



Internet Retailing

Selling in the digital age

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THOMSON REVIEW

Internet Retailing asked 4 retail experts to take a look at Thomson.co.uk and give readers insight into the retail strategy, site performance, usability and customer experience.

RETAIL STRATEGY

Emma Robertson, Director, Transform

In an incredibly tough retail environment, even more challenging for the travel industry, TUI and Thomson are bucking the trend. Whilst major competitor Thomas Cook issued its third profit warning for the year, TUI execs were gracing the financial pages, presenting their on-target profit results.

The travel industry in particular is vulnerable to the developments in online retail and research, with the traditional role of the travel agent under ongoing threat of disintermediation through specialist providers within the value chain. Whereas once all international holidays involved a travel agent, it is increasingly the norm for customers to book their holidays independently in a modular fashion, using third party validation from TripAdvisor or booking.com reviews to inform and substantiate their decisions. Within this context TUI's recent results are even more impressive, although group moves to offer flights outside of package deals and invest in businesses such as LateRooms.com also account for TUI's ongoing success in a changing market.

Thomson is the UK's leading leisure travel agent, however in terms of size they are about to be overtaken by the newly merged Thomas Cook/Co-op Travel company which will boast 1,200 stores across the UK, compared to Thomson's 600. From a multi-channel perspective Thomson do support a limited amount of channel cross-over, with an especially nice feature being a short-code tie up between brochures and online.

The surprising thing is that despite having the largest and most visited travel website in the UK, it is the online experience that currently lets Thomson down. The breadth of the proposition has clearly responded to market changes, offering both package and tailored booking options. However, the sections don't tie together, with clearly different templates, booking functionality and even navigation being used across the different product ranges. Equally there are some basic usability failings which make unspecific "browse" journeys frustrating - ranging from non-persistent "short-lists" to specific hotel offers directing the user to a blank input form.

From an overall retail travel perspective Thomson

are clearly doing a lot of the right things, and rightly prioritise the holiday experience as their primary mission and motivation. However within this context there is a lot of opportunity to improve the online channel and make the whole booking experience a pleasure as well.

USABILITY

Jamie Sands, Usability Consultant, User Vision

As the Thomson homepage carries no strapline or mission statement it is important to know who they are and what their specialism is. The homepage clearly promotes package holidays and late deals. The almost blog-like homepage does not promote a positive initial impression. It is not commensurate with an organisation of Thomson's standing and may impact the trust associated with the brand.

Page content is prioritised well but results in a subtle approach to upselling. For example, moving from half to all inclusive is presented below price structure. Using words like 'may' does not give confidence in the upsell. Those who are ready to buy are persuaded by a 'hurry, only one room left' message.

The faceted navigation is a helpful filtering aid around complex holiday requirements. The ability to 'Add to Shortlist' is commonly used online for comparative purposes. The Shortlist message is fixed in view with scrolling and is a helpful draw. Unfortunately, the shortlist is so long that a direct visual comparison is difficult.

Most recent searches (excluding Flight only, Hotel and Cruise) are held to assist a return visit to the site. The 'Don't know where to go' page directs the user back to the 'Destinations' page. This could have been used to promote particular offers but links to Google Earth, amongst other things, only serve to take the user away from Thomson.

Importantly, the search results can be sorted via any of the metrics. Although the design doesn't reflect that it is sortable, it does state 'Click on the column headers to reorder your results' which adds page complexity. The 'holidays you may also like', model is employed but appears below the page fold so could be missed.

Considering that the booking process involves forms, options, upgrades and other potential

usability difficulties, there is real room for improvement. This is not unique to Thomson but is true across the travel industry.

EYE TRACKING ANALYSIS

Guy Redwood, Managing Director, SimpleUsability

We invited users to participate in booking a holiday on the Thomson website. They were asked to have a destination and booking party in mind and add on any specific requirements they would need. Eye tracking technology was used to observe how the users would navigate through the site during the holiday booking process.

Once on the Thomson homepage one user was immediately attracted by the 'Late deals' option. This took them to a landing page showing over 33,000 holiday deals which the user found overwhelming. The results were already arranged in lowest price order but this was not obvious to the user. Clicking on the column heading rearranged the date order of the results, but again we saw the user looking around the page because she had failed to realise that anything had changed due to the listings looking so similar.

Users liked that they had the option to view Thomson reviews, however another user was a bit sceptical of the reviews that Thomson would provide on their own site. The majority of users liked that they were able to access TripAdvisor straight from the website. Some users stated that they would place more trust in a TripAdvisor review than a company's own customer review. A user also said they would be suspicious of a resort that wasn't reviewed.

The 'My shortlist' facility was a helpful tool which enabled users to save their favourite holidays during browsing. This tool was mainly missed by the users as their attention was drawn into the middle of the page where the holidays appeared. The 'My shortlist' was in a separate box which moved down the right-hand side of the page when the user scrolled, it was hard to distinguish it because the background colour was a similar colour to the background of the main page.

We observed a user misunderstanding the language used in the 'Choose your date' filter. The user believed the wording 'I can travel between...and...' allowed them to enter the dates which they could fly out between, without entering a return date. No results were returned due to the narrow date range. The user then entered a wider range of dates believing that they would have to narrow down their search manually later on in the booking process.

SITE PERFORMANCE

David Flower, Vice President, EMEA, Compuware Gomez

Compuware put thomson.co.uk to the test during July and August to see whether its website merited the 94% customer satisfaction rating awarded by its customers last year. Starting with a positive comment, thomson.co.uk performed well across all major



Eye tracking gaze plot for Thomson.co.uk
Source: SimpleUsability

browsers. This included various flavours of Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome as well as mobile browsers such as Blackberry and iPhone.

On the internet backbone, where you would expect to see the best scores in terms of website availability and download speeds, the performance of thomson.co.uk was average, compared to 40 other key players in the UK travel sector. With an average homepage download time of 2.45 seconds, thomson.co.uk ranked 19th in the benchmark. For comparison purposes, the top performing websites of National Express and Rail Easy, performed sub one-second download times.

Where this website really encountered performance issues was around its consistency – or rather, lack of consistency. On 7 August, the Gomez network recorded several instances of Doubleclick causing delays and on 8 August there were three 20+ seconds response times from three of the five internet backbone nodes. In both of these cases the content download was not impacted but at the end of the day, these items are included on the site to help generate revenue – and are therefore important.

The Last Mile test is a representation of the performance experienced by the end-user on the 'real' internet as opposed to the sterile conditions behind a firewall. During this test, thomson.co.uk's average homepage download time was 5.56 seconds and its availability was 95.38%. Although by no means the worst scores in this benchmark, they highlight that the website has room for improvement. National Express topped the table again with an average homepage download speed of 2.10 seconds and an availability rating of 97.59, placing it on top here too. ■

GOMEZ SCORES MR PORTER.COM 3.2 STARS OUT OF 5 MADE UP OF THE FOLLOWING:

Availability on Last Mile Score: 16 out of 25

Response Time on Last Mile: 14 out of 25

Consistency on Backbone: 6 out of 15

Competitiveness on Backbone: 8 out of 15

Browser Support: 20 out of 20

Total 64 out of 100