking-process (where users are more likely to want to access this information).

[www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)



//  
Frankfurt (Hahn) - where's that?  
Is that in Frankfurt or miles  
away?!

//

- Comment on Ryanair

**Full guideline:** Whenever you refer to an airport, make it easy for users to access a description of where it is and details on how to get there.

## 7. Display prices in different currencies

People generally find it far easier and more convenient to compare prices and make purchasing-decisions based on the currency with which they are most familiar.

As such, it's vital that your site provides prominent access to prices in different currencies within the booking process.

AirBerlin (right) allows all users to see prices in both Pounds and Euros. (In this example, Swiss Francs and American Dollars should perhaps be provided too.)

Please choose your currency: **EUR** | **GBP**

Please select a flight:

[www.airberlin.com](http://www.airberlin.com)

London - Stansted >> Zurich							
	from – to*	Flight no.**	Departure	via	Arrival	Seats	Fare
OUTBOUND FLIGHT			⬆ Previous flights ⬆				
	STN – ZRH	AB 8229	Fri. 30.06. 07:30	via	12:10	-	£ 169
	STN – ZRH	AB 8747	Fri. 30.06. 17:15	via	22:00	9	£ 169
	STN – ZRH	AB 8229	Sat. 01.07. 07:30	via	12:10	-	£ 169

//

Oh that's awesome – I can get it in Euros!

//

- Comment on AirBerlin

**Full guideline:** Provide prices in the native currencies of both the originating and destination airports (as well as Euros and American Dollars, if appropriate).

## 8. Show the price in full as soon as possible

We have found that people detest being 'hit' with extra taxes and charges part-way through a booking process. This is obviously true for any online checkout process.

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. The screenshots from British Airways (right) and AirBerlin (below) show alternative ways of doing this. AirBerlin itemises the costs which may help people to directly compare prices with rival airlines.

### Choose Your Departure Date

[www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)

 The prices below now include taxes, fees, charges and surcharges

Select your date below and click the 'Continue' button

Price guide: Lowest    Higher

July						
Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
				7	8	9
				£136	£53	£101

This guideline is particularly true for business travellers, who may often need to research the full ticket price before getting permission to make the purchase. Over half of business travel is now booked via the Internet<sup>10</sup>, so do be sure to cater for this crucial group of web users. On top of this, 50% of professionals will be required under company policy to book business travel online by 2015 (up from 28% in 2004)<sup>11</sup>.

[www.airberlin.com](http://www.airberlin.com)

<b>Outbound flight:</b>	GBP 246 Fare GBP 5 Taxes and charges GBP 13 Fuel surcharge <b>= GBP 264</b>	<b>Total amount: GBP 264</b> per person Child/Infant: GBP 183/GBP 25
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**Full guideline:** Display all costs associated with a flight as early as possible in the booking process.

<sup>10</sup> 2005/6 Barclaycard Business Travel Survey  
[www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information\\_centre/tibs/tibs2005\\_06\\_survey.pdf](http://www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information_centre/tibs/tibs2005_06_survey.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> 2005/6 Barclaycard Business Travel Survey  
[www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information\\_centre/tibs/tibs2005\\_06\\_survey.pdf](http://www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information_centre/tibs/tibs2005_06_survey.pdf)

## 9. Make it easy to look for another flight

A booking process shouldn't assume that users will be happy with the results of their search. It's crucial that if they're not, the process helps them to keep on looking for an appropriate flight.

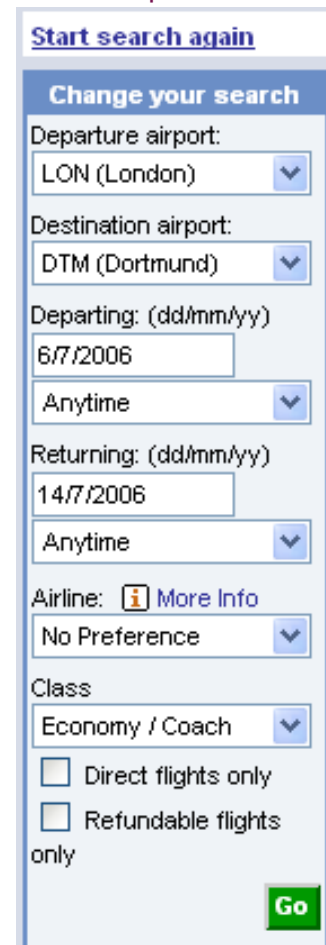
The easiest way to do this is to allow users to start a new search directly from the results page. Do also ensure that all search criteria (such as dates, airports and the number of people) is maintained.

Both Expedia (right) and EasyJet (below) allow users to start another search directly from the results-page. It should, however, be noted that Expedia provides their feature at the top of the page in the left-hand column whereas Easyjet only provides it at the bottom of the page (where it may be more likely to go unnoticed by users).

Both of these features correctly 'remember' the details that users entered when running their first search.

More than 40% of consumers are now buying holidays via online travel agencies<sup>12</sup> so do let them easily find an alternative flight. Make it difficult for them to perform a subsequent search and they're unlikely to hang around for too long on your site.

[www.expedia.co.uk](http://www.expedia.co.uk)



The Expedia search form is titled "Start search again" and "Change your search". It contains the following fields: "Departure airport:" with a dropdown menu showing "LON (London)"; "Destination airport:" with a dropdown menu showing "DTM (Dortmund)"; "Departing: (dd/mm/yy)" with a text input showing "6/7/2006" and a dropdown menu showing "Anytime"; "Returning: (dd/mm/yy)" with a text input showing "14/7/2006" and a dropdown menu showing "Anytime"; "Airline:" with an information icon and a link "More Info", and a dropdown menu showing "No Preference"; "Class" with a dropdown menu showing "Economy / Coach"; and two checkboxes: "Direct flights only" and "Refundable flights only". A green "Go" button is at the bottom right.

Hot what you were looking for? Then search again:

[www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)



The EasyJet search form has two columns. The left column has "From" with a dropdown menu showing "London (All Airports)" and "To" with a dropdown menu showing "Dortmund (DTM)". The right column has "Flying out on" with a date dropdown showing "08" and a month dropdown showing "July 2006", and "Returning on" with a date dropdown showing "12" and a month dropdown showing "July 2006".

Change your dates or route above, then click New search

New search

**Full guideline:** Provide an obvious way for users to 'search again' if their first search hasn't returned any relevant results.

<sup>12</sup> ABTA (November 2005)

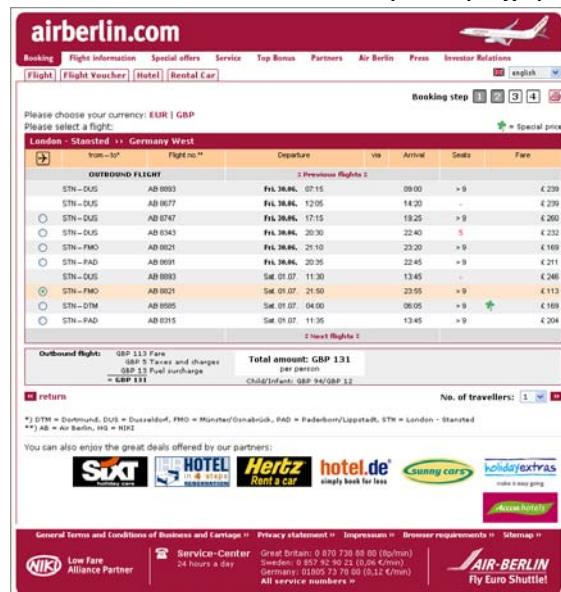
## 10. Make pages print-friendly

Not everyone who enters the booking process will want to book a flight there and then. Some people will simply be researching prices and/or finding out what flight times are available.

It's very important that your site takes account of this by making sure that a page prints well (i.e. in an easy to read format and without cutting off any important information). You can also reassure users that a page will print well – either through a specific 'print-friendly version' or a simple message.

An example of a site with pages that print well is AirBerlin (right). The first image shows the actual web page and the image below the print preview.

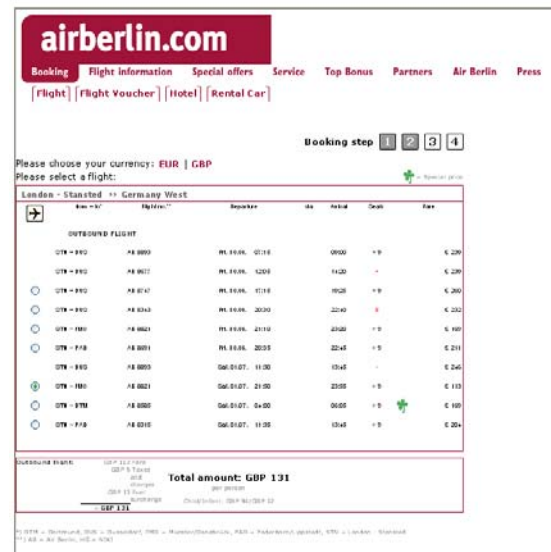
[www.airberlin.com](http://www.airberlin.com) (web page)



[www.airberlin.com](http://www.airberlin.com) (print preview)

Air Berlin - Fly Euro Shuttle

Page 1 of 1



**Full guideline:** Pages within the booking process should print well (i.e. in an easy to read format and without cutting off important information). Reassure users that a page will print well – either through a specific 'print-friendly' version, or a simple message.

## BONUS IDEA – Support comparison-shoppers

Most people will want to compare times and prices across several travel websites, which makes it unlikely that they'll book a flight on their first visit to any site. That being the case, it's strange that none of the sites we looked at seemed to have any features designed to support this form of user behaviour.

This behaviour is further evidenced by the fact that online travel agencies experience the highest level of comparison shopping among the leading e-commerce sectors – one in every four visits to travel agency websites coming from another site in the same category<sup>13</sup>.

Travel websites don't generally offer 'Bookmark this page' or 'Save this search' features for results pages (they do for pages showing individual flights). Sites could even offer an 'email a friend' or 'email me a copy'-feature which would include a link to a 'refreshed' version of that same search at any time.

## BONUS IDEA – Support spur-of-the-moment decisions

When looking for flights, people may not always have a particular destination in mind. They may just have a budget for travel within a particular date range, for example.

All of the websites we encountered seemed to be set up for users who knew exactly what they wanted. We would suggest that sites consider ways of supporting such 'browsing'-behaviour.

## Other guidelines to remember

The following guidelines are reasonably well adhered to across travel websites, but it's still important to mention them in case your site isn't conforming to all of them:

- Allow users to change the order of search results
- Provide easy access to the privacy & security policies
- If you fly from/to several airports that serve a major city provide an 'All'-option (e.g. 'ALL London Airports')
- Include the IATA location identifier (e.g. GVA = Geneva) after every airport name to prevent inconsistent naming between sites confusing users

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<sup>13</sup> Hitwise UK (May 2005)

- Provide easy access to the customer services helpdesk
- Make it obvious whether users will be sent a paper or electronic ticket (and/or whether they will be given the choice)
- Avoid/explain flight-industry or airline-specific jargon
- For journeys that involve more than one flight (i.e. connections and stop-overs), provide an estimate of total travel time
- Provide information on value-added services (particularly for business and first-class tickets), such as:
  - Seat size
  - Entertainment
  - Refreshments
  - Onboard storage space
  - Airport lounge
  - Quick check-in arrangements



## Conclusion

53% of people now use the Internet as their primary method for booking airline travel<sup>14</sup>. Usability is essential so that site visitors can find the flights they're looking for quickly and intuitively. An increase in usability can lead to an increase in conversions of up to 100%<sup>15</sup>.

With such a huge choice of websites available in the online travel industry, you don't have to try too hard to have your site visitors clicking away from your website. Applying the guidelines in this report is a great start to improving the user experience of an online travel website.

However, guidelines, while valuable, can never be a substitute for assessing the usability of your website with real users attempting to complete real tasks. Therefore, you should also be sure to carry out usability testing on your website on a regular basis. Usability testing involves watching typical site visitors complete typical tasks on your website (see [www.webcredible.co.uk/testing](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/testing) for more).

For more information on other general usability guidelines that should be conformed to, visit [www.webcredible.co.uk/articles](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/articles) or book a place on a Webcredible usability course at [www.webcredible.co.uk/training](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/training).

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<sup>14</sup> Accenture UK Travel Survey 2005  
([www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information\\_centre/tibs/tibs2005\\_06\\_survey.pdf](http://www.companybarclaycard.co.uk/information_centre/tibs/tibs2005_06_survey.pdf))

<sup>15</sup> Return on Investment for Usability ([www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html))



The usability & accessibility specialists

## About Webcredible

Webcredible is a usability and accessibility consultancy providing a range of services:

### Usability

- ▣ Usability testing
- ▣ Usability website evaluation
- ▣ Ongoing usability support
- ▣ Intranet usability

### Training

- ▣ Usability testing training
- ▣ Writing for the web training
- ▣ Web usability training
- ▣ Web accessibility training
- ▣ Advanced CSS training

### User-centered design

- ▣ User research & focus groups
- ▣ Card sorting & site map creation
- ▣ Wireframe design & testing

### Accessibility

- ▣ Web accessibility evaluation
- ▣ Accessibility testing
- ▣ Ongoing accessibility & CSS help

### Accessible web design

- ▣ CSS web design & build
- ▣ CSS / XHTML coding
- ▣ DOM scripting & accessible

Webcredible is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and respected usability and accessibility consultancies in the UK. Webcredible's research articles have been re-published on well over 100 websites and in numerous offline publications.

Webcredible regularly conducts usability testing studies and has a purpose-built usability lab (see [www.webcredible.co.uk/services/tour](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/services/tour) for a virtual tour). Clients include BBC, Environment Agency, Norwich Union, T-Mobile, Visa, World Health Organization and Yamaha.

For more information please:

- ▣ Telephone 0870 242 6095
- ▣ E-mail [info@webcredible.co.uk](mailto:info@webcredible.co.uk)
- ▣ Visit [www.webcredible.co.uk](http://www.webcredible.co.uk)