

## Listen up airlines....

When I asked “Is it just me or are most airline website booking engines defective?”, I did not get one reply that said I was wrong.

I’d like to start by recounting a recent personal experience in booking flights which was so painful it was the catalyst for writing this article. I will not mention the airline – this was not an exhaustive study and I don’t want to point the finger at one airline website that I happened to use recently. Suffice it to say, it is a major international airline and I would have expected a lot, lot better.

I started by researching flights A→B → C and C → B → A for all the airlines or combination of airlines flying that route once I had determined that the only direct flight available was weekly and didn’t fit into my schedule. I chose the airline in question (we’ll now call it ‘anonymous’) mainly because the connection times in B, outbound & inbound, were about 1.5 hours. No other airline that I could find offered these good connections. Then I was informed my departure date would have to be brought forward by one day to a Wednesday – but I saw this as no problem as

*A comment from Canada:*

*I am delighted that you are taking an interest in this fascinating area!*

*Although I might be considered as having an axe to grind, owning an agency as I do, in fact my interest is quite the opposite. **We make a significant number of our bookings on airline web sites, and find them rather devious, difficult and disingenuous.***

*As one might suppose, airlines invest heavily in distributive systems in order to maximise their revenues; users of these sites do so in order to minimise their expense. Herein lies the ultimate paradox. A single system pulling in two opposite directions.*

*Airline sites, as all others on the web, are inherently binary in nature. One asks a question, one is given an answer; there is remarkably little grey area, and unless the user knows the questions to ask, unless their needs are simple, they will achieve the best result only by chance. The more knowledge one has, the more likely the booking is to be correct.*

*A case in point is the Air Canada Aeroplan site; booking a flight from (say) Winnipeg to Paris, one is offered excellent AC connections; once booked, the user is surprised but resigned to the \$900 charges imposed by the airline. While the site offers a connection via Chicago on UA, nowhere does it indicate that this option would save the client \$650!*

*The web portals are heavily reliant on brand power; clients know the primary airline contact but become terribly hazy when affiliate, associates or the competition are offered.*

*An interesting and very efficient business communication system, but dangerous and expensive in the hands of the naive!*

*Max Johnson  
The Great Canadian Travel Company Ltd*

*And from Australia:*

*I tend to search frequently amongst various airline websites and when it comes time to make that actual booking I am usually VERY frustrated because I do not like to waste my time filling in the various forms BEFORE I am advised EXACTLY what the final price (incl fares, taxes, surcharges, booking fee, etc) will be. Incidentally, I am also of the view that taxes and surcharges MUST be incorporated into the fare. The airline passenger in most cases is not interested in understanding the politics of 'extras'; we just want to know what it is going to cost.*

*As someone who also frequently books using frequent flyer miles or points, I am again appalled that airlines are 'getting away with' charging for fuel (by calling it a surcharge) when surely an airline ticket is supposed to include the cost of fuel. In other words, there should be NO additional charges for booking a frequent flyer trip. If the points required need to be increased, then so be it, but airlines need to get off the 'surcharge and taxes' bandwagon and start playing the game 'honestly'.*

*Qantas Airlines' website is hopeless to use unless you happen to be located in either Australia or England. Because it pre-loads the departure point and won't let the user choose a point other than points in those two countries – despite having One World relationships with many other airlines across the globe.*

**LOTS of room for improvement.**

*Thank you for providing an opportunity to 'whinge'.*

*Per Nielsen*

*Director*

anonymous had stated the flights I had chosen were daily. So, credit card in hand, I proceeded to make the booking. But on B → C, the flight I wanted was not offered leaving me with more than 8 hours to wait at airport B. I checked, double-checked, tried other airlines and routes again but it still seemed the best option so I proceeded to make the booking.

The booking, seat selection and payment appeared to go through OK, so I asked the system to send me the e-ticket by email. It never arrived but fortunately I'd made a note of the PNR.

The next day I go back to the site, access "my flights" via the PNR and again request the e-ticket be sent by email. Once again it did not arrive. I noticed an "Advanced" button, which allowed me to enter personal information including passport number, etc, supposedly to speed up check-in. I filled out the form and submitted and back comes "Sorry, you don't have a reservation with us"!

On the screen where I requested an emailed e-ticket, was the phone number of my local anonymous office. I called the number.... "the number you have dialed is not available". By now I would willingly have used a different carrier but the credit card transaction appeared to have been accepted. Eventually I find the correct telephone number, tell them the problem and within seconds the e-ticket is delivered to my mailbox.

Day of departure – decided to check-in online. Anonymous allows me to check-in A → B but when I ask it to print the boarding pass, nothing happens. I try emailing it to myself – it never arrives. Try again – same thing. Try to check-in for B → C and “there appears to be a problem, try again later” – I did, same thing. (On my return journey, I was able to check-in and print boarding passes for both sectors online, so sometimes it works.)

Check-in at the airport was no problem and ended up with two “old-fashioned” boarding passes. As I while away 8+ hours at B, I checked the departure board and discovered the flight B → C that I wanted did run on a Wednesday – it had plenty of seats but it was too late by then to switch and ensure my luggage made it. Eight hours in an airport wasted because the booking engine didn’t know about all the flights.

*From Florida:*

*Orbitz is good, though on occasion I can get cheaper rates from the airline site itself. But Orbitz will give me the easiest and quickest look. It’s easy to book your flights with them and they are “user friendly.” They will also alert you to check in time, when you can print your boarding passes, and will let you know of cancellations or delays. In the event of the latter, they will rebook you.*

*L. Hansen  
Palm Coast, FL*

I found many occurrences where flights I knew existed were not available in booking engines. They could have been full, but it happened too frequently for this.

I accept that many booking problems could be due to the user doing something wrong, but these websites should be easier to use.

To summarize some of my findings:

- Many airlines do not show flights in their booking engines for codeshares. One airline does not even show the routing in the dropdown from/to window.
- When flights don’t appear that I was sure existed, I often ended up displaying the timetable, finding the flight and then calling the local airline office.
- One airline, let’s call them anonymous3, displayed an impressive page on an in-terminal hotel (operated by anonymous3) which appealed due to a long layover en-route, but gave me no way (that I could find) to book a room or even contact the hotel.

- A potential passenger may know a carrier flies from A to B once or twice a week and the passenger is willing to be flexible with dates. Even though many booking engines have a “I can be flexible with dates” button, they often just doesn’t do the job. As an example, one airline site with this problem refuses to show ANY flights unless you get both the departure & return dates correct. Very irritating. Some sites are improving this by showing a grid of available arrival and departure dates with pricing – definitely a positive step.
- Calendars to enter the departure & return dates are often difficult to use.
- The terms and conditions of flights are often hard to find and not understandable to a non-airline person. The terminology needs to be clear and concise – can we change the reservation, is there a fee, are full refunds available, etc. Some T&Cs are so complex you need to be a lawyer to understand them.

It seems to me that:

- Airlines do not get non-IT people to test their websites. Remember many of us are idiots but you still need our bookings to survive.
- Websites are not thoroughly tested in all browsers at all resolutions (we’re not all IE users).
- Error situations don’t seem to be fully tested and error/warning messages are usually not very informative.

Let me reiterate that research for this article was not exhaustive but from general study and personal experience, low cost carriers appear to do a much, much better job of their booking engines than “traditional” airlines. (Note the Webcredible study outlined below states otherwise for UK-based airlines. My personal experience is not with UK-based airlines.) And why would LCCs be better? Because in many cases it is the only way to book these flights so the engine MUST WORK. So do full-fare airlines just not care whether we book online or not? Do they want us to call the local airline office if it exists, or use a travel agent?

Check out a recent article in Travel Daily News:

[http://www.traveldailynews.com/pages/show\\_page/29614](http://www.traveldailynews.com/pages/show_page/29614))

which is SITA’s prediction for the future of the booking engine. This comment below from SITA’s Chief Technology Officer seems like wishful thinking considering the state of today’s booking engines. “near future” – I don’t think so!

*“The rise of social networking over the internet means that the days of the simple online flight-booking engine are numbered. Web 2.0 technologies will transform airline web sites into travel planning portals that go far beyond date and location. By making it faster, easier and more cost-effective to provide real-time content from diverse sources, Web 2.0 technologies meet travellers’ demands for greater information and personalisation.*

*“In the near future when a customer makes a booking, the airline website could extract the passenger’s preferences from its frequent flyer programme, combine it with external content from travel web sites so that hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions can be overlaid on a Google map and the traveller can then take a virtual sight-seeing tour and be linked in with friends’ travel plans.”*

Recently Webcredible (<http://www.webcredible.co.uk> ) researched 20 of the top UK travel agent and airline carrier websites using 20 best practice guidelines. The results:

- Opodo - 67%
- British Airways - 65%
- Travelbag - 62%
- STA travel - 58%
- Lastminute - 56%
- Virgin Atlantic - 55%
- Ebookers - 54%
- Expedia - 53%
- Travelocity - 53%
- BMI - 53%
- Flight Centre - 52%
- Thomas Cook - 49%
- First Choice - 48%
- Airline Network - 47%
- Easyjet - 46%
- FlyBE - 46%
- Thomsonfly - 44%
- XL.com - 44%
- Ryanair - 40%
- Monarch - 38%

The 20 guidelines used in the study 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

The summary comment:

“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.”

And:

“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.”

They address another of my gripes:

“Many of the travel sites don’t even provide rudimentary printer-friendly templates so pages print out properly.”

(I have on my desk right now a printed itinerary for a flight I’m taking next week. After clicking the print button at the airline site after making the booking, 4 pages were printed. Page 1 was almost OK, but the remaining 3 were very badly laid out with unnecessary page breaks making the content almost unreadable.)

CHI organizes an annual Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. The conference abstract states “Specific user interface guidelines are described to increase the usability of airline travel e-commerce Web sites. Although previous guidelines address the usability issue from the perspective of the sale of tangible products that can be described and depicted, less attention has been given to the usability issues for the sale of services. Service industries have different requirements for communicating with customers, specifically regarding their product offerings. ***This is prominent in the air travel industry, where Web site usability is known to be poor.*** We examine how the current guidelines are inadequate for Web sites providing air travel information.”

One report from Forbes Traveler on “Beyond Booking: Building Brand Equity Online in the Travel and Leisure Market”:

([http://www.forbestraveler.com/media/downloads/GuidelineTrendReport\\_OnlineTravel.pdf](http://www.forbestraveler.com/media/downloads/GuidelineTrendReport_OnlineTravel.pdf))

is a little old but makes some interesting points which still seem relevant today. The summary:

“Companies big and small roll out virtual red carpets with promises of the best rates, the most luxurious accommodations or that *trip of a lifetime*. But when it comes to creating and maintaining a virtual relationship with consumers, **the travel and leisure market has a long way to go.**”

At least the problem is recognized – but by the right people? With rare exceptions, airline website developers just don’t seem to have a handle on what their customers really want. We use airline websites because we want the flexibility to review all the options in our own time – not always possible if we call the airline office or a travel agent. But when the websites just don’t give us the information we want, we often feel trapped and forced into a booking that’s not necessarily convenient for us.

Written by: Yvonne Russell

Date: April 20, 2009