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[Barbara S. Chaparro](#), Editor

Planning Your Next Vacation: Orbitz, Expedia, or Travelocity?

By [Barbara Chaparro](#) & Ashley Gibson

After lots of hype and controversy, Orbitz.com, a new travel website developed by five airlines, American, Continental, Delta, Northwest, and United, was launched and has since been a fierce competitor to Expedia.com and Travelocity.com. Horizon reported that online travel users preferred Orbitz.com 3 to 1 over Travelocity.com (Enos, 2001). We decided to compare the three sites in a usability test to see which, if any, came out on top with first-time users.

We evaluated participants' user satisfaction, navigational efficiency, and general preference for three travel sites - [orbitz.com](#), [expedia.com](#), and [travelocity.com](#). Efficiency was measured by the degree of 'lostness' (Smith, 1996), or the ratio of optimum number of pages to complete a task to the actual number of pages traversed by the participants. A lostness ratio of a 1.0 indicated participants traversed the optimal path. A lostness ratio closer to 0 indicated that users traversed many more pages than the optimal path (and therefore would be considered to experience more lostness). This efficiency data was gathered by the tracking program ErgobrowserTM.

After completing the tasks with each site, participants answered a satisfaction questionnaire. After completing the tasks with all three sites, participants ranked the sites in order of preference. A Pentium II based PC computer, with a 60 Hz, 96dpi 17" monitor with a resolution setting of 1024 x 768 pixels was used.

METHOD

Eight participants volunteered for the usability study. All participants were familiar with the web, but were not frequent users of online travel sites. Participants were asked to complete three tasks with each site (site order was counterbalanced across participants):

1. You and your friend are going from Wichita, KS, to Freeport, Bahamas, over winter break. First, find out how much a flight and hotel will be for December 26th to January 2nd. Second, you want to know if there is a package deal to help save money. Is there a package deal that may be cheaper than the flight and hotel individually?
2. You are unable to remember your password for an account you set up a few months ago. Find information on the site that tells you how you can find out your password.
3. How much will it cost a day to rent a convertible car while you are in LA.? Your plane flies in on November 9th at 10:00 and you depart on November 12th at 2:00.

Results

Figure 1 shows the average satisfaction scores (max = 60) for the three sites. Results from a one-way ANOVA revealed that Expedia.com was significantly more satisfying than Travelocity.com [$F(2,14) =$

7.38, $p < .01$]. In addition, Expedia.com was found to be significantly preferred over Travelocity.com [Friedman $\chi^2(2, N = 8) = 6.25, p < .05$]. (Orbitz.com was not found to be significantly different from either of the other sites in terms of satisfaction or preference.) Analysis of the navigational efficiency, or lostness, showed Expedia.com and Orbitz.com to be superior to Travelocity.com (Expedia.com = .51, Orbitz.com = .53, and Travelocity.com = .68). Participants were also found to be successful with the tasks 79% of the time with Expedia.com and 62% of the time with both Orbitz.com and Travelocity.com.



Figure 1. Reported Satisfaction of Travel Sites

Discussion

In this study, success rate, lostness, and satisfaction/preference results all favored Expedia.com. Participants stated the flight, price, and package deal information were all clearly displayed and easy to find on Expedia.com. The Vacation Wizard allowed users to easily find deal information for the first task, which incidentally was reported to be the most difficult of the three tasks for all sites. In fact, none of the participants were able to successfully complete Task 1 with Travelocity.com because it was too difficult to find a comparable package deal (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Searching for a package deal was much easier with the Expedia.com (top) wizard than with Travelocity.com (bottom).

In addition to the difficulty in finding a package deal, the following were noted as issues impacting overall satisfaction:

- Airport/City Lookups - we were surprised to see the number of users who misspelled Los Angeles when looking for the car rental. Orbitz offered an airport look-up but it typically was not used in the first attempt. Once a location was entered incorrectly, users had to scroll through a list of locations with that spelling (i.e., 'Las Angeles' produced a list of locations beginning with 'Las') and had difficulty getting back to a page that allowed them to type another location name.
- Airport Codes - most users do not know airport codes and opt to type in city names instead. All of the sites allowed this, but Orbitz changed city names to airport codes once entered. For example, Freeport, Bahamas was changed to 'FPO'. Some users were confused by this, and not knowing what 'FPO' was, chose to re-enter the city name.
- Car Rental - specifying the type of car to be rented was reported to be easier on Expedia and Orbitz than on Travelocity, where users had to first get a price and then specify the details of the car they wanted to rent.
- Hotel rates - Orbitz.com did not display hotel rates on a single page - users were required to drill down from each hotel to find its price. Both Travelocity.com and Expedia.com displayed rates on a single page allowing easier comparison.
- Font size - "tiny" text was criticized by several participants using Orbitz.com and Travelocity.com.
- Entering Date of Travel or Rental - Expedia.com was the only site that required the user to type a date into a date field for departure and return. Though there was a calendar graphic that presented a small calendar from which a date could be chosen, users typically entered the date rather than clicking on the calendar. Several users made typos in the date field and commented that this was more error-prone than selecting it from drop-down lists as in Orbitz.com and Travelocity.com.
- Deal vs. Package - Users were confused by the terminology of a 'deal' and a 'package'. Both Orbitz.com and Expedia.com have major tabs dedicated to each; users were not sure which to explore for a listing of package deals in Task 1.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our study showed that Expedia.com was superior to Orbitz.com and Travelocity.com for the tasks of booking a flight, comparing flight and hotel prices to package deal prices, finding a hotel, and renting a car. Ease of use, clarity of information, and easy access to package deals and prices were all reasons cited for the users' preference. Poorly labeled package deals, extra steps to rent a particular type of car, cluttered pages, and small fonts were some of the criticisms of the least preferred Travelocity.com. Orbitz.com was touted for being easy to use for flight information, but cumbersome when comparing hotel rates, sometimes difficult to read (because of small fonts), and unforgiving when recovering from user input error (i.e., misspelling city names).

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