



The usability & accessibility specialists

Flights online – ensuring your site takes off

A usability study of UK travel websites



The usability & accessibility specialists

Report written and researched by Webcredible © 2008

Questions or comments? E-mail usability@webcredible.co.uk

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Introduction

The market opportunity

The size of the European travel marketplace was said to be worth €49.4 billion in 2007 and is growing to an estimated €67 billion in 2009¹. Flights have become a commodity where profit margins are being squeezed by competitive forces and government legislation.

At the same time the number of UK adults choosing to carry out their holiday planning and booking online has continued to grow over the past 10 years. A survey carried out by YouGov in 2007² revealed that 31% of online British adults plan to conduct all of their holiday planning, including bookings, online in 2008. A further 36% plan to conduct most of their planning online, while only 4% will avoid the Internet for travel purposes during 2008. At the same time, many businesses are empowering their staff to arrange and book their own business travel for themselves.

Given the sector's huge growth and potential, it's essential that the top travel sites leverage every advantage available to them to be more effective in this highly competitive marketplace. Usability has been proven to deliver highly compelling commercial benefits to businesses by reducing the risk of drop-offs. This is particularly important for highly transactional travel agent and airline carrier sites.

About this report

In February 2008, Webcredible investigated the usability of 20 travel websites in the UK, evenly split between travel agents and airline carriers.

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 February 2008.

Each website was evaluated against these 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 and well designed 'first step' of the booking process
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 manipulation of the results
7. Make pages "share friendly"
8. Support comparison shoppers
9. Display the full price (or an estimate) as early as possible
10. Make it easy to refine the 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 your flight cancellation/change rules are clear and findable

Errors and error handling

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

Results

Executive Summary

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

Website	Total score
Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk)	67
British Airways (www.britishairways.com)	65
Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk)	62
STA travel (www.statravel.co.uk)	58
Lastminute (www.lastminute.com)	56
Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)	55
Ebookers (www.ebookers.com)	54
Expedia (www.expedia.co.uk)	53
Travelocity (www.travelocity.co.uk)	53
BMI (www.flybmi.com)	53
Flight centre (www.flightcentre.co.uk)	52
Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)	49
First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk)	48
Airline network (www.airlinenetwork.co.uk)	47
Easyjet (www.easyjet.com)	46
FlyBE (www.flybe.com)	46
Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com)	44
XL.com (www.xl.com)	44
Ryanair (www.ryanair.com)	40
Monarch (www.flymonarch.com)	38
Average score	51.5

With only 3 websites scoring over 60%, and with so many top Internet brands scoring around the 50 mark, there's clearly significant scope for these market leaders to improve the usability of their online offering.

As the number of users intent on booking their flights online is set to increase in 2008, the opportunity to travel agents and carriers can only be realised by delivering a first class user experience. If users can't find the flights they want and successfully get through your booking process they'll likely pick up the phone or go somewhere else.

Travel agent vs. carrier websites

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

Travel agent website	Total score
Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk)	67
Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk)	62
STA travel (www.statravel.co.uk)	58
Lastminute (www.lastminute.com)	56
Ebookers (www.ebookers.com)	54
Expedia (www.expedia.co.uk)	53
Travelocity (www.travelocity.co.uk)	53
Flight centre (www.flightcentre.co.uk)	52
Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)	49
Airline network (www.airline-network.co.uk)	47
Average score	55.1

Carrier website	Total score
British Airways (www.britishairways.com)	65
Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)	55
BMI (www.flybmi.com)	53
First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk)	48
Easyjet (www.easyjet.com)	46
FlyBE (www.flybe.com)	46
Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com)	44
XL.com (www.xl.com)	44
Ryanair (www.ryanair.com/site/EN)	40
Monarch (www.flymonarch.com)	38
Average score	47.9

The main differences observed between travel agents and carriers were:

- There's a significant disparity across all criteria between travel agents and carriers
- Carrier sites are generally less transparent when it comes to total pricing choosing to add additional costs later during the user's booking journey (this



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shouldn't come as a surprise to people in the industry with the recent news from the Office of Fair Trading)

- 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 general, both travel agents and carriers aren't taking full advantage of the growing acceptance of Web 2.0 sharing tools. The task of planning a flight is often a social activity and users will expect to have tools to support this group task. Many of the travel sites don't even provide rudimentary printer-friendly templates so pages print out properly.

Finally, with the growing number of airlines flying to new and mysterious-sounding airports, many of the sites aren't being upfront about where they're based and how users 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 p29 for a full breakdown of scores.

Category: Flight search

1. Provide a clear and well designed 'first step' of the booking process

Overall average

3.9 (out of 5)


Travel agent average

4.1 (out of 5)

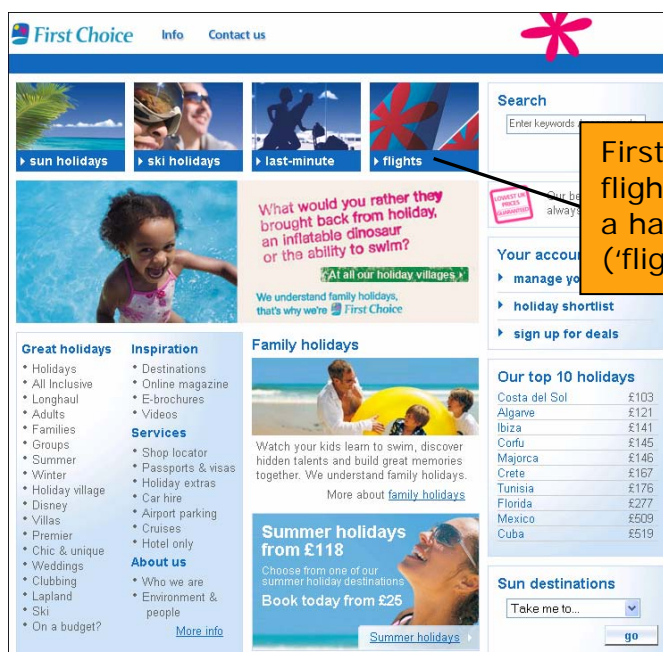
Carrier average

3.7 (out of 5)

Many web users arriving on a travel site aren't looking to browse around – they usually have a target holiday location, 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 straightaway.



The screenshot shows the AirlineNetwork.co.uk homepage. At the top, there's a banner for 'Fly to the USA with Atlantic from £285'. Below this is a navigation bar with links like 'Flights', 'Flight & Hotel', 'Hotels', etc. The main content area features a large flight search form. The form includes fields for 'Depart From' (London Airports), 'Destination' (Choose from List), 'Type of Journey' (Return, One-Way), 'Depart Date' (7 Mar 2008), 'Return Date' (14 Mar 2008), and passenger counts for Adults, Seniors, Children, and Infants. There are also links for 'Group bookings', 'Free newsletter', and 'Advanced Options'. A prominent orange callout box points to the search form with the text: 'Airline Network's homepage has a clear search form that acts as a powerful call-to-action.'



The screenshot shows the First Choice homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Info' and 'Contact us'. Below this is a search bar with the text 'Enter keywords'. The main content area features several promotional banners and links. A prominent orange callout box points to the search bar with the text: 'First Choice has placed the flights landing page behind a hard to find link ('flights').'

The websites generally fared well for the guideline, with 15 out of 20 scoring 4 or 5 out of 5, and the majority being marked down for not having a clear process or the form simply not being clear enough on the page.

Category: Flight search

2. Offer functionality to aid the booking process

Overall average

2.1 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

2.6 (out of 5)

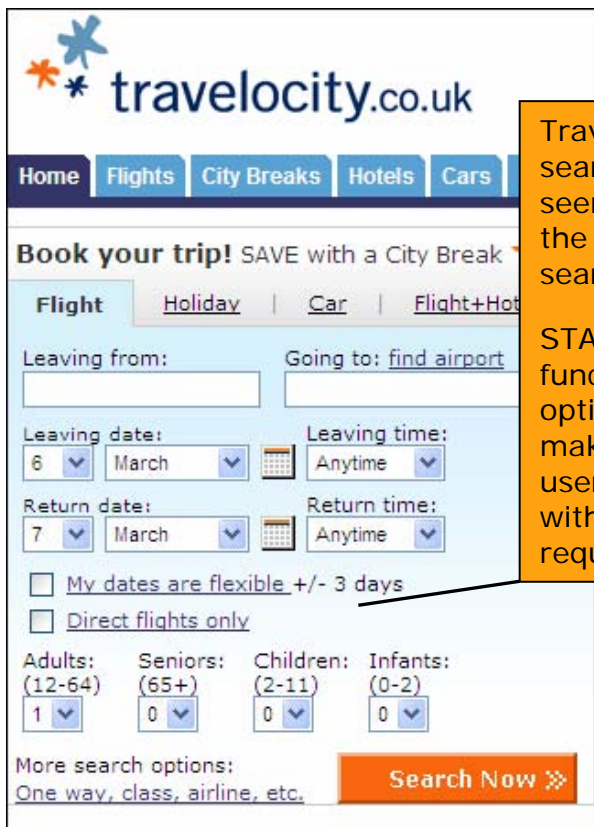
Carrier average

1.6 (out of 5)

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). When booking online these needs are still present and should be supported through the booking process.

The following options should be provided:

- ❑ Flexible dates
- ❑ Direct flights only
- ❑ Multi-flight trips
- ❑ Class



travelocity.co.uk

Home | Flights | City Breaks | Hotels | Cars

Book your trip! SAVE with a City Break

Flight | Holiday | Car | Flight+Hot

Leaving from: Going to: [find airport](#)

Leaving date: 6 March Leaving time: Anytime

Return date: 7 March Return time: Anytime

☐ My dates are flexible +/- 3 days

☐ Direct flights only


Adults: (12-64) 1 Seniors: (65+) 0 Children: (2-11) 0 Infants: (0-2) 0

More search options: One way, class, airline, etc.

Search Now

Travelocity offers good search options without seemingly adding to the complexity of the search itself.

STA Travel's search function has limited options potentially making it harder for users to be specific with their requirements.



STA TRAVEL
EXPERIENCE IS EVERYTHING
UNITED KINGDOM

PLAN YOUR TRIP | BOOK AND BUY | DESTINATIONS

SEARCH AND BOOK

☒ FLIGHTS ☐ HOTELS & HOSTELS

☐ BUS PASS ☐ TOURS AND TREKS

[INSURANCE](#) [DISCOUNT CARDS](#)

[EUROSTAR](#) [GIFT VOUCHERS](#)

[RAIL PASS](#)

From: London (All Airp.) To:

Departure: 24 Feb 08

☐ One way flight

Return: 07 Mar 08

No. of Travellers: 1

Traveller 1 ☒ I am a student ☐ I am under 26

SEARCH

[Advanced Search](#)
Find more options for flights (e.g. open jaw flight).

Speak to a real person - call our friendly experts at **0871 2300 040**

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

Category: Flight search

3. Provide an effective calendar

Overall average

3.1 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

3.0 (out of 5)

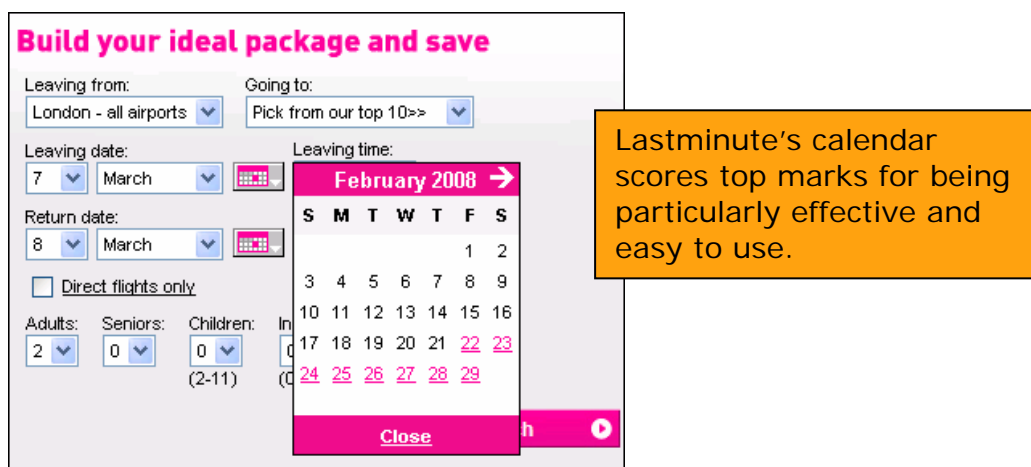
Carrier average

3.2 (out of 5)

Entering dates into websites can be an erratic business – it's very easy to enter the wrong date without noticing. Most sites now offer a 'calendar' feature, displaying the dates per month, allowing people to select their required dates more easily.

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

- ❑ The icon used to signify the feature is clear
- ❑ 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 point
- ❑ Users aren't forced to use the calendar if they do not wish to
- ❑ The 'return' calendar begins on the 'leaving' date



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

Category: Flight search

4. Allow flexibility when completing the first step

Overall average

2.9 (out of 5)

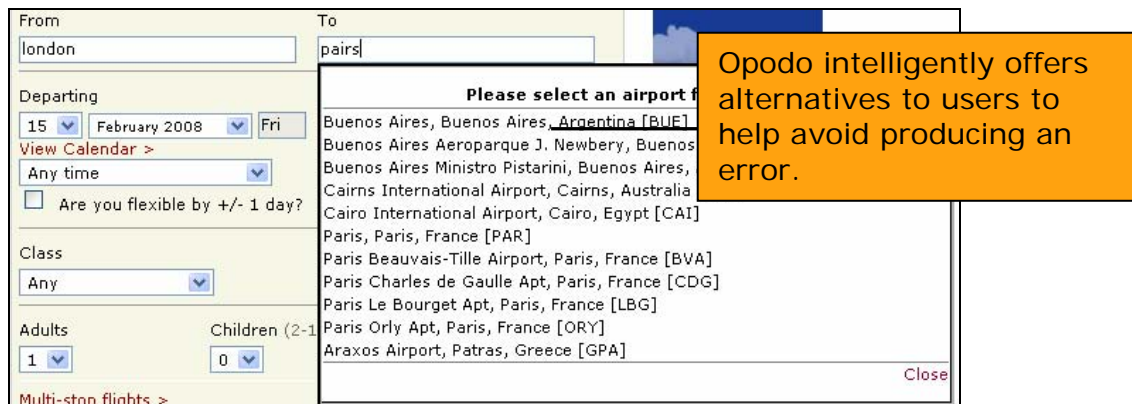
Travel agent average

2.6 (out of 5)

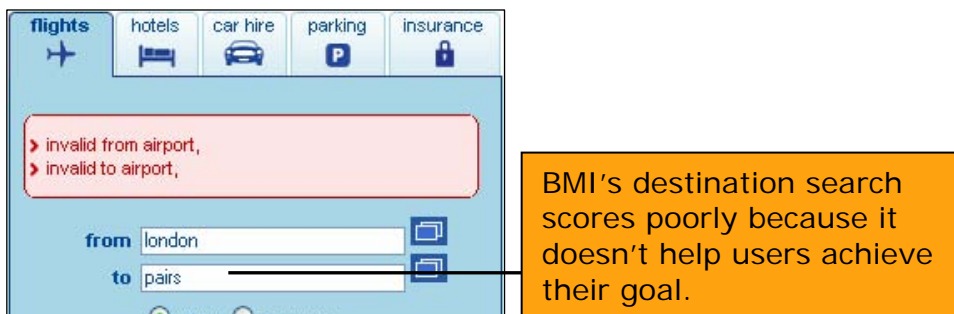
Carrier average

3.1 (out of 5)

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 some place names correctly can be a real struggle. People often don't know or care exactly which airport they fly to or from, so long as they arrive near their destination. Despite this, many websites force people to specify an airport, rather than allowing them the flexibility of just naming a city.



The screenshot shows the Opodo flight search interface. The 'From' field is set to 'london' and the 'To' field is set to 'pairs'. A dropdown menu is open, displaying a list of airports. The first option is 'Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina [BUE]'. Other options include 'Buenos Aires Aeroparque J. Newbery, Buenos Aires', 'Buenos Aires Ministro Pistarini, Buenos Aires', 'Cairns International Airport, Cairns, Australia', 'Cairo International Airport, Cairo, Egypt [CAI]', 'Paris, Paris, France [PAR]', 'Paris Beauvais-Tille Airport, Paris, France [BVA]', 'Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, Paris, France [CDG]', 'Paris Le Bourget Apt, Paris, France [LBG]', 'Paris Orly Apt, Paris, France [ORY]', and 'Araxos Airport, Patras, Greece [GPA]'. A 'Close' button is visible at the bottom right of the dropdown. An orange callout box points to the dropdown menu with the text: 'Opodo intelligently offers alternatives to users to help avoid producing an error.'



The screenshot shows the BMI flight search interface. The 'from' field is set to 'london' and the 'to' field is set to 'pairs'. A red error message box is displayed above the 'to' field, stating: '> invalid from airport, > invalid to airport,'. An orange callout box points to the error message with the text: 'BMI's destination search scores poorly because it doesn't help users achieve their goal.'

The websites scored poorly with regards to this guideline – many sites didn't offer the choice of 'All London airports', failed to recognise 'Pairs' as 'Paris', or allowed people to specify a return date that was before the outward date. Only 4 out of the 20 travel sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5.

Category: Search results and flight summary

5. Provide a clear results page

Overall average

3.4 (out of 5)

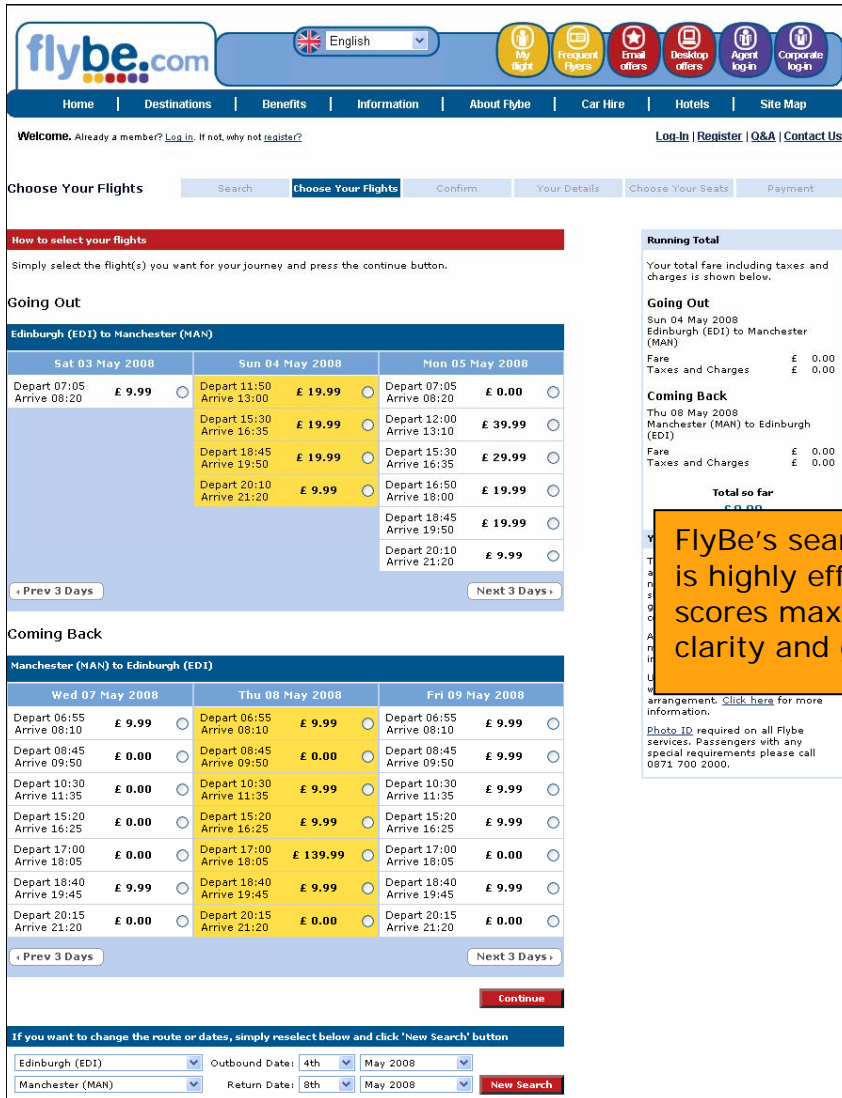
Travel agent average

3.4 (out of 5)

Carrier average

3.4 (out of 5)

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.



flybe.com English

Home | Destinations | Benefits | Information | About Flybe | Car Hire | Hotels | Site Map

Welcome, Already a member? [Log in](#) If not, why not [register](#)? [Log in](#) | [Register](#) | [Q&A](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Choose Your Flights Search Choose Your Flights Confirm Your Details Choose Your Seats Payment

How to select your flights

Simply select the flight(s) you want for your journey and press the continue button.

Going Out

Edinburgh (EDI) to Manchester (MAN)

Sat 03 May 2008	Sun 04 May 2008	Mon 05 May 2008
Depart 07:05 Arrive 08:20 £ 9.99	Depart 11:50 Arrive 13:00 £ 19.99	Depart 07:05 Arrive 08:20 £ 0.00
	Depart 15:30 Arrive 16:35 £ 19.99	Depart 12:00 Arrive 13:10 £ 39.99
	Depart 18:45 Arrive 19:50 £ 19.99	Depart 15:30 Arrive 16:35 £ 29.99
	Depart 20:10 Arrive 21:20 £ 9.99	Depart 16:50 Arrive 18:00 £ 19.99
		Depart 18:45 Arrive 19:50 £ 19.99
		Depart 20:10 Arrive 21:20 £ 9.99

« Prev 3 Days Next 3 Days »

Coming Back

Manchester (MAN) to Edinburgh (EDI)

Wed 07 May 2008	Thu 08 May 2008	Fri 09 May 2008
Depart 06:55 Arrive 08:10 £ 9.99	Depart 06:55 Arrive 08:10 £ 9.99	Depart 06:55 Arrive 08:10 £ 9.99
Depart 08:45 Arrive 09:50 £ 0.00	Depart 08:45 Arrive 09:50 £ 0.00	Depart 08:45 Arrive 09:50 £ 9.99
Depart 10:30 Arrive 11:35 £ 0.00	Depart 10:30 Arrive 11:35 £ 9.99	Depart 10:30 Arrive 11:35 £ 9.99
Depart 15:20 Arrive 16:25 £ 0.00	Depart 15:20 Arrive 16:25 £ 9.99	Depart 15:20 Arrive 16:25 £ 9.99
Depart 17:00 Arrive 18:05 £ 0.00	Depart 17:00 Arrive 18:05 £ 139.99	Depart 17:00 Arrive 18:05 £ 0.00
Depart 18:40 Arrive 19:45 £ 9.99	Depart 18:40 Arrive 19:45 £ 9.99	Depart 18:40 Arrive 19:45 £ 9.99
Depart 20:15 Arrive 21:20 £ 0.00	Depart 20:15 Arrive 21:20 £ 0.00	Depart 20:15 Arrive 21:20 £ 0.00

« Prev 3 Days Next 3 Days »

[Continue](#)

If you want to change the route or dates, simply reselect below and click 'New Search' button

Edinburgh (EDI) Outbound Date: 4th May 2008

Manchester (MAN) Return Date: 8th May 2008 [New Search](#)

Running Total

Your total fare including taxes and charges is shown below.

Going Out

Sun 04 May 2008
Edinburgh (EDI) to Manchester (MAN)

Fare £ 0.00
Taxes and Charges £ 0.00

Coming Back

Thu 08 May 2008
Manchester (MAN) to Edinburgh (EDI)

Fare £ 0.00
Taxes and Charges £ 0.00

Total so far

£ 0.00

[Click here](#) for more information.

Photo ID required on all Flybe services. Passengers with any special requirements please call 0871 700 2000.

FlyBe's search results page is highly effective and scores maximum marks for clarity and good structure.

The sites performed fairly well for this guideline. 11 of the 20 sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5. Sites were marked down for cluttering the screen with unneeded information, or missing key information from the page (such as the dates).

Category: Search results and flight summary

6. Allow manipulation of the results

Overall average

2.9 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

2.0 (out of 5)

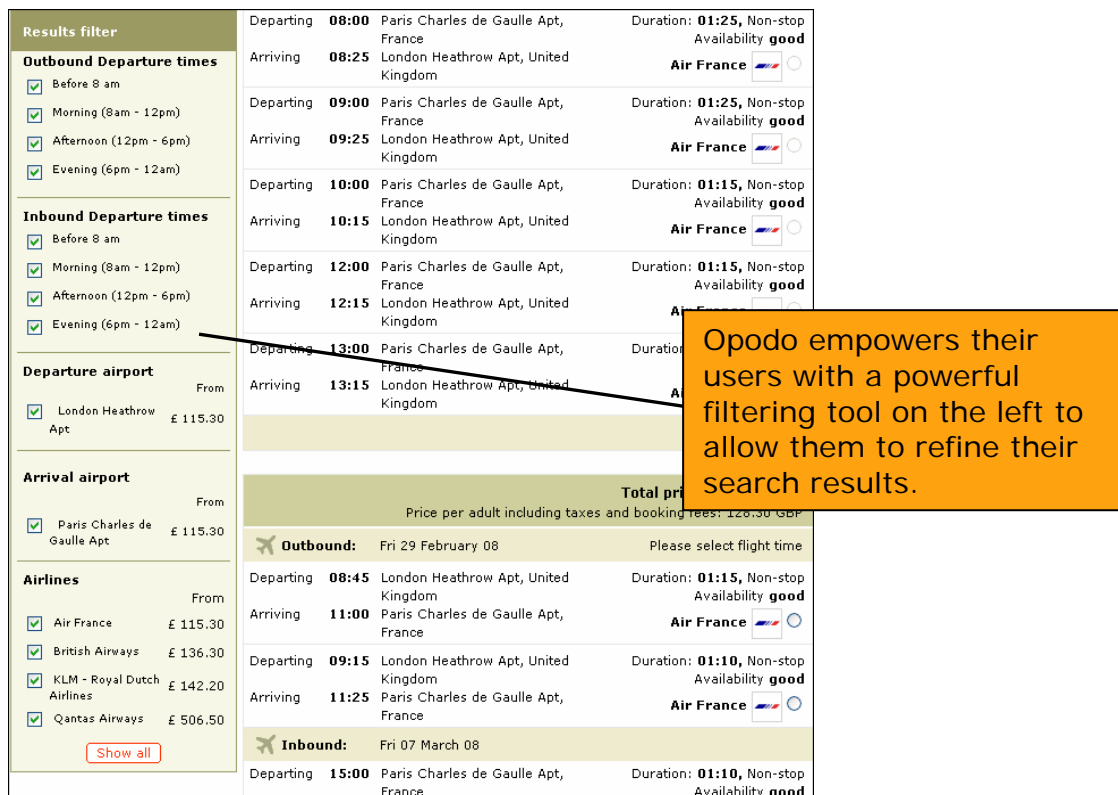
Carrier average

3.8 (out of 5)

If users are provided with a long list of results then it's crucial they're able to manipulate the list. This will help them 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. Users can usually sort by price to bring the cheapest flights to the top.

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 users who know a bit about the product(s) as filter criteria are usually product-specific.



Results filter

Outbound Departure times

- ☒ Before 8 am
- ☒ Morning (8am - 12pm)
- ☒ Afternoon (12pm - 6pm)
- ☒ Evening (6pm - 12am)

Inbound Departure times

- ☒ Before 8 am
- ☒ Morning (8am - 12pm)
- ☒ Afternoon (12pm - 6pm)
- ☒ Evening (6pm - 12am)

Departure airport

From ☒ London Heathrow Apt £ 115.30

Arrival airport

From ☒ Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt £ 115.30

Airlines

From

- ☒ Air France £ 115.30
- ☒ British Airways £ 136.30
- ☒ KLM - Royal Dutch Airlines £ 142.20
- ☒ Qantas Airways £ 506.50

[Show all](#)

Departing **08:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France Duration: **01:25**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **08:25** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom **Air France**

Departing **09:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France Duration: **01:25**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **09:25** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom **Air France**

Departing **10:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France Duration: **01:15**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **10:15** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom **Air France**

Departing **12:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France Duration: **01:15**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **12:15** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom **Air France**

Departing **13:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France Duration: **01:15**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **13:15** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom **Air France**

Total price

Price per adult including taxes and booking fees: 126.30 GBP

Outbound: Fri 29 February 08 Please select flight time

Departing **08:45** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom Duration: **01:15**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **11:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France **Air France**

Departing **09:15** London Heathrow Apt, United Kingdom Duration: **01:10**, Non-stop Availability **good**

Arriving **11:25** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France **Air France**

Inbound: Fri 07 March 08

Departing **15:00** Paris Charles de Gaulle Apt, France Duration: **01:10**, Non-stop Availability **good**

8 sites didn't need to offer the ability to manipulate the results because the number of flights offered was too small for such requirements. Of the others only 1 offered filtering as an option, with sorting being more common. The websites generally performed poorly for this guideline, with just 1 out of 12 scoring 4 or 5 out of 5.

Category: Search results and flight summary

7. Make pages “share friendly”

Overall average

2.2 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

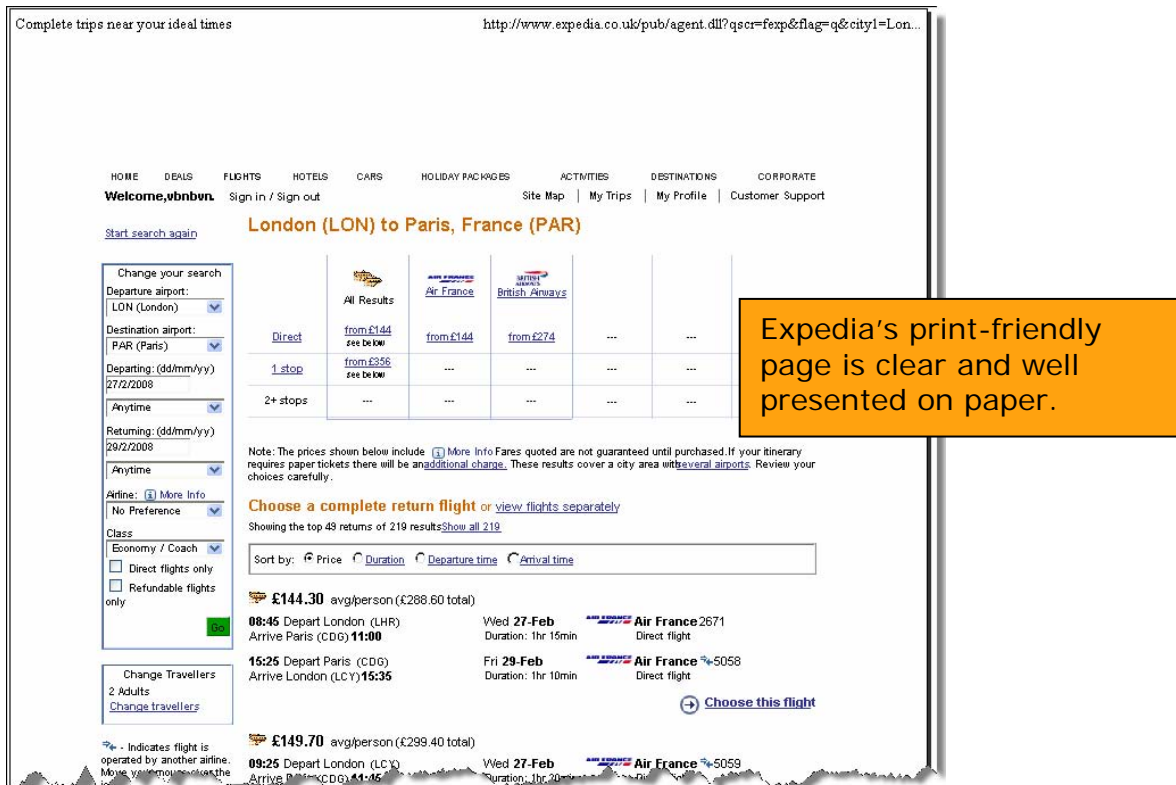
2.1 (out of 5)

Carrier average

2.3 (out of 5)

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', yet no site offered this.



Complete trips near your ideal times <http://www.expedia.co.uk/pub/agent.dll?qscr=fexp&flag=q&city1=Lon...>

HOME DEALS FLIGHTS HOTELS CARS HOLIDAY PACKAGES ACTIVITIES DESTINATIONS CORPORATE

Welcome, vbnbn. Sign in / Sign out Site Map My Trips My Profile Customer Support

[Start search again](#) **London (LON) to Paris, France (PAR)**

Change your search
 Departure airport: LON (London)
 Destination airport: PAR (Paris)
 Departing: (dd/mm/yy) 27/2/2008
 Returning: (dd/mm/yy) 29/2/2008
 Class: Economy / Coach
 Direct flights only
 Refundable flights only

Change Travellers
 2 Adults
[Change travellers](#)

All Results
 Direct from £144
 1 stop from £356
 2+ stops ...

Note: The prices shown below include [More Info](#) Fares quoted are not guaranteed until purchased. If your itinerary requires paper tickets there will be an additional charge. These results cover a city area with several airports. Review your choices carefully.

Choose a complete return flight or view flights separately
 Showing the top 49 returns of 219 results [Show all 219](#)

Sort by: Price Duration Departure time Arrival time

£144.30 avg/person (£288.60 total)
 08:45 Depart London (LHR)
 Arrive Paris (CDG) 11:00
 15:25 Depart Paris (CDG)
 Arrive London (LCY) 15:35

Wed 27-Feb
 Duration: 1hr 15min
 Air France 2671
 Direct flight

Fri 29-Feb
 Duration: 1hr 10min
 Air France 5058
 Direct flight

Choose this flight

£149.70 avg/person (£299.40 total)
 09:25 Depart London (LCY)
 Arrive Paris (CDG) 11:45
 Wed 27-Feb
 Duration: 1hr 20min
 Air France 5059
 Direct flight

The websites scored decidedly averagely for this guideline, with many sites not providing their users with even rudimentary sharing tools. 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.

Category: Search results and flight summary

8. Support comparison shoppers

Overall average

1.0 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

0.8 (out of 5)

Carrier average

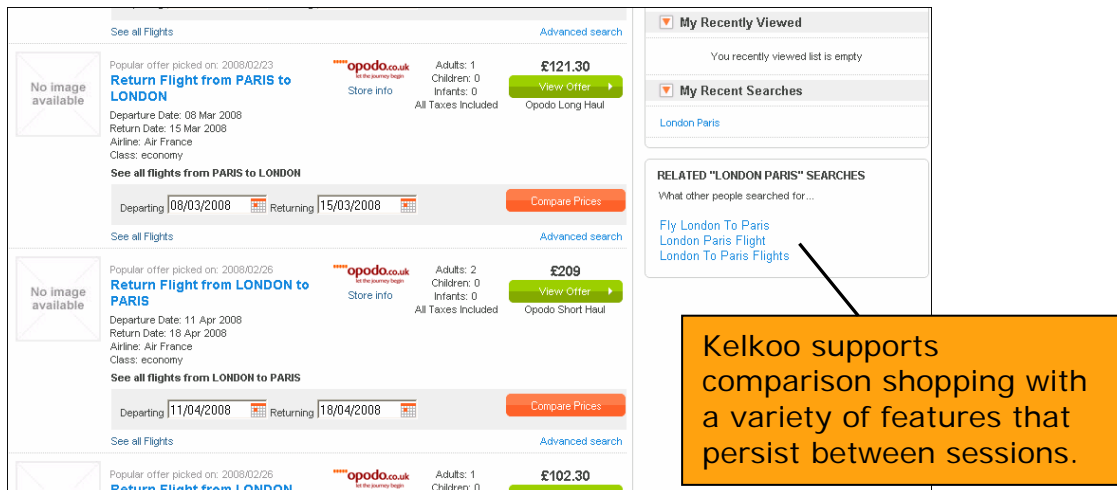
1.2 (out of 5)

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 – one 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.



Travel websites don't generally offer persistent features for results pages either.

Some sites offer features for saving individual flights. Unfortunately users are typically more committed to making a booking at that stage in their journey rather than continue 'comparison shopping'.

Category: Search results and flight summary

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

Overall average

3.3 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

4.3 (out of 5)

Carrier average

2.2 (out of 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 true for business travellers who may often need to research the full ticket price before getting permission to make the purchase.

Total price: 308.90 GBP
Average price per person: **154.45 GBP**
All prices include taxes

Thomas Cook clearly displays the total price. Their approach to taxes is also clearly explained.

2. Click on a price or decomposing box to select the flight of your choice.
3. Once a flight is selected the flight price including taxes, fees & charges is displayed in the right hand fare box.

Going Out From London (Stansted) - Cork

« Previous Day » Next Day »

Select A Flight

Flight	Class	Fare	Day	Time	Depart	Arrive
✈️	Adult	89.99 GBP	Thu, 28 Feb 08	06:20	Depart	07:45 Arrive
✈️	Adult	89.99 GBP	Thu, 28 Feb 08	16:25	Depart	17:55 Arrive

Going Out

Reg Fare
Depart: London (Stansted) 06:20
Arrive: Cork 07:45
2 x Adult 179.98 GBP
Fare: 179.98 GBP
Taxes / Fees: 48.16 GBP
Total Price: 228.14 GBP

Coming Back From Cork - London (Stansted)

« Previous Day » Next Day »

Select A Flight

Flight	Class	Fare	Day	Time	Depart	Arrive
✈️	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	08:10	Depart	09:25 Arrive
✈️	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	18:20	Depart	19:40 Arrive
✈️	Adult	29.99 GBP	Sun, 2 Mar 08	21:30	Depart	22:50 Arrive

Coming Back

Reg Fare
Depart: Cork 18:20
Arrive: London (Stansted) 19:40
2 x Adult 59.98 GBP
Fare: 59.98 GBP
Taxes / Fees: 35.12 GBP
Total Price: 95.10 GBP

Ryanair uses various prices placed around the page, making it difficult to establish exactly how much the flights will cost.

The difference in score between travel agents and carriers is highly significant and should come as no surprise to many readers. The transparency of pricing is a long-standing concern of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT). All the travel agent sites scored either 4 or 5 out of 5 whereas the carriers were let down by 6 sites scoring 2 or below for this important guideline.

Category: Search results and flight summary

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

Overall average

2.9 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

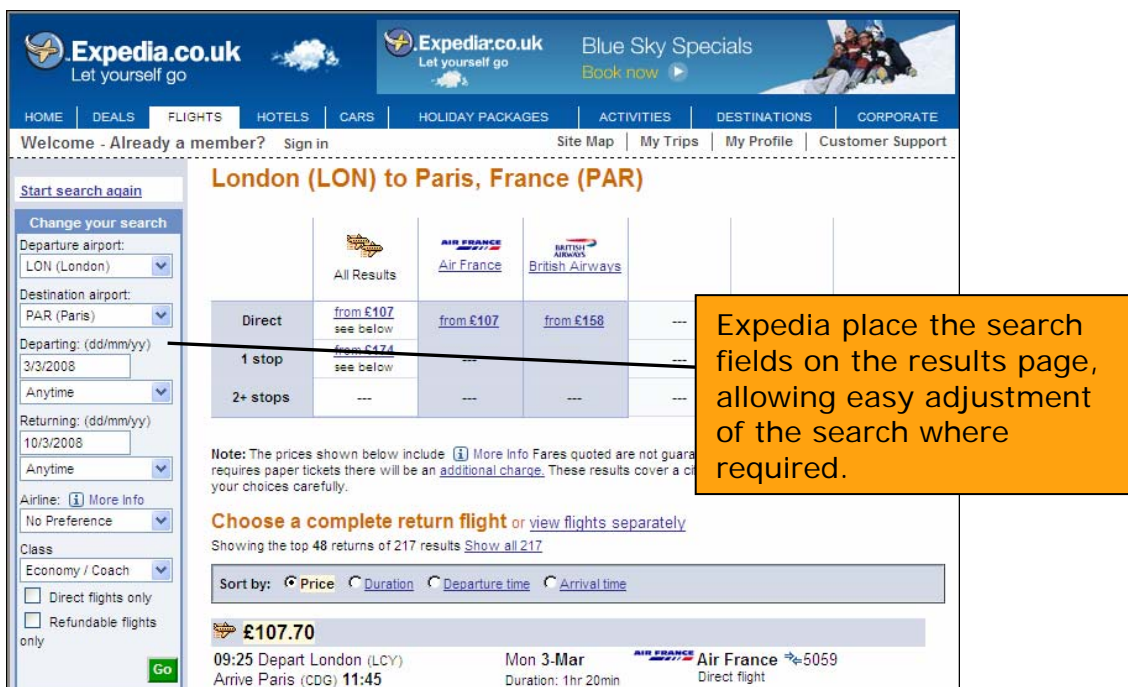
4.2 (out of 5)

Carrier average

1.6 (out of 5)

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.



London (LON) to Paris, France (PAR)

	All Results	Air France	British Airways
Direct	from £107 see below	from £107	from £158
1 stop	see below	---	---
2+ stops	---	---	---

£107.70
09:25 Depart London (LCY) Mon 3-Mar Air France 35059
Arrive Paris (CDG) 11:45 Duration: 1hr 20min Direct flight

Expedia place the search fields on the results page, allowing easy adjustment of the search where required.

With the exception of BMI, all the travel sites provided some facility to address this guideline. However, there was another marked difference between travel agents and carriers. The carrier travel sites lost marks for losing users' previously entered search criteria and providing only limited re-search options.

Category: Search results and flight summary

11. Provide information on each airport

Overall average

0.5 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

0.0 (out of 5)

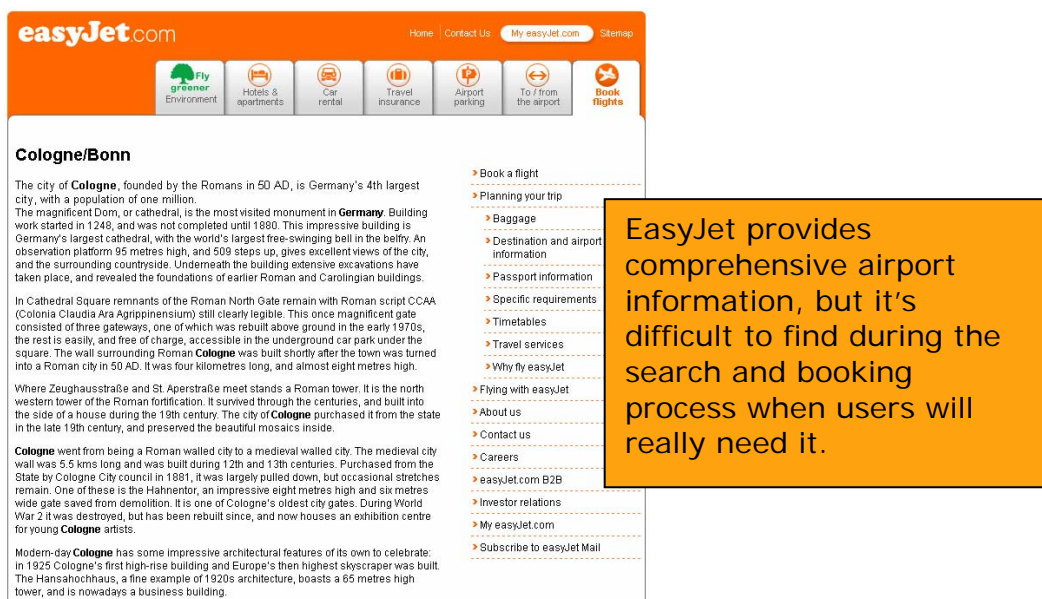
Carrier average

0.9 (out of 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 the transport links (public and otherwise) are
- ❑ How long it takes to get there from the original location/final destination

This issue 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.



With 15 out of 20 travel sites scoring 0 out of 5 on this guideline, 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.

Category: Search results and flight summary

12. Use a clear flight confirmation page

Overall average

4.2 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

4.3 (out of 5)

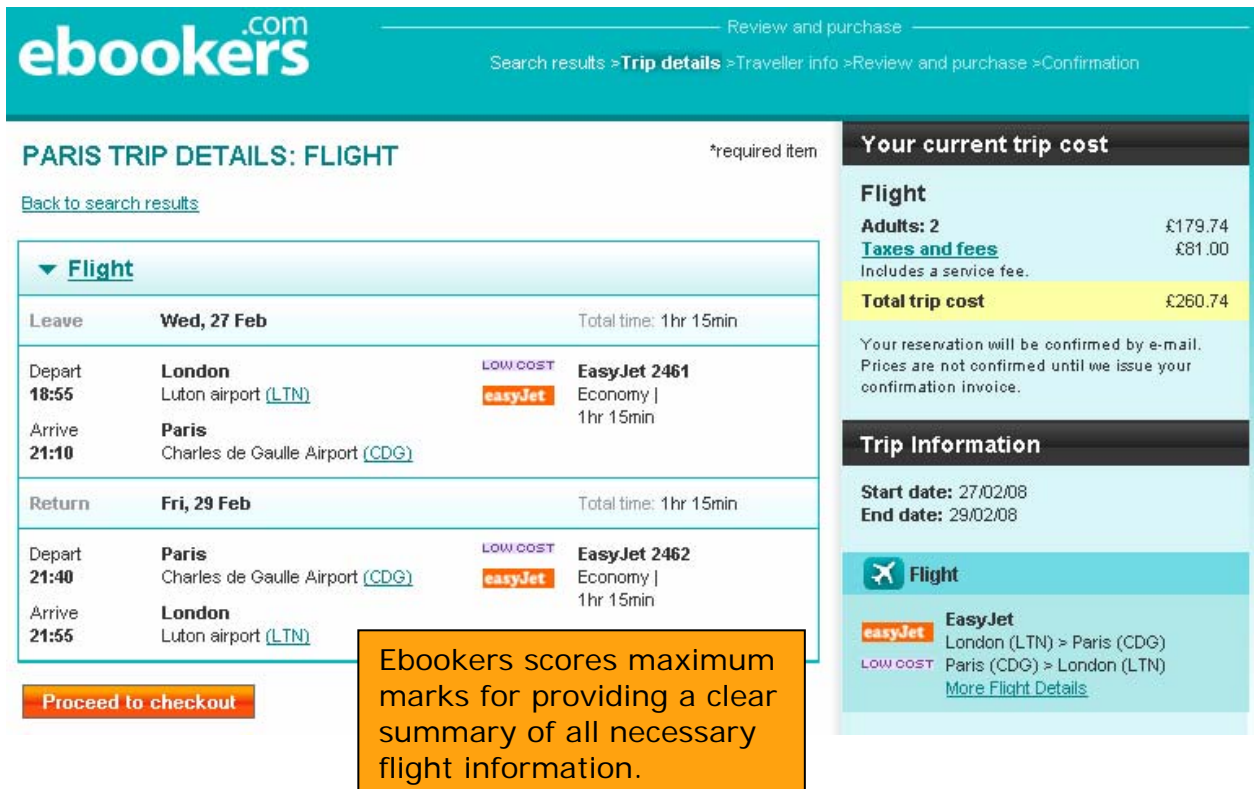
Carrier average

4.0 (out of 5)

After selecting flights from the search result 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 items included

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



ebookers.com — Review and purchase —

Search results > Trip details > Traveller info > Review and purchase > Confirmation

PARIS TRIP DETAILS: FLIGHT

[Back to search results](#)

Flight

Leave	Wed, 27 Feb	Total time: 1 hr 15min
Depart 18:55	London Luton airport (LTN)	LOW COST easyJet EasyJet 2461 Economy 1 hr 15min
Arrive 21:10	Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG)	
Return	Fri, 29 Feb	Total time: 1 hr 15min
Depart 21:40	Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG)	LOW COST easyJet EasyJet 2462 Economy 1 hr 15min
Arrive 21:55	London Luton airport (LTN)	

[Proceed to checkout](#)

Your current trip cost

Flight	
Adults: 2	£179.74
Taxes and fees	£81.00
Includes a service fee.	
Total trip cost	£260.74

Your reservation will be confirmed by e-mail. Prices are not confirmed until we issue your confirmation invoice.

Trip Information

Start date: 27/02/08
End date: 29/02/08

Flight

easyJet
LOW COST
EasyJet
London (LTN) > Paris (CDG)
Paris (CDG) > London (LTN)
[More Flight Details](#)

Ebookers scores maximum marks for providing a clear summary of all necessary flight information.

17 out of 20 travel sites scored 4 or 5 out of 5 on this guideline, which is an excellent result.

Category: Booking pages

13. Provide a contact number through the booking process

Overall average

1.9 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

3.0 (out of 5)

Carrier average

0.8 (out of 5)

Some users 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.

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.



Flight Centre scores highly for putting their contact number(s) into the header, providing both a number and opening times.

11 out of the 20 travel sites scored 0 or 1 out of 5 on this guideline, which is a significant user experience risk. Those users that aren't 'e-confident' may struggle to complete your booking process and may decide to dropout if they can't pick the up phone and speak to you.

It's also important to consider that a phone number on your site will reassure your users that you're a bona fide enterprise.

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.

Category: Booking pages

14. Use appropriate up-selling

Overall average

3.6 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

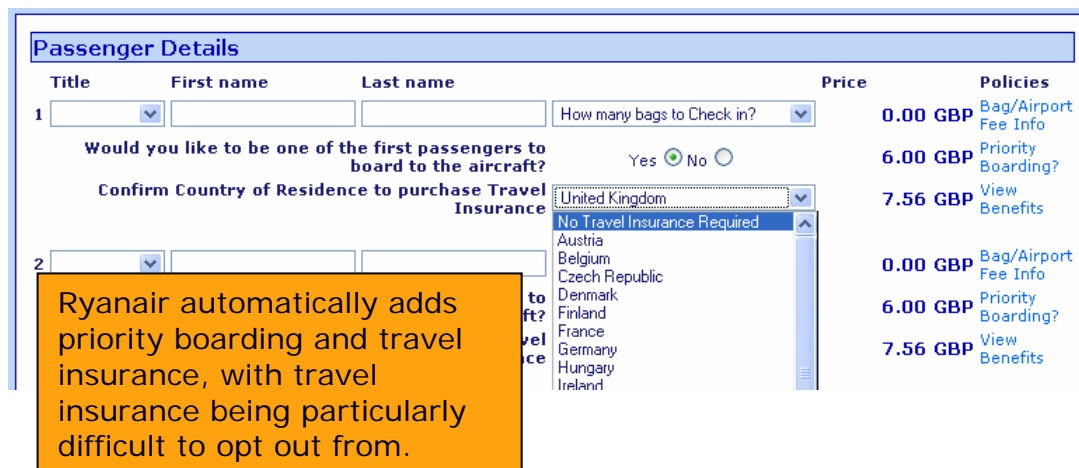
4.1 (out of 5)

Carrier average

3.0 (out of 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.



Passenger Details

Title	First name	Last name	Price	Policies
1			0.00 GBP	Bag/Airport Fee Info
Would you like to be one of the first passengers to board to the aircraft?			6.00 GBP	Priority Boarding?
Confirm Country of Residence to purchase Travel Insurance			7.56 GBP	View Benefits
2			0.00 GBP	Bag/Airport Fee Info
			6.00 GBP	Priority Boarding?
			7.56 GBP	View Benefits

United Kingdom
Austria
Belgium
Czech Republic
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Hungary
Ireland

No Travel Insurance Required

Ryanair automatically adds priority boarding and travel insurance, with travel insurance being particularly difficult to opt out from.

It's a positive sign that so many sites have scored so highly for this guideline. With 14 out of 20 of the sites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5, it's clear that most travel sites understand the importance of transparent pricing.

Unfortunately, several sites automatically included travel insurance into their booking package – Ryanair make it particularly difficult for users to unselect their insurance. Others automatically add charges for meals, carbon offsetting and seat options.

Category: Booking pages

15. Display a clear progress bar

Overall average

2.2 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

2.1 (out of 5)

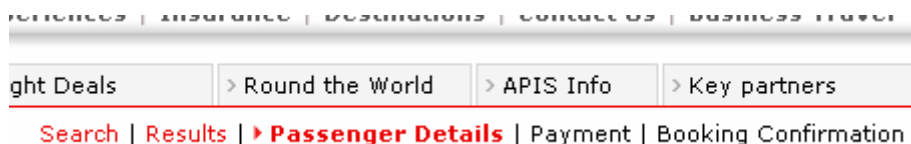
Carrier average

2.3 (out of 5)

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.

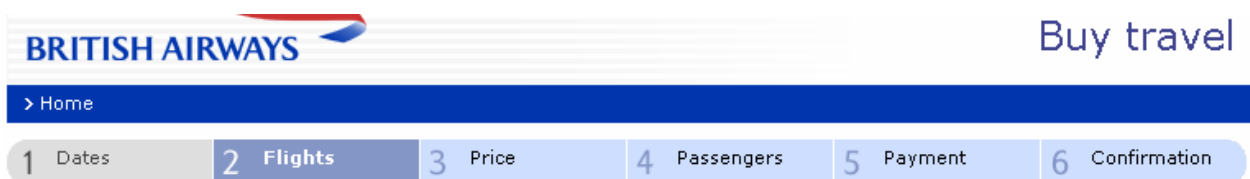
The progress bar should:

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



Flight Centre's progress bar (above) is too closely grouped with the 'search' and 'results' links. This makes it hard for users to follow.

BA (below) scores highest for their progress bar which is clear, easy to understand and has a strong sense of flow.



18 out of the 20 travel sites provide a progress bar, but with an average score of just 2.2 out of 5 overall there's clearly room for improvement. Most of the progress bars went against one or more of the above criteria thereby reducing their effectiveness.

Category: Booking pages

16. Ensure your flight cancellation/change rules are clear and findable

Overall average

2.5 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

2.3 (out of 5)

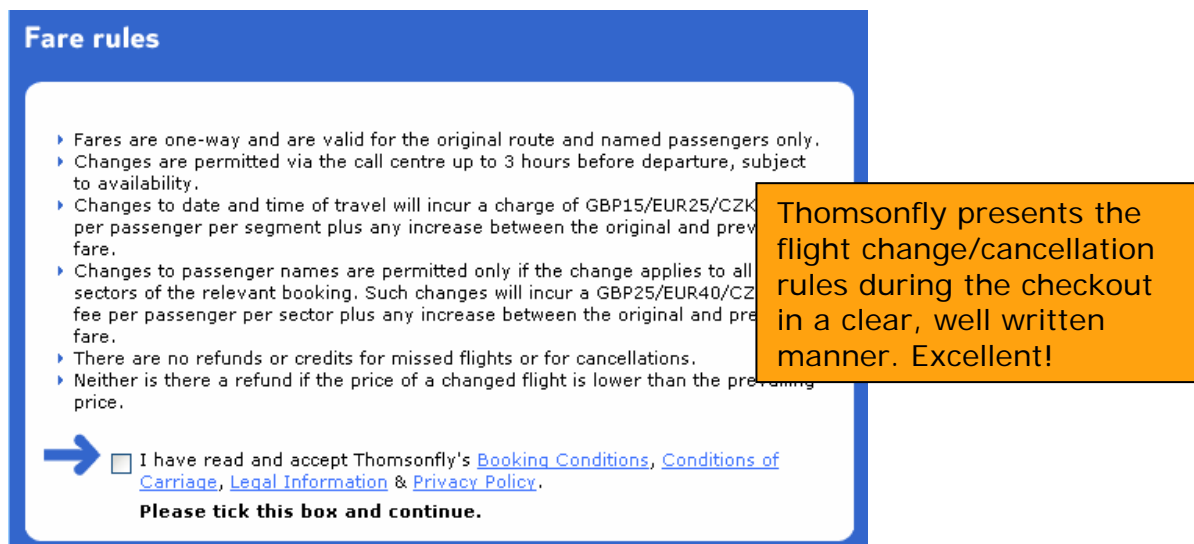
Carrier average

2.7 (out of 5)

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 legalise 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 three or four sentences in bullet points to explain the basics. Links to further explanations should also be included where required.



Fare rules

- ▶ Fares are one-way and are valid for the original route and named passengers only.
- ▶ Changes are permitted via the call centre up to 3 hours before departure, subject to availability.
- ▶ Changes to date and time of travel will incur a charge of GBP15/EUR25/CZK per passenger per segment plus any increase between the original and previous fare.
- ▶ Changes to passenger names are permitted only if the change applies to all sectors of the relevant booking. Such changes will incur a GBP25/EUR40/CZK fee per passenger per sector plus any increase between the original and previous fare.
- ▶ There are no refunds or credits for missed flights or for cancellations.
- ▶ Neither is there a refund if the price of a changed flight is lower than the prevailing price.

☐ I have read and accept Thomsonfly's [Booking Conditions](#), [Conditions of Carriage](#), [Legal Information](#) & [Privacy Policy](#).

Please tick this box and continue.

Thomsonfly presents the flight change/cancellation rules during the checkout in a clear, well written manner. Excellent!

Whilst all 20 travel sites provided their terms and conditions of booking on the site, only 3 out of the 20 scored 4 or 5 out of 5 for this guideline. With an overall average of 2.5 out of 5, it's clear that the travel sites need to consider the reasons for this lack of upfront transparency with their users.

Category: Errors and error handling

17. Provide a clear error summary

Overall average

2.3 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

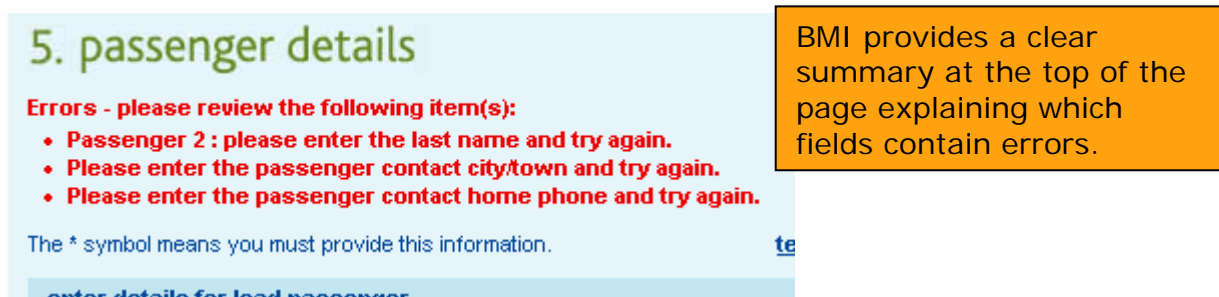
2.1 (out of 5)

Carrier average

2.5 (out of 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.

How ever the error summary is provided, the most important thing is it's the very first thing users see after submitting a form.



The screenshot shows a light blue box with the heading "5. passenger details" in green. Below it, a red heading reads "Errors - please review the following item(s):". This is followed by a bulleted list of three red error messages: "Passenger 2 : please enter the last name and try again.", "Please enter the passenger contact city/town and try again.", and "Please enter the passenger contact home phone and try again.". At the bottom left of the box, a small blue note states "The * symbol means you must provide this information.". To the right of the screenshot, an orange callout box contains the text: "BMI provides a clear summary at the top of the page explaining which fields contain errors."

With only 5 out of the 20 travel sites scoring top marks, it's clear that many need to address this well-established usability guideline. It's essential that users aren't required to hunt around to uncover and correct the errors.

Category: Errors and error handling

18. Ensure all errors are clearly highlighted next to the individual form fields

Overall average

2.1 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

2.8 (out of 5)

Carrier average

1.4 (out of 5)

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. 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 an alert then there's no reminder as to what the error was when the alert is closed.

your name:

✖ Please specify the last name of this traveller.

* Title	* First/given name	Initial	* Last name/surname
Mr. <input type="button" value="v"/>	John	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

* Your e-mail address

The Ebookers' booking process conveniently highlights each field containing errors clearly to direct the user's effort in recovery.

It's very disappointing that 11 out of the 20 sites scored 0 out of 5 for this critical guideline. The use of red text to emphasise the fields that need correcting is a well-established design solution for transaction-based sites.

The discrepancy between travel agents and carrier sites is particularly marked for this guideline with 7 out of 10 carriers scoring 0 marks.

Category: Errors and error handling

19. Provide explicit instructions on how to correct errors

Overall average

0.5 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

0.8 (out of 5)

Carrier average

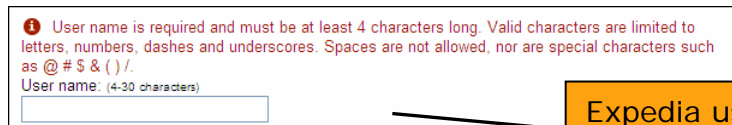
0.2 (out of 5)

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 on 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 what needs fixing
- Not assign any blame to users
- Avoid using words like 'error' or 'mistake'
- Steer clear of long words and/or jargon



❗ User name is required and must be at least 4 characters long. Valid characters are limited to letters, numbers, dashes and underscores. Spaces are not allowed, nor are special characters such as @ # \$ & () ! .
User name: (4-30 characters)

Expedia uses simple, plain language to provide clear recovery instructions.



Windows Internet Explorer

Please correct the following.

- Your street address
- Your town/city
- Your postal code
- Your contact phone
- Your email address

OK

Thomsonfly, however, uses a pop-up window – once users click 'OK' the instructions disappear.

Again, the sites scored particularly badly against this guideline with only 5 out of the 20 sites scoring anything at all.

This result is disappointing because this guideline is 'bread and butter' usability. If users aren't able to recover and progress through their task there's a good chance they'll give up and go elsewhere.

Category: Errors and error handling

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

Overall average

4.3 (out of 5)

Travel agent average

4.5 (out of 5)

Carrier average

4.0 (out of 5)

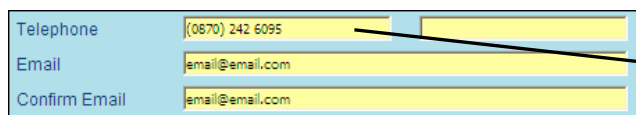
Although users will typically make errors when going through the booking process, some of these errors can be avoided through the clever use of technology. For example, a phone number can be submitted in a number of ways, all of which should be allowed:

- ❑ (0870) 242 6095
- ❑ 0870-242-6095
- ❑ 0870 242 6095

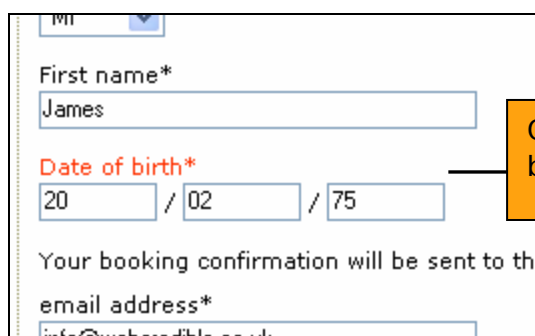
The booking process should allow all these combinations, stripping out any brackets, hyphens or spaces. Other items that can be entered in a number of different ways include (spaces vs. no spaces, slashes vs. no slashes etc.):

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

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



XL's booking engine is agile enough to cope with spaces and brackets in the telephone number.



Opodo don't accept a date of birth entered using 2 digits.

The travel sites scored well against this guideline with only 3 sites out of the 20 scoring below 2 out of 5. Both the travel agents and carriers performed equally well.



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Conclusion

Overall, the UK travel sites featured in this report aren't doing enough to maximise their share of the potential revenue in this highly contested marketplace. With an average usability score of only 51.5% they'll doubtlessly be losing site visitors due to mistakes that could quite easily be avoided.

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%³. With such a massive choice of options available online, users don't have to work very hard to find alternatives and leave your website for 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).

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

References

1. Carl H. Marcussen, 'Trends in European Internet Distribution – of Travel and Tourism Services' January 2008 (www.crt.dk/uk/staff/chm/trends.htm)
2. YouGov Plc, 'Logan Tod warns competition for online travel sites is set to heat up' August 2007 (<http://tinyurl.com/2cmp4m>)
3. Return on Investment for Usability (www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html)

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	
Opodo www.opodo.co.uk	5	5	4	5	5	4	2	0	5	5	0	5	2	4	2	2	5	5	0	2	67
British Airways www.britishairways.com	5	5	4	4	3	3	3	0	4	4	0	5	0	4	4	2	5	5	0	5	65
Travelbag www.travelbag.co.uk	4	0	2	4	3	1	2	2	5	5	0	4	4	5	5	3	2	5	1	5	62
STA travel www.statravel.co.uk	5	0	2	1	5	2	3	0	4	5	0	5	4	5	4	3	5	0	0	5	58
Lastminute www.lastminute.com	4	4	5	3	4	2	1	2	4	5	0	5	1	2	1	2	1	3	2	5	56
Virgin Atlantic www.virgin-atlantic.com	4	2	3	4	3	0	3	2	4	1	2	5	0	5	4	4	0	4	1	4	55
Ebookers www.ebookers.com	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	0	4	1	0	5	5	4	2	3	1	5	0	5	54
Expedia www.expedia.co.uk	4	3	2	2	4	3	3	0	4	5	0	4	0	2	0	3	1	5	5	3	53
Travelocity www.travelocity.co.uk	5	5	4	1	4	1	1	2	4	5	0	4	4	5	2	1	0	0	0	5	53
BMI www.flybmi.com	4	1	4	1	4	5	3	2	4	0	0	5	0	5	2	3	5	0	0	5	53
Flight centre www.flightcentre.co.uk	3	3	3	1	3	2	3	2	4	5	0	3	5	5	2	2	1	0	0	5	52



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Website	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Thomas Cook www.thomascook.com	3	1	2	2	4	2	3	0	5	5	0	4	0	5	0	3	0	5	0	5	49
First Choice www.firstchoice.co.uk	0	1	4	2	3	5	3	2	3	1	0	4	3	4	2	2	0	5	0	4	48
Airline network www.airline-network.co.uk	5	2	3	4	0	0	1	0	4	1	0	4	5	4	3	1	5	0	0	5	47
Easyjet www.easyjet.com	5	1	4	5	4	5	0	0	1	3	3	4	0	2	1	2	3	0	1	2	46
FlyBE www.flybe.com	4	2	0	3	5	5	3	0	1	3	0	4	0	4	3	1	3	0	0	5	46
Thomsonfly www.thomsonfly.com	4	1	3	3	1	5	1	2	2	1	2	3	0	0	3	5	3	0	0	5	44
XL.com www.xl.com	5	1	4	3	4	0	2	2	2	1	0	4	5	2	2	2	0	0	0	5	44
Ryanair www.ryanair.com/site/EN	4	0	3	3	4	5	3	2	0	1	1	4	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	5	40
Monarch www.flymonarch.com	2	2	3	3	3	5	2	0	1	1	1	2	0	4	1	5	3	0	0	0	38
TOTAL	78	42	62	57	68	58	44	20	65	58	9	83	38	71	44	50	46	42	10	85	
Average score	3.9	2.1	3.1	2.9	3.4	2.9	2.2	1.0	3.3	2.9	0.5	4.2	1.9	3.6	2.2	2.5	2.3	2.1	0.5	4.3	51.5



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About Webcredible

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

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- ▣ Usability testing
- ▣ Accessibility audits

User research

- ▣ Interviews & focus groups
- ▣ Persona creation

Training & mentoring

- ▣ Usability & writing for the web
- ▣ Accessibility & advanced CSS
- ▣ Ongoing support for usability & accessibility

Website development

- ▣ Wireframe & site map design
- ▣ Accessible CSS web page design
- ▣ Accessible content management system

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

We are:

- ▣ **Focused on client needs** – Our aims are to increase conversion rates for companies and ensure public sector organisations most 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.

Travel clients include Airmiles, Cheapflights, First Choice, Thetrainline, Thomson and VisitBritain.

For more information please:

- ▣ Telephone 0870 242 6095
- ▣ E-mail info@webcredible.co.uk
- ▣ Visit www.webcredible.co.uk